Bullying
in schools

Research has yet to precisely prescribe a remedy for school bullying, but some guidelines are emerging to help schools choose programs that best fit their situation.

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Harassment, intimidation, and bullying pose a serious public and mental health concern that can poison the climate of schools and affect students' ability to focus on learning. We know that many children have experienced

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harassment, intimidation, and bullying at school: Nearly 28% of all students ages 12-18 reported being bullied physically, verbally, or online at least once during the survey year, according to one U.S. Department of Education report (2013). Another study found that 20% of high school students were bullied on school property and 15% through electronic means over the course of 12 months (Centers for Disease Control, 2014).

Even the White House has taken notice by hosting its first-ever Conference on Bullying Prevention in 2011, raising awareness about the topic by addressing in-school approaches, community-based strategies, and the effects of bullying on achievement. All 50 states have antibullying laws, many of which include model antibullying policies.

Nonetheless, educational settings are struggling to determine and implement suitable antibullying approaches. A myriad of antibullying programs are available — many claiming significant reductions in bullying — and schools are unsure which ones would work best for them. Further, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the potency of individual programs related to bullying. Comprehensive antibullying approaches require schools to mobilize substantial resources, forcing administrators to balance this need against ever-increasing budget constraints. Without a deep understanding of the pervasive effect of harassment, intimidation, and bullying and its connection to overall school culture and climate, schools can find it tempting to opt for contained and less costly approaches (Greene, 2008). Clear guidance is needed regarding the parameters of truly effective intervention.

Are programs effective?

Most antibullying programs have demonstrated only mild to moderate reductions in bullying behavior. A review of whole-school approaches in the U.S. and Europe found that success rates were modest (Pepler, Smith, & Rigby, 2004). Likewise, a meta-analysis of 16 bullying interventions in Europe and the U.S. revealed that bullying interventions were only weakly effective. A review of 48 evaluated interventions by W.M. Craig and colleagues (2010) revealed that almost half reported reductions in victimization, one-quarter reported some positive and negative effects, 15% reported no change, and 4% reported only negative results (Merrell et al., 2008).

But there are examples of successes. As promising programs are tested in more challenging and diverse environments, we have learned about their strong points, both conceptually and pragmatically. While we generally agree with Pepler, Smith, & Rigby (2004) that "the research is not at the point where we can reliably point to specific elements of interven-

tions that are known to be the active and essential elements associated with change" (p. 313), we also recognize that schools and policy makers can't wait for the ultimate studies to be conducted, reviewed, and published. Schools require guidance now for initial and ongoing selection and review of programs

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and their coordination with related prevention efforts. We believe that successful implementation ultimately hinges on a hybrid of best practices and evidence-based approaches that are embedded in a comprehensive, coordinated, and sustained school-wide approach.

Common features

Successful antibullying programs generally share three common features:

#1. The program's c*entral values and philosophy* emphasize a positive school climate and strategies founded on social-emotional and character development;

#2. A long-term *commitment to effective program implementation,* assessment of program effectiveness, and sustainability; and

#3. *Clear and consistent strategies* outlining what to do when bullying occurs.

Central values and philosophy

Effective programs employ a whole-school approach, ensuring that all school community members are on board with preventing harassment, intimidation, and bullying. Students and staff are provided with basic information on the nature and definition of bullying as well as ways to effectively respond. Whole-school approaches do so by:

- Infusing this information in schools' curricula;

- Adopting clear and consistent policies with regard to antibullying practices;

> When prevention efforts fail, schools must have transparent, firm, and consistent policies in place to restore the bullied child's confidence that school is a safe place and that address the broader issue of school climate.

- Targeting the entire student population for prevention; and
- Systematically involving youth directly in program planning and evaluation.

A positive school climate — where a school's norms, values, and expectations result in all children feeling safe, respected, and valued — has been found to be a strong underpinning of effective antibullying approaches (Cohen & Elias, 2011). Such a climate has been associated with lowered aggression and violence (Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008) and, more specifically, reductions in bullying (Olweus & Limber, 2010).

A central component of a positive school climate is an emphasis on nurturing not only students' academic and intellectual growth but also their social, emotional, and character development (Cohen & Elias, 2011). An emphasis on social, emotional, and character development concomitant with a positive school climate necessarily translates to a commitment to an ethos of caring in the school community. Importantly, these provide the foundation for a norm of upstanding behavior where children engage in strategies to stop or reduce bullying such as reporting such incidences to an adult in the school. Thus, students should mirror the positive values of the school and be prepared to act when they observe injustices. To reinforce upstanding behaviors, schools must stipulate explicit expectations as part of any code the school adopts. This necessarily means that passively watching or supporting bullying when they see it is clearly against the norm.

In addition to the school environment, generally successful programs emphasize the importance of family and community (Craig et al., 2010). Strategies such as sending home an antibullying newsletter, hosting evening meetings with parents, and media campaigns have all been effective at raising awareness about bullying (Pepler et al., 2004). Accordingly,

effective bullying interventions are sensitive to the broader influences in the lives of youth.

Long-term commitment

Any effort to respond to harassment, intimidation, and bullying should be considered long-term and planned accordingly. Here, the key elements of sustained implementation success include:

- Dedication to teacher and staff professional development regarding harassment, intimidation, and bullying;
- A plan for the program rollout — i.e., different strategies for children in different grades; and
- A data-driven evaluation of the program over time.

Findings suggest that when teachers are trained in how to effectively handle bullying incidents and are aware of school policies, victimization rates are lower (Smith & Shu, 2000). Trained teachers report greater confidence in their ability to adequately address harassment, intimidation, and bullying and are thus more likely to act when bullying occurs in their presence. Preventing harassment, intimidation, and bullying must be successfully addressed throughout the school. The lunchroom, hallways, bus, recess, school entry and dismissal, gym class and locker rooms, school sporting events and musical performances and assemblies, and even cyberspace all must be as well managed as classrooms because bullying can migrate to those unmonitored areas.

Overall, the elements of an implementation plan should include:

- A clear definition of harassment, intimidation, and bullying;
- Developmentally appropriate and sequenced classroom activities that promote student engagement and self-reflection on harassment, intimidation, and bullying, including cyberbullying;
- A well-outlined protocol for reacting to harassment, intimidation, and bullying;
- Ongoing assessment of school climate and bullying occurrences, including analyzing incidents for indications of areas of school culture needing strengthening or of vulnerable children and populations needing increased support;
- In-person or online professional and

paraprofessional staff training (bus drivers, lunch room aides, etc.); and

- Leadership strongly committed to providing resources for staff professional development for plan implementation.

Thus, harassment, intimidation, and bullying prevention is a systemic matter not solved by programs in the absence of continuity. There is no empirical evidence that programs that are used intermittently "inoculate" children from bullying involvement, whether as a child bullying others, as a child being targeted, or as a passive bystander. Moreover, antibullying strategies must capitalize on the students' increasing maturity and sophistication as they move through the higher grades (Pepler et al., 2004).

Assessment is a critical dimension of harassment, intimidation, and bullying prevention. Schools should employ evaluations — beginning with a pretest and with repeated measurements over time after program implementation — of school climate and the social, emotional, and civic aspects of learning and school improvement efforts.

Clear response strategies

When bullying does occur, schools must have transparent, firm, and consistent policies in place to restore the bullied child's confidence that school is a safe place and to address the broader issue of school climate. What follows are specific recommendations for effectively intervening when harassment, intimidation, and bullying occur — made with the following caveat: Strategies implemented in the absence of programing focused on school climate are unlikely to influence ongoing harassment, intimidation, and bullying (Davis & Davis, 2007).

A school's policies and response to harassment, intimidation, and bullying is a direct expression of the school's climate, culture, and values. Effective antibullying programs employ clear policies that are proactively and frequently communicated to all in appropriate ways, with explicit guidance on reporting and investigating instances of possible bullying, disciplinary procedures, and when police should be called (Jones et al., 2012). Also, it is important for children who bully to receive consequences for their behavior. Graduated and clearly articulated sanctions that reasonably escalate with the severity of bullying behaviors have proven most effective. The consequence should be accompanied by encouragement for reflective activity, including dialogue with staff about the behavior and writing about the behavior. The Method of Shared Concern (Pikas, 2002), which avoids shaming or blaming the child who bullies while still emphasizing the child's re-

sponsibility to change their behavior, is an example of such an approach that has proven effective. This contrasts with ineffective approaches that punish the child who bullies in arbitrary ways without promoting self-reflection. Additionally, there is no evidence that zero-tolerance approaches are effective.

In addition to these specific approaches, we advocate for developing a core group of individuals with expertise derived from the school community, which we call a Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying Action Team (HIBAT). Team members generally consist of administrators, school counselors or psychologists, teachers, and child study staff called in as needed. HIBATs should strive for continuity and build expertise by operating as professional learning communities and socializing new members.

> A positive school climate — where a school's norms, values, and expectations make all children feel safe, respected, and valued — has been found to be a strong underpinning of effective antibullying approaches.

The HIBAT should:

- Coordinate resources and services to the bullying and the bullied child;

- Discuss the occurrence with an eye toward systemic problems;

- Consider the occurrence in light of professional development requirements and any changes that may be needed;

- Include a summary report of the occurrences, including actions taken and recommendations to the principal; and

- Ensure that an incident report has been made in compliance with their state's reporting system.

Conclusion

Schools have a responsibility to safeguard the physical and psychological safety of students, and the evidence is unmistakable that harassment, intimidation, and bullying compromise well-being. Its

adverse influences are pervasive. Harmful effects can persist into adulthood for the individuals involved — even bystanders. For that reason, we strongly endorse an overall approach to harassment, intimidation, and bullying that strives to build schools as positive, respectful, and supportive learning communities. Such communities will have strong norms of inclusiveness and dedication to providing all youth with a sense of belonging and purpose in being in school, and the skills and competencies to promote social-emotional and character development and positive mental health.

The importance of harassment, intimidation, and bullying as an impediment to education, mental health, and physical health requires advocacy for policy reform. Because schools require technical assistance to aid in appropriate program selection, implementation, and assessment of program effectiveness, we call for state and local departments of education to develop and use expert advisory groups consisting of researchers, university professors, and other professionals with the capability to provide support. Such groups would help guide schools in selecting and implementing programs that best fit a school's needs, as well as establishing data collection systems to assess effectiveness. States should

How serious is the problem of bullying?

What the numbers say

Nearly 28% of students aged 12-18 had been bullied physically, verbally, or online at least once in the survey year, according to a U.S. Department of Education study.

– U.S. Department of Education, 2013

About 20% of high school students were bullied on school property during the 12 months before the survey, and 15% were bullied through electronic means.

– Centers for Disease Control, 2014

What researchers have learned

Children subjected to bullying generally suffer high levels of depression and related internalizing problems such as social anxiety.

– Reijntjes et al., 2010

Children subjected to bullying experience compromised academic achievement.

– Juvonen, Yueyan, & Espinoza, 2011

Children who chronically bully others also are more likely to exhibit other forms of aggression and engage in delinquent and criminal offenses.

– Renda, Vassallo, & Edwards, 2011; Ttofi et al., 2011

Students who have been both bullied and have bullied others have been identified as demonstrating the worst outcomes in terms of psychosocial adjustment, as compared to either group alone.

– Kelly et al., 2015

Peers who witness bullying may become fearful of being victimized and can be preoccupied with safeguarding their own status within the peer group.

– Salmivalli, 2010

adopt a nonpunitive approach to accountability to encourage accurate reporting and to provide support needed to achieve harassment, intimidation, and bullying prevention. The required resources can be justified at many levels: educational, financial, and humanistic. No school should open its doors to children unless it is committed to protecting, nurturing, and cherishing them.   **K**

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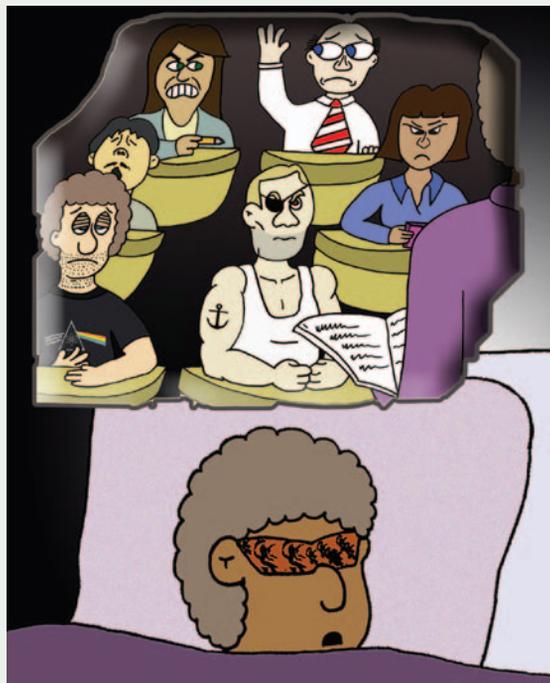
As summer drew to a close, Mrs. Bank's back-to-school nightmare progressed from a class of her worst students to a class of their parents.