BULLYING:

by

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The presence of bullying behavior in schools can seriously affect the overall school climate and the success and mental health of all students and faculty. The National School Safety Center (1995) called bullying the most enduring and underrated problem in U.S. schools. Some bullying behaviors can be easy to identify, while other bullying behaviors can occur quietly and covertly. "School bullying is a dynamic process situated within relationships among students, educators, and other school community members" (Frey, Newman, Nolen, & Hirschstein, 2012, p. 383).

Although definitions of bullying vary from source to source, most agree that an act is defined as bullying when:

- The behavior hurts, humiliates, or harms another person physically or emotionally.

- Those targeted by the behavior have difficulty stopping the action directed at them, and struggle to defend themselves.

- There is also a real or perceived "imbalance of power," which is described as when the student with the bullying behavior has more "power," either physically, socially, or emotionally, such as higher social status, or is physically larger or emotionally intimidating.

- Repetitive behavior; however, bullying can occur in a single incident if that incident is either very severe or arises from a pattern of behavior.

(Pacer's National Bullying Prevention Center, 2016)

As Table 1 highlights, bullying has significant short- and long-term effects that impact education, health, and safety.

Students engaging in violent, disruptive, and dangerous behavior compromise the fundamental ability of our schools to educate youth, making bullying behaviors an issue for all students and all schools (Crone & Horn, 2003). In order to foster learning, all members of a school need to feel safe and supported. Parrett and Budge (2012) noted, "Without these conditions, the mind reverts to a focus on survival" (p. 110).

Creating safe and effective learning environments for all students is a critical factor influencing student outcomes.

Perceived Bullying Behavior in Idaho

The 2014 Idaho Youth Prevention Survey was conducted in March of 2014 and was administered to students in grades six, eight, ten, and twelve, resulting in a final sample of 12,650 survey respondents. Figures 1 through 5 highlight Idaho students' perceptions of their level of safety in their community and at school, and more specifically their involvement in bullying behavior.

| Table 1: Impacts of Bullying Behavior (Pacer's National Bullying Prevention Center, 2016) |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Education – Bullying can negatively impact a child’s access to education and lead to: | • School avoidance and higher rates of absenteeism | • Decreases in grades |
| • Inability to concentrate | • Increase in dropouts | • Loss of interest in academic achievement |
| 2. Health – Bullying can lead to physical and mental health problems, including: | • Headaches and stomachaches | • Sleeping problems |
| • Low self-esteem | • Depression | • Increased fear and anxiety |
| • Fear of other students | | • Post-traumatic stress |
| 3. Safety – Bullying impacts student sense of well-being, such as: | • Self-isolation | • Increased aggression |
| • Self-harm and suicidal ideation | • Fear of other students | • Feeling of alienation at school |
| • Retaliation | | • Retaliation |
Figure 1: Perceptions of School Safety, by Grade Level (Idaho Youth Prevention Survey 2014)

Figure 2: Students Reporting School Climate Statements Always Occur, by Grade Level (Idaho Youth Prevention Survey 2014)

Figure 3: Bullying Experiences, by Race/Ethnicity and by Gender (Idaho Youth Prevention Survey 2014)

Figure 4: Perceptions of School Safety, by Race/Ethnicity (Idaho Youth Prevention Survey 2014)

Figure 5: Bullying Experience, by Number of Times Change School (Idaho Youth Prevention Survey 2014)

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In summary, of the 12, 650 Idaho sixth, eighth, tenth, and twelfth graders surveyed, only 28.5 percent perceived feeling very safe in their community. Likewise, a mere 29 percent responded as feeling very safe at school. Only 30 percent felt the rules at school were fairly enforced and 31 percent of the respondents considered their teachers to care about the students. Slightly more than one-third of these students, 33.5 percent, expressed that they had been bullied in the last year. There were only slight variations across ethnic/race and gender subgroups. This highlights the fact that bullying is not a discriminatory act, but touches all Idaho students. The data also emphasizes a definite trend - with the increase of students changing schools there is a high correlation with an increase in bullying behavior, both as a perpetrator and as a victim.

Bullying Prevention in Idaho: House Bill 246

On March 23, 2015, the Idaho House passed House Bill 246, the anti-bullying measure, on a vote of 51 to 18. House Bill 246 focuses on “student harassment, intimidation, and bullying,” stating, “No student or minor present on school property or at school activities shall initially commit, or conspire to commit, an act of harassment, intimidation, or bullying against another student.” Harassment, intimidation, or bullying is defined as

Any gesture, or any intentional, written, verbal, or physical act or threat by a student that will have the effect of: harming a student; damaging a student’s property; placing a student in reasonable fear of harm to his or her person; placing a student in reasonable fear of damage of his or her property; or is sufficiently severe, persistent, or pervasive that it creates an intimidating, threatening or abusive educational environment for a student.

An act of harassment, intimidation, or bullying may also be committed through the use of a landline, wireless telephone, or through the use of data or computer software that is accessed through a computer or network.

In relation to the new requirements for Local Education Agencies, a few highlights of House Bill 246 include: a) School districts and charter schools shall undertake reasonable efforts that ensure that information on harassment, intimidation, and bullying of students is disseminated annually to all school personnel, parents, and students; b) School districts and charter schools shall provide ongoing professional development to build skills of all school staff members to prevent, identify, and respond to harassment, intimidation, and bullying; c) District policies shall include a series of graduated consequences; and d) Annually school districts shall report bullying incidents.

Elements of Effective Bullying Prevention Efforts

As mentioned above, school bullying is a dynamic process situated within diverse contexts and relationships (Frey et al., 2012). Schools need systemic approaches that noticeably change aspects of the school culture, while also teaching all students the skills to meet their social needs without bullying (Olweus, 2003). Bullying behavior cannot be viewed as a separate or distinct problem that can be fixed while leaving the culture and climate of the school unexamined and untouched (Dillon, 2015).

Context Matters

As seen in scaling-up research, when implementing a new process, the local contextual factors matter (Klingner, Boardman, & McMaster, 2013). “Every education environment is unique, and matching interventions to the features of the context is key to ensuring a program is successfully implemented and sustained” (Ham, Parisi, & Stoolmiller, 2013, p. 184). Table 2 outlines how successful prevention programs turn good intentions into ongoing realities. With those elements clearly outlined, the ability of the program to consider the school’s uniqueness will make the critical difference.
Table 2: Implications for Practice: Characteristics of Effective Bullying Prevention Programs (Heuser and Curney, 2012, p. 266)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Themes</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social-Ecological Perspective</td>
<td>Integrate the greatest possible diversity of people and groups into community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reducing Isolation of People and Ideas</td>
<td>planning and implementation efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathic Involvement</td>
<td>Reduce physical isolation opportunities and increase social, information, emotional, and ideological inclusion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sequential Program Stages</td>
<td>Create and maintain connections between people on the emotional level in addition to knowledge/information level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Initial Awareness Building</td>
<td>Implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Development</td>
<td>Create both knowledge and emotional awareness that promotes understanding, a desire to help, and a press for timely action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skill Development</td>
<td>Create agreed upon values, related rules of behavior, supportive activities, and enforcement procedures involving the greatest possible diversity of school/ community participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Continuing Involvement</td>
<td>Teach a wide variety of social skills that encourage abusers, victims, and bystanders to assertively implement social/behavioral values and policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and Adjustment</td>
<td>Provide regular time for discussions on the school’s evolving climate, positive changes, problems, necessary actions, and how to use previously learned skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation and Adjustment</td>
<td>Evaluate progress, identify changing needs, and direct adjustment of efforts</td>
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Proactive versus Reactive Efforts

Are Idaho schools focusing on proactive work aimed at preventing bullying from occurring, or are we working from a reactive stance, where we are only concerned with dealing with cases of bullying after they have occurred? Traditionally, schools have reactively responded to bullying behavior (Rigby, 2012). More recently the emphasis has shifted to proactive interventions at the schoolwide level.

Levels of Action: Individual Students, Classroom Level, Policy-making Level

Schoolwide bullying prevention efforts require a wide range of strategies. Action is typically undertaken at different levels, including at the student level, at the classroom level, and at the policy-making level. Initially, schools must determine what is it that particular students already know and how they can receive help when it is needed. Rigby (2012) describes action at the classroom level, involving

the delivery of curriculum content and the provision of activities that can help students to acquire relevant knowledge, attitudes, and social skills that will help them in developing positive social relations and minimize the likelihood of their involvement in bullying. (p.400)

Rather than leaving the implementation efforts up to a selected group of people in a school to do what they think is needed, a schoolwide approach meaningfully engages all members of the school community in implementing the agreed policy.

Rigby (2012) suggests, “at the policy-making level, action is needed in developing an appropriate and agreed anti-bullying policy and related strategies, and most importantly, the means by which they can be implemented through cooperation between stakeholders” (p. 400). These stakeholders include school staff, students, and parents.

How Do We Support Students to Prevent Bullying?

Are schools working reactively, investing time and energy to keep kids from doing “bad things,” or are we focusing on cultivating “good” by supporting students and staff to exhibit safety, responsibility, and respect? Dillon (2015) discusses the importance of reframing bullying prevention in stating,

Reframing bullying prevention is reframing how people think about themselves and how they perceive their role and responsibilities toward their community. Reframing bullying prevention requires a lot more than telling students what they shouldn’t do; it is about providing a supportive positive environment that affirms them and allows them to discover and articulate the shared values that can guide them in making moral decisions in real-life situations, not just ones covered by simple rules or supervised by adults. (p. 80)

Many anti-bullying efforts ask students to “Stand up to Bullies,” yet the conversation on just how to do that is absent. This leaves many students with the following concerns:

Sure, standing up to bullying sounds great, but it isn’t so simple. Do you know how hard that is in our social world?

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You are out of touch with our world so how can you tell us to do this when you are not around.

Even though you tell us to stand up to bullying, you still devote almost no time to helping us successfully know how to do that.

What if we stand up to bullying and we end up getting bullied ourselves, or get accused of breaking some other rule, can you guarantee us that we won’t get in trouble?

Before you ask us to stand up to bullying can you help to answer these two simple questions: Is it worth it? Can I do it? (Dillon, 2015, p. 76)

As educators, we must first consider how we create expectations and how we will support students to make these directives a reality. According to Dillon (2015),

For students to feel empowered to help, schools must understand why it is a challenge and then intentionally educate students to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to do what they want to do – help others and make a positive difference in the world. (p. 75)

Although duration of instruction and specific content of bullying prevention curricula can vary, three main features need to be considered. These features include: knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

Knowledge: what bullying is; why it must be stopped – the harm it does; the content of the school’s anti-bullying policy.

Attitudes: being unprejudiced; being cooperative and empathetic; resisting negative group pressure, self-acceptance as an antidote to discouragement.

Skills: being assertive and not acting aggressively; resolving differences constructively; using conflict resolution techniques; helping others who are being bullied, as a good bystander; reacting effectively if bullied. (Rigby, 2012, p. 401)

The teaching of these key features will differ according to the age and maturity of the students.

In order to improve adverse student behavior, all students need to be explicitly taught a positive behavior pattern, be given opportunities to practice and display what they have learned, and receive feedback regarding the effectiveness of their efforts (Walker et al., 1996).

Following the guidelines of effective instruction, students are much more likely to be positively influenced if they participate in activities, role playing, and discussions that enable them to learn through experience and by listening to each other’s opinions.

For more information on Bullying Prevention and related professional learning opportunities, contact Dr. Bubak at katiebubak@boisestate.edu.

References


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