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Governance Brief

Addressing the Conditions of Children: Focus on Bullying

Introduction

All students and staff need a safe and supportive school environment in order to succeed. While incidents of violent crime at school are relatively low, bullying continues to persist and is taking on new and different forms which have long-term implications for the aggressor, victim, bystanders, and the greater school community. Bullying in the 21st century starts at younger ages, is meaner, more accepted, and more complex. It occurs on and off school campus and online.¹

This governance brief highlights the impacts of bullying, identifies new legislation focused on supporting school districts and county offices of education (COEs), and discusses considerations for governing boards and COEs for developing and strengthening bullying prevention policies and practices.

Impacts of Bullying

There are short- and long-term individual, educational, and financial costs of bullying.

Individual

Research shows that bullying can contribute to a victim's low self-esteem, depression, anger, drug or alcohol abuse, eating disorders, self-mutilation, and suicide. Students who are perpetrators of bullying are also impacted in similar psychological and emotional ways, including

low self-esteem, anger, and social isolation. This in turn directly impacts a student's ability to attend school and be engaged and learning in the classroom.

Educational

Bullying creates an environment of fear and isolation, and can prompt misbehavior and disruptions where students cannot focus on learning and teachers cannot focus on teaching. This environment can lead to an increase in absenteeism, suspensions, expulsions, and dropping out. In California, research has shown that bullying can account for up to an average 1.5 letter grade decrease in an academic subject across the middle school years.² Further, the California Healthy Kids Survey shows that schools with high Academic Performance Index (API) scores had significantly lower rates of harassment than schools with low API scores, even after adjusting for socioeconomic and other school characteristics.³

Financial

There are financial costs associated with loss of attendance from suspensions, expulsions, and dropping out, as well as costs associated with providing support services and programs for students removed from class and remediation for students who fall behind. All of the individual and educational impacts described above have a serious financial cost to the school, district, and the community. (For more information on how to calculate the losses and costs of school climate, go to www.community-matters.org/safe-school-ambassadors/documents).

¹ Community Matters, www.community-matters.org

² Juvonen, J., Wang, Y., & Espinoza, G. (2011). *Bullying experiences and compromised academic performance across middle school grades*. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 31(1), 152-173.

³ Juvonen, J. (2010) *Bullying and Violence as Barriers to Academic Achievement*, University of California, Los Angeles. www.childrennow.org/uploads/documents/bwlw2011_brief4_juvonen.pdf

New Legislation

Existing law has created a strong foundation to support school districts and COEs in creating safe and positive school environments. However, there are a number of challenges to successful implementation in rapidly changing school environments. New legislation in California seeks to strengthen bullying prevention policies and practices in school districts across the state.

AB 746 (Campos)

Effective January 1, 2012, this legislation amended California Education Code 32261 to expand the definition of bullying as grounds for suspension and expulsion to include social networking sites in the definition of an electronic act. The code now states “bullying, including bullying committed personally or by means of an electronic act, which includes the posting of messages on a social network Internet website...”

AB 9 (Ammiano)

Effective July 1, 2012, this legislation requires all school districts and COEs to adopt an anti-bullying policy. It also requires complaint procedures to include a timeline that

school officials must follow when investigating student claims of bullying and establishes an expectation that school personnel who witness an act of discrimination, harassment, intimidation or bullying immediately intervene when safe to do so. Additionally, this legislation requires the California Department of Education to monitor districts for compliance with these requirements.

AB 1156 (Eng)

Effective July 1, 2012, this legislation encourages inclusion of bullying prevention policies and procedures in school district comprehensive safety plans. It also requires that a student determined to have been a victim of bullying be given priority and/or additional consideration for inter-district transfer if a request is made. Additionally, this legislation requires the Attorney General’s Office and the California Department of Education to contract to provide professional development in the prevention of bullying. To be clear, this law does not require school districts to train staff; the law directs state agencies to contract to provide training.

County Connection

COEs can play a critical role in helping districts develop and implement effective strategies and provide support and resources for ensuring a safe and supportive school environment. The San Mateo County Office of Education (SMCOE), in partnership with Community Gatepath and its local PTA, launched a two-year, countywide anti-bullying and civility initiative called RESPECT! 24/7. This initiative aims to empower students, families, and communities to prioritize respectful behavior and demand it of themselves and each other with the intent to reduce the incidence of bullying within the county.

This initiative grew out of a working seminar in which all 23 school districts in San Mateo County worked to revise and strengthen district anti-bullying and harassment policies. That work produced an awareness that no single system can tackle this issue alone and that all systems need to work together in order to prioritize the value of civility and respect. As part of this initiative, the SMCOE is hosting numerous training events and activities at schools and venues throughout the county focusing on promoting safe, positive, and healthy schools and communities, free of bullying, harassment, discrimination, and violence.

The RESPECT! 24/7 Initiative enjoys the support of a variety of community partners and the list continues to grow as the initiative expands. A key role the COE

can play in this work is as convener and coordinator of purposeful partners and resources. For example, one of the partners, StarVista, a nonprofit organization that provides mental health and social services to youth, had a specific interest in parent outreach and education. As a result of coordination from the SMCOE, this organization is now planning parent outreach and education events to follow countywide screenings of the documentary film “Bully.” Also, the county library is partnering with SMCOE to implement RESPECT! 24/7 READS, an activity that will engage schools and communities around a common book on this issue.

As this initiative grows and expands, SMCOE is finding that each partnering agency gets better at aligning and leveraging its own strengths and priorities with that of the whole. The COE already functions as a bridge between the school community and the larger community, so it is uniquely positioned to serve effectively and efficiently as the hub for this collective effort.

For more information on the RESPECT! 24/7 Initiative and the San Mateo County Office of Education, contact Nancy Magee, administrator for Bboard Support and Community Relations, at 650-802-5553; or Mefula Fairley, director, Compliance, Assessment and Special Projects, at 650-802-5392.

Policy implications

The governance team should ensure that board policies and administrative regulations related to bullying and school safety are regularly reviewed and revised as necessary, both to remain compliant with current law and to ensure alignment with district goals and priorities. In response to the new legislation, CSBA revised the following sample board policies:

- BP 5145.3 Nondiscrimination/Harassment
- BP/AR 5145.7 Sexual Harassment
- BP 5131 Conduct
- BP 0450 Comprehensive Safety Plan

In addition, CSBA developed a new sample board policy focused on bullying prevention and intervention strategies:

- BP 5131.2 Bullying

Questions for school governance teams

This new legislation creates the opportunity for school districts and COEs to take a look at their vision, goals, and priorities on safe school environments and the supporting policies, practices and programs. Through their unique and critical role and responsibilities, school boards can positively impact school culture. As the governance team discusses the issue of bullying and how to create a safe school environment for all students, it might consider the following questions:

Setting Direction

- What does the research show about the relationship between a safe, supportive, and welcoming school environment and student attendance, engagement and achievement?
- What does the assessment of existing conditions in our schools, district, and community tell us about the needs of our students and opportunities for effective strategies?

Establishing Effective Structures

- Do board policies and administrative regulations comply with current legislation, focus on student learning and achievement, and promote, support and create safe, supportive school environments?

Providing Support

- Does our district have a professional development plan to support school staff in implementing the board policies and administrative regulations?

Ensuring Accountability

- What indicators can be used to assess the effectiveness of our district's safety-related policies and practices?

Leading the Community

- What opportunities are there to incorporate student, parent, and community input into district safety policies, curricula, and strategies?
- Who are the key community organizations, agencies and individuals who can help support collaborative solutions to creating a safe, supportive school and community environment?

Collective Impact Approach

Bullying is a rapidly increasing and complex problem that impacts students, families, schools, and the community. All institutions, organizations, and individuals inside and outside schools—governing boards, school staff, parents, students, community-based organizations, local government, and state and federal leaders—must accept responsibility for the critical role they play in bullying prevention and intervention and ensuring positive outcomes for all students. CSBA encourages governance teams to consider the assets and resources within their community that can support the district's efforts around school safety and bullying prevention, and work to develop and implement processes that allow for purposeful collaboration and partnerships. Governance teams have an opportunity to advocate for alignment between the district and the community—to engage and lead the community toward a shared vision for student success.

An "Inside-Out Approach"

Community Matters, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization headquartered in Sebastopol, California, is a national leader in bullying and violence prevention whose mission is to collaborate with schools and communities in creating safe and inclusive environments where all youth and adults thrive. Community Matters implements an "Inside-Out Approach" to bullying prevention—an approach which recognizes that a positive school climate is the foundation for building safe, high performing, and thriving school communities. This approach is student-centered, focuses on building relationships, is formative and restorative, and seeks to change social norms. For more information on Community Matters' programs and services including school climate assessments, empowering students, training staff, and working closely with families and the community, go to www.community-matters.org.

The “Community School” Approach

A key strategy to achieving collective impact is the “community school” approach, also known as “full-service community schools,” “school-community partnerships,” or “community-engaged schools,” which has been shown to have stronger parent-teacher relationships, increased teacher satisfaction, a more positive school environment, greater community support, increased neighborhood security, heightened community pride, and better rapport among students and residents (Coalition for Community Schools, 2009). For more information about the community school strategy, please see CSBA’s policy brief, “Community Schools: Partnerships Supporting Students, Families and Communities,” and “Community Schools: It takes a village,” in the Summer 2012 issue of California Schools magazine, both found at www.csba.org.

Resources

- **CSBA**, www.csba.org
 - » School Climate Matters: How to Create Safer and Bully-Free Schools (Education Insights @ CSBA Webinar)
 - » Safe Schools: Strategies for Governing Boards to Ensure Student Success (CSBA guidebook)
 - » Providing a Safe, Nondiscriminatory School Environment for All Students (Policy Brief)
 - » Cyberbullying: Policy Considerations for Boards (Policy Brief)
 - » Community Schools: Partnerships Supporting Students, Families and Communities (Policy Brief)
 - » “Community Schools: It takes a village,” California Schools magazine, Summer 2012
- **California Department of Education**, www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss

Provides training, resources and technical assistance for establishing a school-community environment that is physically and emotionally safe and conducive to learning.
- **StopBullying.gov** Website

Provides information from various government agencies on how children, parents, educators and others in the community can address bullying.