Literature Review – Bullying and Harassment in Schools

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Terminology

It can be difficult for communities to settle on a single definition for bullying because the behavior itself must be assessed through family, teacher and peer reports, which can vary (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Individuals respond to the severity of bullying in different ways. What one person would consider severe, another may find it worthy of minor concern (Bradshaw, et al., 2013). General definitions for bullying behaviors and related terms include the following.

- **Bullying**: Any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another person or group who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying behaviors may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth. These behaviors include physical, psychological, social or educational harm (Gladden, et al., 2014).

  o **Direct Bullying:** Aggressive behavior or behaviors that occur in the presence of the targeted youth. Examples of direct bullying include pushing the targeted youth or directing harmful written or verbal messages at the youth (Gladden, et al., 2014).

  o **Indirect Bullying:** Aggressive behavior or behaviors that are not directly done against the targeted youth. These can include spreading false and/or harmful rumors (Gladden, et al., 2014).

  o **Physical Bullying:** The use of physical force against the targeted youth, such as hitting, kicking, punching, spitting, tripping and pushing (Gladden, et al., 2014).

  o **Verbal Bullying:** Oral or written communication against the targeted youth to cause harm. Can include taunting, name-calling, threatening or offensive notes or hand gestures, inappropriate sexual comments, or verbal threats (Gladden, et al., 2014).

  o **Relational Bullying:** Behaviors designed to harm the reputation and relationships of the targeted youth. Includes attempts at isolation by keeping the youth from interacting with peers or ignoring them. Indirect methods include spreading false or harmful rumors, publicly posting derogatory comments or posting embarrassing images without the targeted youth's permission or knowledge (Gladden, et al., 2014).

- **Discrimination:** Beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements or behaviors that denigrate individuals or groups based on perceived group membership (Clark, et al., 1999; Brown & Bigler, 2005). Discrimination is measured according to the perception of the person suffering,

and it does not have to be repeated. It can be perpetrated by an adult, youth or institution (Jones, 2000).

- **Harassment**: A continuous pattern of intentional behavior that is reasonably perceived as being motivated by any characteristic of a student or by being associated with an individual from a protected population. The behavior is considered harassment when it gets in the way of a student being able to take place in everyday activities. (Cornell & Limber, 2016)

- **Identity/Intersectionality:** The effects of identity-based harassment and other bullying behaviors differ for students within demographic groups, as well as across them. Many students struggle to understand or talk about bullying or discrimination surrounding one aspect of their identity without talking about the disadvantages associated with another. For this reason, it is important for schools to avoid categorizing students by oversimplified aspects of their identities and instead celebrate their complex and multifaceted selves. (Spiegler, 2016)

- **Bully Victim**: People who bully who are the victims of bullying (Menesini, et al., 2009; Cook, et al., 2010).

- **Bystander**: Any person who witnesses bullying – either in person or in digital forms, such as social media, websites, text messages, gaming and apps – and does not intervene (stopbullying.gov, 2018).

- **Protected Groups**: Students likely to suffer from bullying behaviors based on an element of their identity, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, religious orientation, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, weight, disability or some other visual marker. Teachers also can consider students who struggle with social and/or academic skills as vulnerable to bullying behaviors and therefore "protected" students. (Spiegler, 2016)

- **Safe Space:** "A place where anyone can relax and be able to fully express, without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable, unwelcome or unsafe on account of biological sex, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, cultural background, religious affiliation, age or mental ability" (NCSSLE, 2021).

- **School Micro-Contexts:** Physical locations throughout a school's grounds occupied by students at a given time (Patton, et al., 2013).

- **Social Emotional Learning**: A set of skills that individuals need to succeed at school, in the workplace, in interpersonal relationships and as citizens (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

- **School Climate**: A broad, multifaceted concept that involves many aspects of the student's educational experience. It is the overall quality and character of school life, to include teaching and learning practices, organizational structures, norms, values and relationships (APA, 2018). A positive school climate is the "product of a school's attention to fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting and caring relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting" (NCSSLE, 2021).

- **Upstander:** A witness of bullying behaviors who acts to stop the behavior or chooses to somehow help the person being bullied (Facing History and Ourselves, 2021).

Prevalence and Impact

Bullying is a widespread issue in schools and communities across the United States. In fact, the phenomenon of bullying is experienced broadly by students across developmental periods, geographies and demographic groups. In 2019, about 22% of students ages 12-18 reported being bullied at school, while around 16% of students in grades 9-12 reported being electronically bullied in that same year (Irwin, et al., 2021). Those students who do attend school but remain afraid of being bullied (or feel compelled to engage in bullying behaviors) are often distracted from the central activities of school and find it difficult to learn (Glew, et al., 2005; Swearer, 2011; CDC, 2019).

National Center for Education Statistics reports the following for 2019 (Irwin, et al., 2021):

- A higher percentage of female students (25%) reported being bullied at school than male students (19%).

- Students of two or more races reported being bullied at the highest rates (37%), followed by white (25%), Black (22%), Latino (18%) and Asian American students (13%).

- Reported bullying incidents were higher for students in rural schools (28%) than students enrolled in schools in towns and cities (22%) or in suburban areas (21%).

- Students in middle school grades were more likely to report name-calling, being made fun of, or insulted (17% to 20%) than students in 10th, 11th and 12th grades (9% to 11%). They also were more likely to report being pushed, shoved, tripped or spit on (7% to 8% vs 2% to 3%).

- A higher percentage of female students ages 12-18 reported being subjected to rumors (19%) than their male peers (12%), being made fun of (16% vs. 12%) and being intentionally excluded from activities (9% vs. 4%). A higher percentage of male students ages 12-18 (6%) reported being pushed, shoved, tripped or spat on than their female peers (4%).

- Only 46% of students ages 12-18 who were subject to bullying behavior notified an adult at school about the incident. A higher percentage of Black students (61%) reported bullying than white students (47%), and both percentages were higher than Latino students (35%).

- Around 60% of students who reported being subject to bullying more than 10 days in the school year indicated they notified an adult about the behavior. In contrast, only 43% of students who were bullied two days in the school year and 35% of those bullied one day in the school year reported the behavior.

The fallout from bullying can increase the risk for depression, anxiety, sleep difficulties, lower academic achievement, and dropping out of school. Youth who bully others are at higher risk for substance abuse, academic problems, and experiencing violence in later adolescence and adulthood. Students who engage in bullying behaviors while being bullied themselves face the worst outcomes and are at serious risk for mental health and behavioral problems (CDC, 2019).

Frequent experiences with bullying and/or harassment can lead to toxic levels of stress, which can depress immune functioning and increase cortisol levels, negatively impacting physical, psychological and cognitive health (Swearer, 2011; Vaillancourt, et al., 2010; APA, 2018). Thus, the negative effects of bullying behaviors are both short- and long-term, often influencing students' right to fully access the everyday activities of school. It is important to note that, while schools and communities experience the impact of bullying and harassment, the nature of these behaviors, as well as their specific effects on those involved, often vary significantly depending on the context in which these behaviors occur and the identities of those involved.

Although many studies focus on the negative effects of bullying for those who are victimized, bullying behaviors also negatively impact those who are perpetrating the harm. Whether students are engaging in bullying behaviors or suffering as a result of these behaviors, they are more likely to experience higher levels of depression, anxiety and externalizing behaviors, all of which can get in the way of a learning (Cook, et al., 2010; Menesini, et al., 2009; Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Swearer, 2011).

In the longer term, students who engage in bullying behaviors, those who witness these behaviors and those who are victimized are shown to suffer socially and struggle with substance abuse (Farrington, 1993; Huesmann, et al., 1984; Olweus, 1993). Furthermore, the interpersonal patterns reflected in bullying behaviors – using aggression, asserting power over others in order to communicate or problem-solve – *may* translate to dangerous interpersonal behaviors later in life, such as sexual harassment, relationship violence and community violence.

Adverse behavioral and psychological outcomes are common across those who have been bullied and those who bully. These outcomes can include the following.

- Students who engage in bullying or who are bullied have lower academic achievement and aspirations (Ali, 2010; APA, 2018).

- Students who engage in bullying or who are bullied have higher rates of absenteeism (Ali, 2010).

- Students who bully have a higher likelihood of being convicted of a criminal offense when they become adults than their uninvolved peers (Cook, et al., 2010).

- Kids who bully are also more likely to abuse alcohol or other drugs in adolescence and

adulthood, fight, vandalize property, drop out of school, and extend their violence to their romantic partners, spouses, or children when they enter into adulthood (stopbullying.gov, May 2021; APA, 2018).

- Kids who are bullied have shown higher levels of depression and anxiety, increased feelings of sadness and loneliness, changes in sleep and eating patterns, and a general loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy. They may also suffer from health problems and decreased academic achievement. They are more likely to commit suicide, both during childhood and later in life (Ali, 2010; stopbullying.gov, May 2021; APA, 2018).

- Children who witness bullying are more likely to have increased use of tobacco or other drugs, increased rates of depression or anxiety, and miss or skip school (stopbullying.gov, May 2021).

Risk Factors: Who is Bullied and Who Bullies?

There are many reasons students engage in bullying behaviors and many reasons students may be more vulnerable to victimization. More often than not, students who engage in bullying behaviors are trying to meet a physical or psychological need but do not have the tools to engage in a prosocial way.

Some of the risk factors for direct involvement in bullying and harassment operate at the individual-level, and others operate at the level of a setting or context. While it is beyond the scope of this package to discuss research on the individual risk factors associated with bullying (for more information, see stopbullying.gov, June 2021), it is important to note that bullying behaviors are not static. Many students will engage in bullying behaviors at some point over the course of their development but not at other points. Many students will engage in bullying behaviors in some contexts but not others. Most often, the likelihood that a student will try to meet a need in a way that harms others depends, in part, on the factors at play in their environment. **We strongly encourage educators to avoid labelling students as bullies or victims and to talk instead about the behaviors in which students are engaging and how these behaviors may be causing others harm** (Van der Valk, 2013).

Often, students engage in bullying behaviors because of a desire for power. After all, each of us requires power and agency in order to meet our own needs. The desire to acquire power by taking power away from others is, unfortunately, often learned from observing the behaviors of adults in society. This is particularly true when students engage in identity-based bullying.

In the United States, many groups experience heightened levels of oppression and marginalization due to beliefs or observations about power and who holds it. When certain beliefs that empower (or disempower) are cited repeatedly, they create a culture in which oppression is normalized (Meyer, 2008; Kumashiro, 2002). In schools, everyday language and behaviors create cultures of power. These cultures of power both enable individuals to exert power over each other and reinforce power dynamics within the culture. Thus, to prevent bullying and harassment in schools, we must address questions of power and marginalization within a school community.

Targeted students typically (Cook, et al., 2010):
- Develop internalizing symptoms, causing them to believe they do not have power;
- Lack adequate social skills;
- Possess lower self-esteem than peers;

- Find it difficult to solve social problems;
- Live and engage in less supportive school, community and family environments; and
- Tend to be noticeably rejected by peers.

Students who bully usually (Cook, et al., 2010):
- Are more socially competent;
- Struggle academically;
- Have negative attitudes and beliefs about others;
- Have a negative self-image;
- Have difficulty resolving problems with others;
- Come from family environments where they experience conflict;
- Have negative images of the school environment;
- Tend to be negatively influenced by peers; and
- Have higher levels of aggression and impulsivity (APA, 2018).

Negative outcomes of bullying for targeted students include (Menesini, et al., 2009):
- Depressive tendencies;
- Higher anxiety;
- Lower self-esteem; and
- More negative social representation when compared to uninvolved students.

Often, students engage in bullying behaviors because of a desire for power, which is behavior they learn from adults. Students who are **bully victims** – bullies who are also victims of other bullies – tend to have even more negative outcomes than just bullies or victims. Namely, they can be more likely to be involved in rule-breaking and risky behavior, such as substance abuse (Menesini, et al., 2009).

Despite data on students who engage in or are victims of bullying, there is no real longitudinal, nationally representative assessment of bullying and victimization in the United States because these behaviors can be idiosyncratic to individual schools and communities (Swearer, 2011). However, numerous studies have found some common factors in students who are bullied across the country and in the schools where they learn. These include the following.

- **Gender**: Boys and girls are both involved in bullying perpetration and victimization, but research finds that boys are involved in bullying at higher rates than girls (Swearer, 2011; Glew, et al., 2005; Cook, et al., 2010; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). In general, boys are more often involved in physical bullying, while girls are more likely to engage in relational, verbal and cyberbullying (Hymel & Swearer, 2015).

- **Transgender**: Transgender students were more likely than all other LGBTQ students to

have negative experiences at school. In 2015, 43.3% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their gender expression (Kosciw, et al., 2016; APA, 2018).

- **Grade Level**: Bullying tends to happen most often in middle school, but research also suggests that it peaks during transition periods – both between elementary and middle, and middle and high school (Swearer, 2011).

- **Race/Ethnicity**: Though bullying in general transcends race and ethnicity, research shows that students of color are more likely to be bullied than their white peers (Swearer, 2011).

- **Religion**: Most students who report being bullied based on religion follow beliefs that are different than the majority (Swearer, 2011). A survey by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) indicates that Muslim students (58%) and Jewish students (60%) are more likely to experience bullying because of their faith than are other students (Mogahed & Ikramullah, 2020).

- **Weight & Physical Fitness**: Students who are or appear to be overweight or underweight are more likely to be targeted by students who bully (Wang, Iannotti & Luk, 2010). There is a link between verbal harassment based on weight and students' desire to engage in physical activity. Girls were especially susceptible to being less satisfied and likely to participate in physical activities if they were perceived or perceived themselves to be overweight (Jensen, Cushing & Elledge, 2014).

- **Socioeconomic Status**: Disparities between family income are associated with higher levels of victimization. It is likely that the relationship between income and being bullied depends on the context of the school and community (Swearer, 2011).

- **Poor Social Skills**: All students involved in bullying, both the one who bullies and the targeted student, often exhibit poorer social skills than their peers and do not cope as well with negative emotions (Swearer, 2011; Cook, et al., 2010).

- **Superior Social Skills**: Students who bully can often be considered "popular and cool" among their peers and are more likely to bully or manipulate others (Swearer, 2011).

- **LGBTQ Students**: Students who are, or who are believed to be, LGBTQ are more likely to be bullied (Swearer, 2011). In 2015, 57.6% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 43.3% because of their gender expression (Kosciw, et al., 2016). A national survey of school climate found over 80% of LGBTQ youth reported hearing homophobic remarks from other students at school, and more than half reported hearing comments from teachers or staff (APA, 2017).

- **Disability**: Research concerning students with disabilities shows mixed results. Some studies find that autistic students are more likely to be victimized. Other studies find that students with behavior disorders are more likely to exhibit bullying behavior, but this may be in response to having been bullied (Swearer, 2011). Any number of factors, from behavior to appearance, may impact a student's identity among his or her peers and increase the likelihood of bullying (Musgrove & Yudin, 2013). Students with intellectual disabilities or communication disorders may have a difficult time understanding or reporting incidents of bullying to adults who can help (Musgrove & Yudin, 2013). Generally, students with disabilities are subjected to more bullying, physical abuse, verbal abuse and rejection than other students (APA, 2017).

Risk factors for the school environment include the following.

- **Climate:** The people who teach and manage schools are primarily responsible for setting the school climate. When the climate is unsupportive and unhealthy, bullying can proliferate. Schools associated with higher levels of bullying tend to have negative, punitive climates (Swearer, 2011).

- **Teacher Attitudes:** When the adults directly responsible for teaching people to ignore bullying or think that it is part of "kids being kids," higher levels of bullying persist (Swearer, 2011).

- **Classroom Characteristics:** There are four classroom characteristics associated with higher levels of bullying: negative peer friendships, poor teacher-student relationships, lack of self-control among individuals, and poor problem-solving among students (Swearer, 2011).

- **Academic Engagement:** When students are challenged and motivated to do well, bullying declines. Students involved in bullying are less academically engaged (Swearer, 2011; Glew, et al., 2005).

- **School Belonging:** Elementary school students who bully tend to show lower rates of school belonging than their target students. Feelings of belonging are associated with lower rates of bullying and victimization (Swearer, 2011; Glew, et al., 2005).

Environmental risk factors hearken back to the issue of school climate. The easiest way to establish a healthy environment is to prioritize acceptance, safety, and healthy relationships between authority figures, teachers and students. Educators and administrators should actively develop a safe and healthy school climate and, in the process, prevent bullying and harassment in their school community.

School Obligations Under Law

State laws outline the specifics of how school districts should respond to incidents of bullying and cyberbullying (Stopbullying.gov, Oct 2021; Harper, 2018). These laws vary by state.

The Office for Civil Rights has the responsibility to enforce certain federal civil rights laws (GAO, 2021).

- **Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964** (Title VI) prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in programs or activities that receive federal assistance.
- **Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972** (Title IX), prohibits sex discrimination in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance.
- **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973** (Section 504) prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance.
- **Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990** (Title II) prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability by public entities, whether or not they receive federal financial assistance.

Federal law requires schools that receive federal funds to intervene in bullying incidents related to a student's identity that may qualify as harassment under federal civil rights laws (Harper, 2018; GAO, 2021). Schools are required by federal law to address student conduct if:

- The behavior is unwelcome and offensive, including if the instigator uses derogatory language, intimidation, threats, physical contact or physical violence (Stopbullying.gov, Oct 2021);

- The bullying creates a hostile school climate and interferes with a student's sense of safety and ability to participate in learning and school events (Stopbullying.gov, Oct 2021); or

- The behavior is based on a student's real or perceived race, color, national origin, disability, or religion. A student's sex includes their gender identity, sexual orientation or intersex traits. National origin includes a student's spoken language. (Stopbullying.gov, Oct 2021)

School districts are obligated by federal law to report their bullying data to the U.S. Department of Education (Harper, 2018). Most anti-bullying policies will specify that bullying incidents must be investigated reported, and then submitted to the federal government.

School districts can work with state education agencies and expert organizations for support on bullying and cyberbullying prevention programs to ensure that their policies and procedures are up to date and effective (Harper, 2018).

Following are resources for more information on bullying laws, regulations, and model anti-bullying and harassment policies.

- Federal Laws (StopBullying.gov, Oct 2021): https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/laws/federal
- Students' Experiences with Bullying, Hate Speech, Hate Crimes, and Victimization in Schools (GAO, Nov 2021): https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104341
- Laws. Policies & Regulations [by State] (StopBullying.gov, Sep 2021): https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/laws
- Cyber-Bullying and the Law: What Should School Leaders Know? (Education World, 2013a): https://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/cyber-bullying-legal-issues-liability-schools.shtml
- Bullying and School Liability: What Administrators Should Know (Education World, 2013b) https://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/bullying-school-legal-liability.shtml
- Confronting LGBTQ+ Bullying and Harassment in Schools – A Resource for Students and Families (Office for Civil Rights, 2021): https://www.justice.gov/crt/page/file/1405661/download
- Guidance on Antibullying Policy and Enumeration (CDC, 2021): https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/bullying/anti_bullying_policies_infobrief-basic.htm
- Model Local Education Agency Bullying and Harassment Prevention Policy (GLSEN, 2020): https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Model-Local-Education-Agency-Bullying-Harassment-Prevention-Policy_0.pdf
- State Laws, Regulations, and Guidance that Affirm Nondiscrimination Protections for LGBTQ+ Students (GLSEN, May 2021): https://www.glsen.org/policy-maps
- Webinar National Bullying Prevention Month – video with Deputy Secretary Cindy Marten (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021): https://youtu.be/fDo-yMdaT28 Slide deck: https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/bullying-prevention-month-202110.pdf
- What Should Your School's Bullying Policy Look Like?, by the Cyberbullying Research Center (Patchin, 2020): https://cyberbullying.org/school-bullying-policy
- Bullying and School Liability: What Administrators Should Know (Education World, 2013c): nworld.com/a_admin/bullying-school-legal-liability.shtml

Avoid Ineffective Anti-bullying Programs

Some popular anti-bullying programs tend to actually be ineffective or do more harm than good for students in the long term.

For example, though the student bystander strategy is emphasized by many anti-bullying programs, a 2010 synthesis of research studies on bullying found that strategies encouraging student bystander intervention made bullying worse. Studies generally do not follow the bullied student after these short interventions, so there is no indication about whether or not the behavior might have resumed after a student bystander steps in. Additionally, if students who are unsure or mistaken on how to successfully intervene in bullying try, they could end up making the situation worse. (Healy, 2019)

Another meta-analysis of anti-bullying programs found that while elementary school anti-bullying programs were generally effective, many high school anti-bullying programs were likely to make the bullying behaviors worse, though the exact reason for the difference is unknown. The meta-analysis showed successful aspects of anti-bullying programs included connecting with families through meetings, research-based disciplinary methods, and improved playground supervision. (Healy, 2019)

Though studies have shown that bullying interventions may stop the bullying behavior more quickly, there is no evidence that they dispel the behavior or improve the bullying in the long term. These interventions can draw more attention to the targeted student and increase their anxiety and distress. The targeted student may feel more helpless, especially if the student felt that they could defend themselves. (Morrison, 2020).

Another very common school practice is to offer one-off anti-bullying programs and assemblies. These do not work at reducing bullying. Students cannot absorb proper strategies for preventing bullying in a single hour or day, and the complex factors that contribute to bullying cannot be addressed in such a limited time. Short or brief programs can also send the message to students that bullying isn't important. (Holohan, 2019).

Additionally, strategies that include having the student exhibiting the bullying behavior talk directly to the targeted student with promises of being nicer tend to backfire and make the behavior worse. (Holohan, 2019).

Parsons (2005) describes how the three typical types of anti-bullying programs tend not to succeed: zero-tolerance using exclusionary discipline, problem-solving that focuses motivations or that rely on peer mediation led by students who do not have the insight or authority required, and a combination of the two. Parsons emphasizes that outside curriculum is typically short-

lived, "Anti-bullying has to grow from the inside out" (2005).

Vitelli (2016) describes a study that gathered student impressions on anti-bullying strategies. Students pointed out unsuccessful aspects of bullying programs:

- **Assemblies:** One-time, dry assemblies where it is just a speaker or teacher talking to gathered students were identified as boring.

- **Repetition of Generic Messages:** Being told generic slogans such as "bullying is bad" or seeing the same posters and graphics again and again led to students feeling detached from anti-bullying messages. These simple reminders do not take into account the complex lives that students live.

- **Distant Staff and Teachers:** Students who felt that teachers, staff or administrators didn't care about them found anti-bullying messages ineffective. Additionally, if a student feels disconnected or unsafe in school, they are less likely to report bullying behavior because they believe they will not be helped.

- Outside speakers were also likely to be ignored for having no personal relevance to student attendees.

Be wary also about holding assemblies with speaker or videos that dramatize bullying-associated suicide. If held at all, such programs must be handled carefully to be age-appropriate and to not imply that all bullying leads to suicide. The data show that bullying and suicide-related behavior are related, but clearly most youth who are involved in bullying do not engage in suicide-related behavior (CDC, 2014). The key message should be that students who are bullied will be supported and bullying will not be allowed.

Other tactics that do not work include posters and slogan campaigns on their own, suspending students who bully, telling targets to ignore the bullying or to fight back, encouraging witnesses to confront students who bully, blaming families, or using peer mediation or any other approach that "puts the bully and victim in the same room to 'work it out'" as if the problem is an mere disagreement among equals (Provini, 2011). Provini cautions against "overemphasis on the words "bullying" and "bully" (better to emphasize what specific behaviors are inappropriate and why... teasing, put-downs, name-calling, homophobic language, tripping, pushing, gossiping, social exclusion, etc.) (2011).

The student study (Vitelli, 2016) provides the following recommendations for a successful anti-bullying program:

- Use positive, motivational messages in anti-bullying materials that encourage students to stand up for themselves. All anti-bullying messages and activities should be tested on students of various ages and demographics to see how they respond and make changes

before wide-spread use.

- Anti-bullying activities should immediately address any disruptive behavior and encourage students to be involved and participate.

- Teachers and staff should be extremely vigilant in monitoring for bullying behavior, especially after anti-bullying activities.

- Schools must deal with bullying incidents immediately and in a fair and impartial manner. Students must feel that the targets of bullying behavior will be listened to and protected.

- Educators and staff must have the proper resources and support to properly deal with bullying incidents.

Fostering Change

Bullying prevention is a major focus for classrooms in the United States. The practice has been on the rise since the 1990s, and nearly all states have passed laws related to bullying, many of which encourage the use of programs or strategies to prevent the practice (Bradshaw, 2015).

The GAO's 2021 report indicates that almost all schools offered students programs – including social emotional learning, peer mediation, and restorative circles – to address "hostile behaviors" in 2015-16 and 2017-18, which programs increasing over time. Other strategies in use include programs and training for students, teachers, and staff; diversity groups; mental health services; disciplinary action; security mechanisms; and school resource officers.

Whether or not programs are effective has been less scrutinized in rigorous academic literature, and the few meta-analyses that have been conducted have had mixed results. Some show that bullying prevention programs are effective, while others question their results (Bradshaw, 2015). Overall effective elements of bullying prevention programs, according to Bradshaw's review of the literature, include high levels of playground supervision, consistent disciplinary methods, family engagement activities, and classroom management strategies. The programs were more efficient if they took more time and had a greater intensity on the subject matter (Bradshaw, 2015). Programs that attempt to prevent violence and disruptive behaviors while promoting a positive school climate can also impact bullying and victimization, even if they do not specifically target these behaviors (Bradshaw, 2015).

School districts should focus on connected, coordinated efforts and programs to train their staff and engage their students and communities for bullying prevention. After all, classrooms and schools are all parts of a larger system. Consistency and continuity are essential (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Principals and administrators should resist the notion that a greater number of bullying prevention programs equates to an overall better effort. Too many programs can overwhelm teachers, leading to poorer implementation (Bradshaw, 2015).

Zero-tolerance policies, in particular, are not recommended for alleviating the issue of bullying. Not only have these policies been linked to less engagement for the students, they also can create negative bonds between students and teachers, making them less likely to report incidents of harassment and bullying that they may observe (Boccanfuso & Kulfeld, 2011).

Leaders at the state level can prepare to hold people to higher standards by ensuring that everyone is protected. States should take stock of their current laws and then make efforts to amend or create anti-bullying laws and policy guidance that enumerate protections for underserved and vulnerable populations (Kull, Kosciw & Greytak, 2015). Legislators and stakeholders should ensure that there is funding for anti-bullying efforts to enable districts to

properly train and implement programs. The people responsible for setting laws and policies should encourage school board associations to develop model policies or recommendations that protect all youth (Kull, Kosciw & Greytak, 2015).

School Climate

Any strategies for bullying prevention – from connecting with the community to handling the classroom – work best when integrated into an explicit, multi-tiered effort to improve school culture and climate. Teachers should work in tandem with the other stakeholders – administrators, colleagues, families and other community members. School personnel should set high expectations for their students early and often (Learning for Justice, 2017). Every single person on staff – from administrators to support personnel – should be aware that hate, disrespect and intimidation have no place on campus (Learning for Justice, 2017). It is imperative to create a positive climate based on prevention. Rather than focusing on reaction, energy and effort should prioritize ensuring that bullying and harassment are curbed before they can begin. Some general strategies to promote a positive school climate include the following.

- Ensure educational leadership is committed to preventing mean, cruel, or bullying behavior and maintaining safe, supportive, respectful, meaningful, and engaging climates for learning and development (Cohen & Freiberg, 2013).

- Engage all stakeholders in building a positive educational environment: students, families, guardians, school personnel, and community members and leaders (Cohen & Freiberg, 2013; Montemayor & Chavkin, 2016).

- Reflect and assess constantly to understand how ready the school is to combat cruel, bullying behavior and how to improve these efforts over time (Cohen & Freiberg, 2013).

- Ensure that all students and adults involved in the school environment understand codes of conduct, practices and goals (Cohen & Freiberg, 2013).

- Create a "no slur" school. Early in the year, it should be clear that insults related to ability, appearance, culture, gender, language, race, ethnicity, religion, orientation or social class will not be tolerated. These policies should be readily available for students, teachers and community members to read about and should be backed up by empirical data about the harm slurs can do to others (Learning for Justice, 2017). Post reminders that hateful speech will not be accepted.

Addressing Bias-Based Harassment

A key facet of addressing bullying and harassment at the school level is combatting harassment that occurs due to facets of a student's identity: race, religion, sex, gender, sexuality, size, ability and national origin. Every student should feel welcome at school, regardless of how they look, identify, or worship. Unsavory pranks, bias incidents, and even hate crimes can happen at any school, anywhere. In some cases, the maliciousness is intentional, in others, offending students do not realize the full impact of their actions (Learning for Justice, 2017). In the even that harassment or a crisis that was fueled by bias occurs, the following steps should be taken:

- **Assess the resources** available to manage the response.

- **Put safety first:** Follow the school's policies for locking-down the site or evacuating students, if necessary. Alert families and care-givers, if appropriate. Attend to any injuries and follow the school's emergency protocols (Learning for Justice, 2017).

- **Denounce the act:** If a hate crime has occurred, it is especially important to denounce the act in unambiguous terms. The denunciation of the incident should be delivered to all stakeholders via the school website, school newspaper or newsletter, internal announcement systems, and the media (Learning for Justice, 2017).

- **Investigate:** Administrators should gather the facts about the incident and do not let the crisis itself force them into a hasty decision. They should approach each incident with an open mind, ask questions to determine if a student was acting out of ignorance rather than malice, understanding the motivation will help frame the response to the incident. Administrators should investigate the incident to ensure that it is not part of a larger pattern, create a way for witnesses to give information anonymously, and collect data from eyewitnesses as soon as possible to ensure they are as accurate as possible (Learning for Justice, 2017).

- **Involve others:** School personnel should have already built positive relationships with families and community members and organizations whom they can reach out to during a crisis. They should set up avenues for written or verbal feedback from stakeholders and ensure counseling is available for students, faculty and staff (Learning for Justice, 2017).

- **Work with the media:** If the incident is serious or wide-spread, the media will likely be involved. School districts cooperate with the media as much as possible. If an outlet is mishandling the story or breaking school policy, corrective action should be taken. Refer to the district or school-identified media relationships specialist for support. Operating a single communications hub is vital to avoid miscommunication and to allow everyone to deliver a clear message (Learning for Justice, 2017).

- **Provide accurate information – dispel misinformation:** Misinformation is common in the wake of bias-based incidents at school. Though everything cannot be monitored, a person or a small group should be tasked with keeping eyes out on various information sources (such as social media sites) to identify misinformation. Create a fact sheet to distribute so that the information surrounding the incident is clear, factual and concise (Learning for Justice, 2017).

- **Support targeted students:** It is vital to support targeted students as well as their communities. To provide this support, the school should provide physical safety, denounce the act clearly, and follow through on appropriate consequences for perpetrators. Even when the attack is indirect, targeted students will still feel insecure in their environment and upset. The targeted student's privacy and wishes should be respected. Additionally, school personnel should not put the victim on the spot, take offense to the student, their family, or community's anger at the incident, and should avoid victim-blaming. The school should apologize on behalf of the school's community and be sensitive to privacy concerns in the wake of the incident (Learning for Justice, 2017).

- **Seek justice, avoid blame:** There tends to be a focus on blame and punishment in the wake of a bias incident. If a crime has occurred, it will be handled by law enforcement, while school policy violations are addressed by the school. Whether a crime has been committed or not, it is the duty of school leaders to focus on restoration, not merely punishment. Fear and ignorance are at the root of bias incidents, and these incidents are an opportunity to teach about culture and race; to help students gain a deeper understanding of diversity and embrace their differences and commonalities (Learning for Justice, 2017).

- **Promote healing:** As the crisis winds down, it is important to share messages of healing and unity. Involve the neighborhood and wider community in opposing hate at school. Do not frame healing as the end of efforts, but as a beginning of further work toward improving school climate and culture (Learning for Justice, 2017).

Addressing Cyberbullying

Research and action concerning cyberbullying typically focuses on the "bully and victim," but the unique forms that online harassment can take also constitute defining a person or groups of peers as "instigators" or those who assist the person who is bullying by prodding or encouraging them (Hicks, et al., 2019). Instigators can also escalate a bad situation by demeaning the victim or disinhibiting the bully's behavior. In social media, instigators can quickly share information or prod a person to bully via private or public messages that delete themselves, such as certain functions of the app Snapchat that allow users to share information in their "story" that deletes after 24 hours.

Cyberbullying takes place over digital devices to include cell phones, computers, tablets, or gaming devices. It includes sending, posting or sharing negative, harmful, false or mean content about someone else or revealing personal information to cause embarrassment or humiliation. The most common places cyberbullying occurs (Stopbullying.gov, Nov 2021) include:
- Social media, including but not limited to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok
- Text messages or messaging apps
- Email
- Instant messaging or direct messaging spaces
- Online forums, chat rooms, and message boards
- Online gaming communities

Cyberbullying, in particular, concerns educational stakeholders because it can be pervasive, persistent, and difficult for educators to notice or monitor when it happens outside of school-monitored sites and online spaces.

Estimates of the prevalence of cyberbullying vary widely, ranging from 10% to 40% of all students depending on the age of the student group being studied and the definition of cyberbullying behavior (Hinduja & Patchin, 2021).

Bullying and instigating is harmful to their targets but is also associated with negative outcomes for the students who bully and instigators themselves, to include increased anxiety, depression, lack of self-esteem and self-respect, guilt, shame, and the potential for legal implications depending on policies or the severity of the behavior.

Schools should intervene in these behaviors by proactively helping students build positive relationships and carving out spaces for them to express their emotions creatively. Solutions include implementing empathy training, solution-focused complimenting, art-journaling and no-bullying contracts.

Younger students who are not allowed to use private messaging or email services may have

fewer problems with online bullying, but these problems may be more difficult for adults to catch if the students are using social media sites outside of the online classroom (Sparks, 2020).

Cyberbullying and in-school bullying are similarly hurtful and disruptive, but cyberbullying can be even more devastating to a student for numerous reasons. Some students may not even know who is bullying them or why. The actions of the aggressor can go viral and spread to the entire school community, making it more difficult for the student to feel safe around their peers. Because the abuse is removed from an in-person environment, students may find it easier to be cruel or not realize the seriousness of harming their peers. Additionally, many adults may not have the training or personal experience with online platforms to be able to identify cyberbullying.

Because cyberbullies often perceive themselves as anonymous, it opens up the pool of students who potentially will bully but might not otherwise do so in person. The round-the-clock availability of several different modes of cyber communications also can heighten the threat of cyberbullying. Furthermore, the concept of anonymity may significantly reduce chances for empathy or remorse by perpetrators because they cannot readily see how their victims are affected by their actions (Kowalski, et al., 2014). Accordingly, many anti-bullying laws and policies should be revised to take into account these contextual differences. (Hinojosa, 2017)

Cyberbullying has numerous detrimental effects on anyone impacted and it is common for targets to feel depressed, sad, angry and frustrated. Research has tied cyberbullying to low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, family issues, academic difficulties, suicidal thoughts, delinquency, and school violence (Hinduja & Patchin, 2021).

Highlights from the Cyberbullying Research Center's 2019 cyberbullying survey of 4,972 students ages 12-17 (Patchin, 2019) include:

- 37% of student respondents reported experiencing cyberbullying in their lifetimes. When asked about specifics in the last 30 days, the most common forms of harassment were receiving mean or hurtful comments (24.9%) and being subject to online rumors (22.2%).

- 15% of student respondents admitted to cyberbullying others at some point. The most common reported type of cyberbullying done in the past 30 days was posting mean comments (9.3%).

- Girls ages 12-17 were more likely to have experienced cyberbullying (38.7%) compared to boys (34.5%).

Sixty percent of students who have been targets of cyberbullying say it impacted their ability to learn and feel safe at school while 10% admitted to skipping at least once in the previous year due to cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2021).

The Cyberbullying Research Center partnered with The Cartoon Network to conduct a survey of

cyberbullying among younger students: tweens, or students aged 9-12 years (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Highlights include:

- One in five tweens have been cyberbullied, cyberbullied others or witnessed this behavior.

- Tweens who were cyberbullied indicated that the behavior negatively impacted their feelings about themselves (69%), their friendships (32%), physical health (13%) and their schoolwork (7%).

- Two-thirds of respondents reported that they were willing to step in to defend, support or assist those being bullied at school or online if they witnessed the behavior.

- Barriers that prevent tweens from intervening when they see bullying behavior in school or online include being afraid of worsening the situation, not knowing what to say, being unaware of how to report it online, fear of becoming a target for bullying and not knowing who to tell.

Accredited Schools Online (2021) provides an expanded list of the types of cyberbullying that can happen online, which could be particularly helpful in expanding definitions and broad knowledge.

- **Impersonation**: Either gaining illegal access to someone's online account or making a fake account with their identity.

- **Cyberstalking**: Using technology to harass, intimidate or threaten someone. This usually involves following someone's online accounts and activities.

- **Flaming**: When a user posts derogatory comments or sends aggressive messages. These can turn into online fights and typically involve harsh or foul language.

- **Outing**: An insidious form of cyberbullying where a user posts someone's private information publicly without their permission to humiliate them.

- **Harassment**: Sending inflammatory messages to a single user or a group. This can be done publicly or privately.

- **Trolling**: The deliberate act of provoking a response from a user or group by using inflammatory statements – such as insults or demeaning language – in an online forum. The goal is to incite someone to anger or to drive them to post something equally angry or embarrassing. The behavior is usually classified as the "troll" attempting to feel good by making someone else upset.

- **Catfishing**: When someone pretends to be someone they are not by making up or assuming someone else's identity. This often results in gaining private information from or establishing a closer relationship with the targeted user.

- **Denigration**: Posting rumors and gossip online with the aim of ruining another user's reputation.

- **Exclusion**: Deliberately leaving another user out of activities or posts. An example of this is not tagging someone in a photo or establishing a relevant work or social group without them.

School-Level Strategies

Because bullying behaviors occur across the many spaces that exist within schools (*e.g.,* classrooms, gyms, bathrooms, playgrounds, cafeterias), and because students often move between classrooms and teachers, it is critical for schools to take a community-wide approach to preventing bullying and harassment (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Bradshaw, 2015).

School-level strategies refer to actions that administrators and other school leaders can take to nurture a positive school climate and to prevent bullying and harassment. Therefore, school-based bullying prevention programming must begin with universal efforts, involving all administrators, teachers, counselors and other educational support providers (*e.g.,* bus drivers, cafeteria employees, janitors, office staff).

Prevention and early intervention are key to more successful programs that prevent bullying and promote an open, positive school climate (Bradshaw, 2015).

See IDRA's *School-Level Strategies: Interrupting Bullying & Harassment in Schools – Toolkit* **for more strategies and resources.**

Classroom-Level Strategies

Although bullying behaviors can occur in many different contexts, classroom teachers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to address these behaviors in a classroom setting. Classroom-level strategies refer to routines, approaches and preventative actions that are designed to build a positive classroom climate and strengthen the structures that effectively hold and address harm, when it occurs. Students benefit from consistent opportunities to build social emotional skills in the context of their classroom (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Jones, Bailey & Jacob, 2014; Jones, et al., 2016).

Considering the many tasks asked of teachers to help their students succeed, it can be difficult to find time to specifically address bullying. Studies have shown, though, that daily reinforcement of positive social and emotional learning in the classroom can help reduce bullying in the long term (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Educators should also avoid labelling students as bullies or victims and talk instead about the behaviors in which students are engaging and how these behaviors cause others harm (Van der Valk, 2013).

> **See IDRA's *Classroom-Level Strategies: Interrupting Bullying & Harassment in Schools – Toolkit* for more strategies and resources.**

Individual Strategies

When bullying occurs, bystanders are present around 80% of the time (stopbullying.gov, 2018). They can play a big part to stop bullying when it starts by simply intervening. Stopping the behavior and taking the side of the targeted student can lessen his or her feelings of depression or anxiety in the wake of the incident. Unfortunately, bystanders can often be unaware how to help or intervene when bullying incidents occur, especially if they fear being bullied as well or losing their social status among their peers (stopbullying.gov, 2018).

It also is difficult to teach empathy and respect if the adults and leaders with whom students interact are not emotionally healthy and mature themselves. It is not impossible for someone with low social-emotional skills to teach students how to be effective and build respect and empathy for their fellow students, but it requires consistency and awareness of their own behaviors. Reducing stress and actively being aware of modeling good behavior are essential to leading by example (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Schools should support their educators and leaders by setting aside time for reflection and mindfulness, identifying ways to reduce burnout, and creating environments that enable educators to positively reflect on their experiences teaching their students (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Counselors are an excellent resource as models for learning about emotional and mental health, and these people should be utilized to help develop anti-bullying policies (Bradshaw, et al., 2013).

> See IDRA's *Individual-Level Strategies: Interrupting Bullying & Harassment in Schools – Toolkit* for more strategies and resources.

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