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BORROWER: **COF :: Morgan Library**

TYPE: Article CC:CCG

JOURNAL TITLE: Journal of applied school psychology

USER JOURNAL TITLE: Journal of Applied School Psychology

ARTICLE TITLE: A Comprehensive Training Initiative for Educators to Develop and Implement Effective Anti-Bullying Policies in K-12 Schools

ARTICLE AUTHOR:

VOLUME: advance online publi

ISSUE: advance online publication

MONTH:

YEAR: 2018

PAGES: advance online publication

ISSN: 1537-7903

OCLC #:

Processed by RapidX: 1/3/2019 10:08:21 AM



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To cite this article: Anne Williford, Paula J. Fite, Kathryn J. DePaolis, John L. Cooley, Patricia H. Hawley & Debbie Isen (2018): A Comprehensive Training Initiative for Educators to Develop and Implement Effective Anti-Bullying Policies in K–12 Schools, *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, DOI: [10.1080/15377903.2018.1528489](https://doi.org/10.1080/15377903.2018.1528489)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377903.2018.1528489>



Published online: 26 Dec 2018.



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A Comprehensive Training Initiative for Educators to Develop and Implement Effective Anti-Bullying Policies in K–12 Schools

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ABSTRACT

Although most states across the United States have enacted anti-bullying legislation, state laws vary greatly in detail and direction, leaving many school districts wondering how to best address the problem of bullying and comply with their state's legislative requirements. In response, a comprehensive, statewide training initiative was conducted for school personnel to offer guidance on developing and implementing such policies at the local level. In the present piece, the authors explicate the process by which they (a) derived theoretically grounded, empirically driven recommendations; (b) developed training materials and a project website; and (c) disseminated the material and recommendations across the state. They also present key outcomes as a result of this training initiative.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 February 2018
Accepted 22 September 2018

KEYWORDS

Bullying; anti-bullying policy; K-12 schools; prevention; intervention

Bullying represents a complex social phenomenon that is often poorly understood (Stassen Berger, 2007). Despite decades of research on this problem facing youths worldwide, parents, educators, legislators, and the general public often struggle to clearly define, understand, and respond to bullying. At the same time, several recent tragedies in the United States involving youths who were repeatedly victimized by their peers have led to increased national interest in developing effective solutions to address this concerning problem. In response, all 50 states across the nation have passed anti-bullying legislation that requires school districts to develop policies in line with specific state laws (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). However, according to a U.S. Department of Education (USDE) report, this legislation varies greatly in detail and direction across the country (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer,

2011), leaving many school districts wondering how to best address the problem of bullying and comply with their state's legislative requirements. For most states, these laws provide little detail about the nature and scope of bullying, and importantly, few resources or guidelines to assist schools in crafting and implementing anti-bullying policies and procedures. Thus, these largely unfunded mandates often result in ineffective responses to the problem of bullying at the district level, and in turn, the responses by schools. For this reason, we created a training initiative—including an in-person workshop, manual, and website—to aid school personnel in understanding the nature and consequences of bullying with accompanying recommendations for appropriate and effective school- and district-level policies, procedures, and practices.

Here we describe this innovative, interdisciplinary statewide initiative to assist school district and local school administrators responsible for developing policy in interpreting and successfully translating state-adopted legislation into effective district- and school-level policies that are tailored to the unique needs of their community. This initiative also offers practical tools to school personnel on the ground, such as teachers and school mental health professionals (i.e., school psychologists, counselors, and social workers) with a direct responsibility for responding to bullying incidents among students and addressing the far too common negative consequences that result from their involvement. In the present piece, we explicate the process by which we (a) derived theoretically grounded, empirically driven recommendations (e.g., a model policy that adequately addresses state requirements), (b) developed training materials and a project website, and (c) disseminated the material and recommendations across the state. Additionally, we present key outcome measures in terms of reception and knowledge gains. Our hope is to benefit other states, governmental institutions, and school districts intending to advance similar responses.

Theoretical and empirical basis of the model anti-bullying policy

Central to our approach was careful consideration of federal (i.e., USDE) guidelines for model anti-bullying policies as outlined by Stuart-Cassel et al. (2011). We additionally incorporated theoretical perspectives and cutting edge empirical evidence derived from our disciplines (psychology, social work, and education) that speak directly to the federal guidelines. The following section outlines the federal guidelines, followed by an elaborated justification, and our own recommendations based on current empirical evidence and relevant theoretical frameworks (i.e., that explain the problem of bullying and effective responses for prevention and intervention).

Prohibition and purpose statement

District- and school-level anti-bullying policies must, according to USDE, explicitly state that bullying is not acceptable and will be taken seriously by school personnel, students, and their families. Moreover, a policy should describe ways in which victims, bullies, and bystanders are negatively affected by being targeted by, engaging in, or even merely witnessing bullying behavior. It is important that policies briefly describe the negative consequences for students and to the overall school climate so that school personnel, students, and families recognize the importance of taking all bullying incidents seriously and responding to them appropriately.

Consistent with these recommendations, we assert that anti-bullying policies should specifically prohibit any bullying incident, regardless of form or severity. We also present specific theoretical and empirical evidence to assist schools and districts in recognizing bullying and the consequences to those involved as well as to the overall school climate.

Viewing bullying through a social-ecological lens

Since the seminal work in the 1990s by Salmivalli et al. (1996), bullying has been considered a complex social-ecological phenomenon that occurs within children's and adolescents' peer groups (see Espelage & Swearer, 2003), in which youths occupy certain roles: youths who perpetrate bullying (bullies), children targeted by bullying (victims), youths who both perpetrate bullying and are victimized (bully victims), and youths who are witnesses (bystanders). Accordingly, bullying is not a dyadic event between a bully and victim but rather occurs within the peer group and in classroom and school ecologies that may reinforce bullying behavior. As such, youths in these roles, as well as the overall school climate, can face unique consequences as a result of bullying involvement.

Bullies

Even though bullies often benefit from their behavior (e.g., increased social status and power or material gains; Hawley, 2003; Vaillancourt, Hymel & McDougall, 2003), bullying also bears costs to the perpetrators. In some cases, youths who bully others initiate a pattern of troubling behavior that leads to increased violence and poor academic outcomes, such as lower school commitment, poorer academic performance, and less overall education as evidenced by higher rates of truancy and dropout (Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Ma et al., 2009; Pepler & Craig, 2005).

Victims

Decades of research confirm that bullying contributes to a range of negative developmental outcomes for victims. For example, victims of

bullying often report increased loneliness, emotional distress, depression, social anxiety, and poor school adjustment, such as higher rates of truancy and lower academic performance (Espelage, Hong, Rao, & Low, 2013; Hase, Goldberg, Smith, Stuck, & Campain, 2015; Haynie et al., 2001; Juvonen et al., 2011; Juvonen et al., 2003; Malecki et al., 2015; Marini et al., 2006; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010; Rethon, Head, Klineberg, & Stansfeld, 2011; Unnever, 2005). In the United States, high-profile suicides (e.g., Tyler Clementi, Rutgers freshman) and homicides (e.g., Virginia Tech massacres) highlight the most severe consequences of repeated victimization.

Bully victims

Research shows that some students who are victimized by their peers also engage in bullying toward their peers (Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007). These children, referred to as bully victims, are considered to be distinct from those who are bullies or victims only. Bully victims often experience the most severe negative consequences for their involvement in both bullying and victimization. In fact, evidence suggests that they are more likely to endorse greater acceptance of deviance and aggression, engage in higher levels and more diverse types of aggressive and delinquent behaviors, and exhibit less prosocial behavior (Camodeca et al., 2002; Haynie et al., 2001; Marini, Dane, Bosacki, & Cura, 2006; Veenstra et al., 2005). Likewise, they also experience greater internalizing difficulties, such as depressive and anxiety symptoms and low self-esteem (Kelly et al., 2015; Kozasa, Oiji, Kiyota, Sawa, & Kim, 2017), making them a particularly vulnerable group of students.

Bystanders/witnesses

Research indicates that witnesses to bullying incidents, or bystanders, have a significant impact on the perpetuation, escalation, or mitigation of bullying events in their self-selected roles as assistants (those who help the bully to persecute the victim), reinforcers (those who actively watch the incident without taking action), outsiders (those who avoid the bullying situation), or defenders (those who support the victim; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011; Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli et al., 1996). Assistants and reinforcers may help to promote the perceived power and social status of bullies, thereby encouraging victimization and contributing to increased frequency of bullying incidents in school settings (Juvonen et al., 2003; Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). While defending behavior has been linked to decreased bullying in classrooms (Denny et al., 2015; Salmivalli, Voeten, &

Poskiparta, 2011) and an increase in prosocial behavior among bystanders (Barhight et al., 2017), the choice to serve as a defender may align with the perceived social risk of victimization or loss of status, thereby discouraging students from selecting this bystander role (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012; Wu, Luu, & Luh, 2016). Consequently, many current anti-bullying preventive interventions seek to promote effective bystander intervention via encouraging safe defending options for students. However, defending may come at a cost, which some anti-bullying programs may not fully recognize. In fact, evidence suggests that defending behavior may be associated with social, emotional, and academic difficulties such as distress, anger, poor grades, and relationship challenges (Lambe, Hudson, Craig, & Pepler, 2017). Furthermore, bystanding behavior (witnessing but not intervening in bullying) is associated with anxiety and depression (Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009). Therefore, schools seeking to activate effective defending as a part of their anti-bullying policy must be mindful of the ways in which defending can be done safely and without putting bystanders at risk. We recommend doing so by giving students safe alternatives to confronting the bully (which may result in a greatest physical or psychological harm). These alternatives may include strategies to support and comfort the victim (without confronting the bully directly), anonymous reporting procedures (see further detail subsequently) to encourage reporting to adults, and social norming approaches to communicate to peers that bullying is not tolerated.

School climate

Of note, bullying negatively affects the academic environment of schools, leading to poorer performance overall in schools where high rates of bullying exist. For example, studies suggest that ongoing victimization and bullying behavior are negatively related to school connection and academic achievement, thus negatively impacting the overall academic success of all students (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003; Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Lacey & Cornell, 2013; Ma et al., 2009; Schwartz et al., 2005; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Additionally, students attending schools in which bullying is prevalent may be more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors including substance use, physical violence, and self-harm or suicidal ideation (Klein, Cornell, & Konold, 2012), suggesting that bullying incidents disrupt the school climate and may in turn negatively impact overall student mental health.

Recent theoretical work, however, draws attention to the ways in which schools must attend to both climate and culture. Although the bulk of research in this area often uses these terms interchangeably, they actually refer to distinct organizational phenomena (Hawley & Williford, 2015).

According to evidence stemming from organizational science, an organization's culture is created by the shared norms, values, and beliefs held by members of the organization (Denison & Mishra, 1995). On the other hand, climate refers to the actions of the organization, including its practices, policies, and procedures, that are driven and informed by the organization's culture (Denison, 1990, 1996; Ostroff, Kinicki, & Tamkins, 2003). The distinction between culture and climate is important. High rates of bullying in a school are theorized to occur in part because of supportive norms or values that encourage the behavior (Gest & Rodkin, 2011; Rodkin, 2004). These norms, which could be held by both students and staff, can be described as part of the underlying value system that structures the school's culture. Consequently, these norms may influence a school's ability to appropriately respond to bullying via effective practices, policies, and procedures, thus affecting the school's climate. In other words, negative school cultures that result from bullying may then impact a school's climate by limiting their actions to address it. In response, we recommend that a school's anti-bullying policy make clear that the school's values are firmly anti-bullying (culture) and that it specify the actions (climate) that will be taken in response to a bullying incident (see the following).

Prohibited behavior

According to USDE, a model anti-bullying policy must clearly define bullying, describe conduct that constitutes bullying behavior, and differentiate it from other negative behavior often mistaken for bullying. As a result of the groundbreaking work by Dan Olweus (1978, 1993, 2001), bullying has been defined based on three primary characteristics: (a) intention to harm another person (i.e., aggression), (b) repetition, and (c) a power imbalance between the bully and their target. Thus, bullying represents a distinct phenomenon that should not be conflated with aggression, the definition of which is limited to the first characteristic noted above (Hawley, 2011; Coie & Dodge, 1998).

Despite the growing recognition of the social determinants of bullying behavior as well as the wide acceptance of this definition, anti-bullying legislation often does not clearly define bullying behavior in this way (see Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011) nor include its various forms. A 2012 report by Sacco, Silbaugh, Corredor, Casey, and Doherty showed that of the 41 states that detail a definition of bullying in their legislation, only eight states include repetition while five additional states use terms like pervasive or severe, making the interpretation of these terms by district and school personnel quite subjective. Furthermore, only 16 states include intent to harm in their definitions and only four states include the power differential

despite scholars viewing this as the primary characteristic that distinguishes bullying from other kinds of aggressive behavior. Consequently, school personnel at times may not recognize bullying among students. In fact, research has found that students and school personnel alike are more likely to identify physical forms of bullying and to overlook covert forms of bullying, such as relational and cyberbullying (Boulton, 1997; Byers et al., 2011; Hazler et al., 2001; Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler & Wiener, 2005). As a result, relational and cyberbullying incidents are often more likely to go unaddressed by school personnel (Stauffer et al., 2012). Furthermore, school personnel may not see that addressing cyberbullying is a part of their purview or may not view it as their responsibility (Craig, Bell, & Leschied, 2011; Li, 2008), which then interferes with their ability and willingness to intervene.

We argue that it is important for a model policy, then, to distinguish between the forms of aggression that bullying can take. In doing so, school personnel may be more effective in their responses to bullying among students. Theoretical and empirical work over the last several decades have carefully outlined multiple forms of aggressive behavior including overt, relational, and cyber aggression.

Overt aggression

Overt aggression is generally defined as verbal and physical behaviors directed at individuals with the intention to physically harm or threaten them (Little et al., 2003; Olweus, 1993). Specific behaviors include hitting, kicking, pushing, or the expression of physical intimidation, threats, and insults directed at individuals with the intention of physical harm (Gendreau & Archer, 2005; Little et al., 2003; Olweus, 1993). Debates in the literature can be found regarding the labeling and conceptual distinctions of physical forms of aggression (Little et al., 2003), including direct, overt, physical, and verbal behaviors. One way to distinguish between these labels is whether verbal attacks and threats are included in the definition along with physical attacks and intimidation. Commonly, the terms *direct* and *overt* include verbal and physical behaviors in the definition, whereas, the terms *physical* and *verbal* distinguish between these two forms of behavior (Gendreau & Archer, 2005; Little et al., 2003). We suggest that district and school policies either use the term *overt aggression* to describe both physical and verbal behaviors or distinguish between these two forms by using both *physical aggression* (to describe specific physical behaviors) and *verbal aggression* (to describe verbal behaviors that threaten, harm, or humiliate others).

Relational aggression

Over the last 30 years, new trends have emerged in the study of aggression to include indirect or covert forms (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen &

Underwood, 1997; Lagerspetz et al., 1988; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Xie et al., 2002). Relational aggression is characterized by using relationships as the primary mechanism to inflict harm (Putallaz et al., 2004). More specifically, relational aggression includes: talking about others (gossiping, breaking confidences), exclusionary behaviors (ignoring, ostracizing), harassment (prank phone calls, note writing), and nonverbal aggression (dirty looks, gestures; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000; Underwood, 2003). In the literature, three terms have been presented to describe this covert form of aggression: indirect (Lagerspetz et al., 1988; Owens et al., 2000), social (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Xie et al., 2002), and relational (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996). As some of the behaviors described previously include direct forms of aggression (i.e., exclusionary behaviors—telling someone you will no longer be his or her friend), *indirect* does not fully capture the extent of this behavior (Underwood, 2003). The primary difference between social and relational as described by Galen and Underwood (1997), and more specifically by Underwood, is that the definition of social aggression includes facial expressions and body language, whereas relational aggression primarily uses threats to withdraw a friendship to get one's way or social exclusion to retaliate against a peer (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). However, the use of facial expressions or body language does not preclude the use of the term relational to describe this behavior. As relationships are the primary vehicle of harm in this form of aggression, the term relational aggression may best describe this phenomenon (Putallaz et al., 2004).

Cyber aggression

In recent years, greater attention has been given to cyber forms of aggression given the pervasive use of technology by today's youths. In fact, recent estimates suggest that over 90% of 13- to 17-year-olds report daily Internet use (Lenhart, 2015). Although fewer studies focus on younger children, some research evidence suggests that younger children's access to and use of technology is rapidly increasing (Common Sense Media, 2013; Holloway, Green & Livingstone, 2013). For example, over 70% of children 8 years old and younger use mobile devices for daily media activities (i.e., playing games, watching TV shows/movies; Common Sense Media, 2013). Interactive communication technologies (e.g., text messaging, online games, social media sites such as Instagram or Twitter) offer youths some benefits for maintaining peer relationships; however, they are also mechanisms for peer harassment (Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2011; Li, 2007). Cyber aggression has been defined as the use of technology to bully and harass peers (DePaolis & Williford, 2015; Law et al., 2011; Li, 2007).

In sum, the key to an effective anti-bullying policy is a clear definition. Thus, bullying must be defined in ways that differentiate it from other forms of aggressive behavior and include its many forms. We argue that an effective policy must make clear that students who engage in any of these bullying behaviors as well as students who actively reinforce, assist, or encourage the bullying will face consequences (outlined subsequently).

Statement of scope

According to the USDE, in order for an anti-bullying policy to be most effective in schools, it should clearly describe the contexts in which the school is responsible for students' bullying behavior. At a minimum, USDE suggests that a policy should include bullying behavior that occurs on school grounds, at any school-sponsored activity or event (on or off campus), on school-associated transportation, or through school-owned technology. Of note, considerable debate around the United States has occurred in response to cyberbullying (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). Although 38 states include electronic acts of bullying in their definitions, only six states specifically define it (Sacco et al., 2012). Federal law allows schools to include disciplinary actions for off-campus behavior, such as an incident of cyberbullying that occurs off school grounds when it leads to a significant disruption of the school environment. About 20 states have included this standard in their state laws (see <https://cyberbullying.org/bullying-laws>). Thus, these laws state that, even if cyberbullying takes place outside of school, the school bears some responsibility to address it when it significantly affects the academic learning environment.

We recommend that schools and districts include a clear statement in their anti-bullying policies that cyberbullying is the responsibility for school staff to address, but make clear when and where it is their responsibility to respond. This is particularly important given the widespread use of technology among young people and the substantial risk that youths today may be targeted through these technologies. For example, research estimates that 20–40% of youths will be affected by cyberbullying in some way during adolescence (Tokunaga, 2010), and findings from one study revealed that 47% of youths between 9 and 18 years old reported witnessing cyberbullying during the previous 30 days (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Recent evidence also suggests that children as young as 10 years old are not immune to the problem of cyberbullying and that online games may be an important context in which cyberbullying occur (DePaolis & Williford, 2015). It is clear that children are now using electronic forms of social communication as contexts to bully and harass their peers both on and off school grounds. Importantly, evidence suggests that a notable portion of victims and

perpetrators are involved in both traditional and cyber forms of bullying (Erdur-Baker, 2010). It follows then that a portion of children and youths are likely to experience bullying on and off school grounds. In fact, a recent study found that the second most common location elementary school-aged children reported experiencing victimization, following the playground, was the home/neighborhood (Fite et al., 2013). Consequently, we suggest that district and school policies must be clear on when cyberbullying behavior occurring offsite or after school hours that affects the learning environment is a school's responsibility to address. However, we recommend that districts or schools have their legal counsel review the anti-bullying policy to clarify the degree to which the school or district has the responsibility and the right to address activities outside the school environment.

Enumeration of groups

The USDE recommends that policies may benefit from stating bullying behaviors that are motivated by race-ethnicity, gender, social class, religious beliefs, disability status, sexual or gender identity, and other relevant characteristics is strictly prohibited. One mechanism for protecting certain vulnerable youths may be through enumerating these groups specifically in the policy. However, we argue this may be an inadequate protection. Thus, we recommend stating explicitly that bias-based bullying against a student because of their actual or perceived race-ethnicity, gender, social class, religious beliefs, disability status, or sexual or gender identity, for example, is strictly prohibited and may face more punitive sanctions if substantiated. We believe this may serve as a call to action for school staff to take seriously the persecution of certain groups, which may be more likely in certain community contexts where these characteristics are deemed unacceptable.

Evidence consistently notes that certain groups, especially lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youths, are at increased risk for experiencing victimization. For example, research shows that LGBTQ youths are at a substantially high risk for experiencing bullying victimization (Earnshaw, Bogart, Poteat, Reisner, & Schuster, 2016), particularly in social contexts where homosexuality is deemed as unacceptable or nonnormative (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Newman, Fantus, Woodford, & Rwigema, 2017). Although inconsistent patterns have been found on racial and ethnic differences in bullying involvement, some evidence suggests that the least predominant racial or ethnic group in a school may also be most at risk for being victimized by peers (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Graham & Juvonen, 2002; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006). Furthermore, a particularly at risk group for bullying is children with disabilities. Research consistently shows that children with disabilities

experience greater bullying victimization than students without disabilities (Limber, Kowalski, Agatston, & Huynh, 2016; Rose et al., 2015; Schroeder, Cappadocia, Bebko, Pepler, & Weiss, 2014), with a recent study finding that youths with disabilities experienced bullying at a rate that was three times greater than students in the general student population (McNicholas & Orpinas, 2016).

These findings draw attention to ecological systems theoretical perspectives (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1999, 2005) that make clear the influence of group norms at the peer, school, and community levels in encouraging bullying behavior targeted at certain outgroup members (Hawley & Williford, 2015; Espelage, 2014). Consequently, youths who may be isolated due to their race-ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity, disability status, or social class may encounter school ecologies that tolerate their persecution. Thus, we believe that explicitly prohibiting bias-based bullying is an important way to protect vulnerable groups from persecution. Yet only 18 states include a statement specifically prohibiting bullying based on certain characteristics (Sacco et al., 2012). We recommend that schools and districts consider what characteristics may elevate risk for victimization in their particular context as a means to track bias-based bullying. We also suggest that schools and districts add language to their anti-bullying policy strictly prohibiting bullying based on any class or characteristic protected by their antidiscrimination laws or regulations.

Development, implementation, and review of local policies

To develop an effective policy, the USDE recommends using a collaborative process involving school personnel (e.g., administrators, teachers, and school psychologists or other mental health professionals), students, families, and interested community members. Consistent with this recommendation, we suggest identifying key community stakeholders, including those within and outside of the school or district context, as a starting place for developing an anti-bullying policy that is relevant to and effectively addresses local conditions. We recommend using strategies, such as community meetings, online input mechanisms, and community surveys, for bringing together a wide range of stakeholders to collaborate on developing a policy that captures diverse perspectives. This collaborative approach is in line with the prevailing view that bullying is a social-ecological phenomenon (Hawley & Williford, 2015; Espelage & Swearer, 2003). By involving a range of stakeholders, we believe that the end product—the school's or district's policy—will capture the broader community norms surrounding bullying. As such, the policy may have a greater impact as broader community buy-in is likely.

Next, the USDE advises that oversight is an important component to the development and implementation of anti-bullying policy. They recommend that a provision be included that requires school districts to regularly review (i.e., at the start of each school year) local school policies to ensure that the goals of the state and the district are met and that buy-in from key stakeholders remains consistent. Similar to our recommendations for creating the policy, we recommend that this annual review include a community feedback mechanism, again through community meetings, online input, or community survey. Thus, the review can serve as an important opportunity to revise the policy, if needed, in response to changes in local conditions.

Reporting and investigating, written records, sanctions, and referrals

According to the USDE, anti-bullying policies should include reporting procedures for students, their families, school personnel, and others to disclose incidents of bullying. Therefore, USDE suggests that anti-bullying policies should clearly outline a procedure for promptly investigating and responding to any report of bullying incidents, including (a) immediate intervention strategies for protecting the victim from additional bullying or retaliation; (b) notification to parents of the reported victim and of the alleged perpetrator, and, if appropriate; (c) notification to law enforcement officials. The USDE also advises that written records should also be maintained to track the incident, ensure that further bullying or retaliation did not occur, make sure that the responsive actions (as described further subsequently) were successful, and protect the school in case of a lawsuit or involvement of law enforcement. They also advise that clear sanctions must be enacted for the perpetrators when a report of a bullying incident is substantiated. To ensure that the needs of those involved are addressed, the USDE suggests that anti-bullying policies should outline when and how appropriate referrals are made to counseling and mental and other health services, as appropriate, so that the needs of the victim, perpetrator, and others are met.

In line with Rigby (2008), we argue that schools should accept that bullying is likely to occur among students and, as a result, they must see it as a serious problem needing effective responses. Procedures for how a school will respond to bullying, document bullying incidents, and promote parental involvement (Fite, Cooley, Williford, Frazer, & DiPierro, 2014; Rigby, 2008; Whitted & Dupper, 2005) are needed. Consistent with these recommendations, we offer specific strategies for developing reporting, investigating, and response systems.

First, we note that a substantial number of victims do not report their victimization as evidence to encourage schools and districts to adopt anonymous reporting procedures. Research suggests that students often do

not report experiencing or witnessing bullying for fear of retaliation. In fact, studies have shown that up to 50% of victims do not report being victimized to a parent or a teacher (DePaolis & Williford, 2015; Whitney & Smith, 1993), and that approximately 30% of victims do not report their victimization experiences to anyone (Smith & Shu, 2000). We also recommend adding specific language to a school or district policy that prohibits retaliation if a student reports an act of bullying. We note that bystanders may also bear costs for reporting (e.g., retaliation; Hawley & Williford, 2015). Thus, to motivate students to report bullying they experience or witness, we strongly encourage that anonymous reporting procedures be put in place and an explicit statement that prohibits retaliation, in response to the reporting of bullying behavior, to adults be included. We also recommend policies include reporting procedures for families and community members so that it is clear to whom they can report the incident and how the incident will be investigated. Accordingly, we provide several example forms that can be used by students to report incidents anonymously. We also offer guidance on creating online reporting mechanisms that can be used by parents, community members, and those on the periphery of the school (e.g., after-school program staff).

Nonanonymous strategies are also effective in collecting accurate accounts of bullying incidents (Chan, Myron & Crawshaw, 2005) especially in schools where students see bullying incidents taken seriously by school personnel (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010). In fact, relationships with supportive and trusted adults (i.e., a school psychologist or social worker) can encourage students to report their victimization experiences; thus, fostering help-seeking among students is an important strategy for identifying those who are involved in bullying (Davis & Nixon, 2011; Newman & Murray, 2005). Thus, we recommend that schools to adopt anonymous and nonanonymous strategies for students report bullying and peer victimization incidents they experience or witness. We also advise school personnel to consider ways in which they can support help-seeking by developing warm and caring relationships with students.

Next, the USDE recommends that clear sanctions must be enacted for the perpetrators when a report of a bullying incident is substantiated. Thus, the USDE suggests that anti-bullying policies make clear a graduated range of consequences and sanctions for engaging in or encouraging bullying behavior. Specifically, we recommend including consequences such as a loss of privileges, at a minimum, up to detentions, suspensions and expulsions in the most severe cases. When the behavior violates any state or federal law (i.e., sexual harassment or when bullying escalates into violence), we make clear that consequences must include contacting local law enforcement and their school or district's resource officers. Therefore,

we offer guidance on how schools can create this graduated range of sanctions based on the type, severity, and extent of the bullying.

Last, the USDE notes that anti-bullying policies must ensure that appropriate referrals are made to counseling and mental and other health services, as appropriate, so that the health and mental health needs of the students involved are met. Given that bullying is associated with a multitude of difficulties for both the perpetrator and the victim (e.g., Vernberg & Biggs, 2010), we argue that it is imperative for schools to further assess the health and mental health needs of students involved in bullying and offer specific screening tools that are easy to implement and are evidence-based. We also outline how to make appropriate referrals to health and mental health providers, including school social workers, nurses, psychologists, and counselors, for those in need to prevent further bullying and subsequent problems, such as academic failure, substance use, delinquent acts, medical complaints, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and suicidal behavior (Card et al., 2007; Luk et al., 2010; Vernberg & Biggs, 2010; Vernberg et al., 2011).

We suggest that school-based interventions may also be useful for addressing the health and mental health consequences for those involved in bullying. For example, more targeted interventions may be helpful for offsetting further negative impacts that result from engaging in bullying or experiencing peer victimization, including reducing the likelihood of continued involvement. Because children who bully are distinct from those who are victimized, different kinds of intervention strategies are important to consider. For example, cognitive behavioral preventive interventions, such as Coping Power (Lochman & Wells, 2008), have been shown to reduce aggression, delinquent behavior, and substance use and promote positive academic outcomes among children exhibiting aggressive behavior (Lochman & Wells, 2003). These kinds of preventive interventions targeting aggression might be most appropriate for students identified as bully victims given their tendencies to endorse greater acceptance of deviance and aggression. For children victimized by their peers, preventive interventions that focus on problem solving and cognitive restructuring (e.g., Taking Action) have been shown to decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety through positive changes in cognitions (Chu & Harrison, 2007) as well as reduce subsequent peer victimization especially for students who are chronically victimized (Fite, Cooley, Poquiz, & Williford, 2018).

Finally, we conclude that school staff should reevaluate whether the consequences and referrals that are implemented have resulted in the intended effects, and ultimately the bullying has stopped. If not further adult intervention may be needed.

Dissemination of the policy

The USDE suggests that anti-bullying policy should include clear procedures for notifying students, their families, and school personnel of the policy and its mandates, including how to report incidents, how incidents will be investigated, and the consequences for students caught engaging or encouraging bullying. We recommended that the policy be shared widely among the school's or district's stakeholders, such as by posting the policy on the school or district website, sending letters home to parents informing them of the policy and its provisions, and posting the policy in the school or district office.

Training and prevention

The USDE recommends that anti-bullying policies include a provision for school districts to provide training for school staff on their school or district requirements. Some states' anti-bullying legislation includes language that school personnel have an ethical responsibility to address any incident of bullying reported to them or that they have witnessed and some states have even included sanctions that school personnel will face if they fail to appropriately intervene (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011).

In response, we recommend that schools and districts offer at least annual training on their anti-bullying policy, including a review of the definition of bullying used, reporting and investigating procedures, and needed actions in response, so that school personnel are aware of their role in addressing these behaviors among students. We suggest that all staff within (e.g., teachers, administrators, support staff, coaches, counselors, social workers, bus drivers, custodians, lunchroom staff) and on the periphery of the school (e.g., after-school program staff, crossing guards) are offered training to maximize the policy's impact on the overall school climate and culture (Hawley & Williford, 2015). Of note, a recent study noted significant differences between certified (e.g., teachers, school counselors, social workers) and noncertified (e.g., paraprofessionals, custodial staff, playground monitors) staff in their attitudes toward bullying and self-efficacy to appropriately intervene (Williford, 2015). Noncertified staff members reported significantly lower self-efficacy to intervene and significantly less favorable attitudes toward victims, indicating victims may be responsible in some way for their exposure to bullying. By including all school personnel in training, we believe that each staff member will clearly understand his or her role in the monitoring of and response to bullying incidents. Accordingly, we argue for comprehensive staff training on at least an annual basis.

Transparency, monitoring, and right to pursue other legal remedies

Consistent with current practice in most states, the USDE recommends that anti-bullying policies include a provision that school districts create reports at least annually that detail the number of reported bullying incidents and any actions taken in response. We suggest that this aggregated data also be made publicly available in a way that protects the privacy of those involved while also making the information readily accessible to all stakeholders. Accordingly, we provide tools for schools to create online tracking systems that allow for easy reporting. For example, we recommend several shared document tools that can capture reports of bullying incidents reported to any staff member across a school. These tools are free, easy to use, and require little training; thus, they can be quickly and easily created and disseminated.

Furthermore, the USDE recommends an anti-bullying policy should include a statement that the policy allows victims to pursue other legal actions should they or their families chose to do so. In response, we offer specific guidance on how schools can respond if families choose to pursue legal action, like when and how to consult with their district's legal team and how to maintain thorough records of incidents, including the incident details and the school's or district's responses.

Training approach

Based on the USDE recommendations, our state's legislation, and our own synthesis of theory and empirical work, we developed and delivered full day in-person workshops to district and school personnel in 10 locations around the state, reaching rural, suburban, and urban areas. A manual was also developed that was distributed to each attendee at the workshop that corresponded to the content delivered in the workshop. Additionally, a project website was created that contained general information on bullying, referrals to local and national resources, example policies from other states, and an interactive feature that allowed project participants to dialog with each other about their policy development and implementation processes after completing the workshop. Participants were encouraged to access the website after completing the in-person workshop and login information was provided to each participant during the workshop. Although several parts of the website were publically available, sections containing example policies and interactive features were restricted to workshop participants and only accessible via their login information. It is important to note that the educators served through this initiative were largely unaware of the USDE guidelines and the current theoretical and empirical evidence on bullying and its prevention and intervention. Thus, the information presented in this workshop, in the manual and on the website filled an important gap.

To briefly summarize, workshop and the manual:

1. Clearly defined bullying behavior (including the roles held by victims, bullies, and bystanders) and described behaviors specific to each form of bullying, including overt, relational, and cyberbullying to make clear what behaviors are specifically prohibited;
2. Described common consequences for victims, bullies, bystanders, and the overall school environment such that school personnel recognize the importance of taking all bullying incidents seriously and respond to them appropriately;
3. Outlined the contexts in which schools are responsible, including bullying behavior that occurs on school grounds, at any school-sponsored activity or event (on or off campus), on school-provided transportation, or through school-owned technology as well as bullying, even when occurring off school grounds, that leads to a significant disruption of the academic learning environment;
4. Made clear that certain groups of students (e.g., ethnic minorities, LGBTQ youths, students with disabilities, low-income students) may be at an elevated risk for victimization and recommended adding language that strictly prohibits bias-based bullying by enumerating groups based on their school or district antidiscrimination regulations;
5. Described appropriate reporting procedures (including anonymous reporting) for school personnel, students, families, and community members so that it is clear to whom incidents can be reported and how they could be investigated;
6. Outlined procedures for promptly investigating and responding to any report of an incident of bullying, including immediate intervention strategies for protecting the victim from additional bullying or retaliation, and notification to parents of the victim, or reported victim, of bullying and the parents of the alleged perpetrator, and, if appropriate, notification to law enforcement officials;
7. Provided a template for appropriately tracking reported bullying incidents such a that a written record of each incident can be maintained;
8. Recommended a graduated range of consequences and sanctions for engaging in or encouraging bullying behavior;
9. Provided appropriate training protocols and strategies for involving all school personnel in training and prevention efforts;
10. Recommended evidence-based practices and programs that can be implemented to successfully prevent and intervene with bullying incidents;
11. Reviewed appropriate procedures for assessing the health and mental health needs of students involved in bullying either as perpetrators or

- victims and making appropriate referrals to health and mental health professionals both within and outside of the school;
12. Recommended procedures for carefully documenting reported bullying incidents and responsive actions to facilitate reporting of these data in their aggregate; and
 13. Described bullying incidents that may escalate to a violation of state or federal law, and thus may require the involvement of law enforcement and how schools/districts can respond.

Participants were asked before attending the workshop to bring their current district or school anti-bullying policy that could be reviewed, discussed, and modified as needed during the in-person delivery. The workshop included information sharing as well as small group activities designed to assist project participants in creating or modifying their school's or district's policy. In this way, participants were able to apply the content provided in the workshop and in the manual to their own policy during the workshop. Although most schools sent multiple participants (e.g., principals, teachers, and school psychologists or social workers/ counselors), some schools only sent one representative. In these cases, single representatives were grouped together and encouraged to share their policies and policy development processes with each other. When teams were available from a school and/or district, they worked together during the small group activities on their individual policies.

The project website then served as a resource for further information, including example policies from other states and from participating schools that were willing to share their own policies as regional exemplars. The website also provided an interactive feature where workshop participants could continue dialoging with each other and the project staff as well as share resources and receive support in developing and implementing effective policies and procedures in their local schools.

Workshop evaluation

Before and after the workshop, participants were asked to complete a battery of items that assessed knowledge of bullying along with their evaluation of the program. The aims of this investigation were to (a) evaluate the ability of a full-day anti-bullying workshop to increase knowledge among school personnel, (b) identify what anti-bullying strategies attendees found to be most useful, and (c) evaluate participant satisfaction ratings of the workshop.

Sample

Participants included 234 individuals (74% women) working with K–12 youths, with the majority of participants (67.4%) from rural settings. Approximately 32% of the participants were administrators (i.e., superintendents, principals, or vice principals), 16% were teachers, and 51% were school counselors, social workers, or school psychologists. Approximately 9.5% participants were under 30 years old, 29.7% were between 30 and 39 years old, 25.5% were between 40 and 49 years old, and 35.3% were 50 years old and older. More than half (63.9%) of participants had previously attended an anti-bullying workshop.

Measures

To protect participants' confidentiality, pre- and posttest surveys were placed in the binder that contained the manual and workshop presentation. On these surveys, a unique identifier was used and participants were instructed not to write their name on either survey. Surveys were then collected at the conclusion of the workshop.

Knowledge about bullying

Participants completed 10 items assessing knowledge of bullying and victimization before the commencement of the workshop and again at the end of the workshop. The measure included six true-false and four multiple choice items that were based on the workshop and manual curriculum. Items were created by the second author and then reviewed by three additional members of the team to ensure that the wording of the items was appropriate and the items were directly related to the content of the workshop and manual. The number of items correct were computed at each assessment point and used for analyses.

Workshop evaluation

Upon the completion of the workshop, participants completed 10 items using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*not at all useful*) to 3 (*very useful*) to evaluate how useful the information covered in the workshop was for developing an anti-bullying policy. Additionally, participants reported on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly not recommend*) to 7 (*strongly recommend*) whether they would recommend this workshop to a colleague or fellow educator. Participants also completed two items assessing their overall feeling for the workshop and their overall feelings about the workshop leaders using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very negative*) to 7 (*very positive*). Finally, the participants rated how helpful the workshop was for aiding them and their school district to develop an

effective anti-bullying policy using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very unhelpful*) to 7 (*very helpful*).

Results

Knowledge base

Pretest knowledge scores ranged from 4 to 10 and posttest scores ranged from 5 to 10, with 57.4% of participants improving their knowledge scores from pre- to postevaluation. A paired-samples *t* test was conducted to determine if the knowledge base was higher postworkshop when compared with knowledge before attending the workshop. Results suggested that postworkshop knowledge scores ($M = 7.94$, $SD = 1.12$) were significantly higher than preworkshop knowledge scores ($M = 7.32$, $SD = 1.24$), $t(154) = -6.50$, $p < .001$.

Utility of information covered

Mean usefulness scores are reported in Table 1. At least 95% of participants reported that all components of the workshop were helpful, with the three most helpful topics covered being tracking procedures, defining bullying and related terms, and investigating incidents of bullying. The topic rated as least helpful was information regarding how to assess the health and mental health needs of those involved in bullying, which may be due to the majority of attendees being in mental health and social work roles.

Satisfaction with workshop

Approximately 93.5% of attendees reported that they would recommend this workshop to a colleague or fellow educator ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 0.86$), and 95% of participants reported that their overall feeling for the workshop was positive ($M = 6.07$, $SD = 0.79$). Additionally, 98% of participants reported overall positive feelings about the workshop leaders ($M = 6.52$, $SD = 0.62$). Finally, 95.5% reported that the workshop was helpful in aiding their

Table 1. Participants' ratings of topics covered in the workshop.

Topic	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Information on rates of bullying/victimization	2.23	0.68	0	3
Definitions of bullying-related terms	2.46	0.62	1	3
Common consequences associated with bullies, victims, etc.	2.30	0.66	1	3
Risk factors associated with victimization	2.30	0.67	0	3
How to investigate incidents of bullying	2.42	0.68	0	3
How to track incidents of bullying	2.54	0.62	1	3
Information on disciplinary sanctions for bullying	2.21	0.71	0	3
Information regarding interventions for anti-bullying	2.14	0.75	0	3
Assessment of health and mental health needs of those involved in bullying	1.95	0.82	0	3

school or district in developing an effective anti-bullying policy ($M = 6.04$, $SD = 0.80$).

Summary of evaluative feedback

The evaluative results indicate that the workshop significantly improved participants' knowledge about bullying postworkshop. Thus, this model appears to be useful for improving knowledge, at least immediately upon completion of the workshop. Furthermore, all aspects covered in the workshop appeared to be at least somewhat useful to attendees. Participants of the workshop also reported being satisfied with the workshop and materials presented, as the overwhelming majority would recommend the workshop and reported overall positive feelings about the workshop and the workshop leaders. Additionally, the workshop was viewed as helpful in its goal to assist with the development and implementation of an effective anti-bullying policy.

Limitations

Several limitations to the present workshop and evaluative approach are important to note. First, the workshop participants were predominately administrators and mental health professionals with far fewer participating teachers. No noncertified (e.g., teachers' aides or paraprofessionals) staff were present. Teachers and noncertified staff may be most likely to bear witness to student bullying and may also be the primary staff from whom students seek help in response to their involvement. This workshop—given its focus on policy development and response procedures—may have been less relevant for these staff members. As such, further training may be necessary to provide the adequate tools and resources to bolster their effective intervention. Because school psychologists and social workers play an important role in addressing students' behavioral, emotional, and mental health needs (Early & Vonk, 2001; Watkins, Crosby, & Pearson, 2001), they may also be key to providing support and training to teachers and noncertified staff on effective ways to address bullying and encourage student help-seeking in response (Williford, 2015). In fact, evidence suggests that school mental health professionals have successfully delivered workshops targeting knowledge and self-efficacy to other school personnel in the context of child abuse prevention (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992). Thus, school psychologists and social workers are not only key to implementing a school's anti-bullying policy and procedures but also in assisting others to do so as well.

Second, the evaluation was limited to a pre- and posttest design in which participants retained both surveys until the end of the workshop to protect their anonymity. Although no participant was observed altering their pretest responses during the workshop, it is possible that some may have done so, which could have been impacted pre-/posttest comparisons. Furthermore, follow-up data were also not available. No information is therefore available on how participants applied the content to practices on the ground. Future initiatives would benefit from further follow-up to assess how schools respond to bullying incidents after implementing their revised policies and procedures.

Implications for school psychologists and other school mental health professionals

As noted previously, school psychologists and social workers are responsible for supporting the behavioral, emotional, and mental health needs of students, and therefore, are often asked to respond to bullying directly by supporting those involved. Additionally, they may play an important role informing the development of anti-bullying policies and procedures and implementing these on the ground. Evidence from organizational and implementation science may be helpful in determining how school psychologists may spearhead such efforts. To seek changes in a school and create effective policies and practices, schools must decide what they want to achieve with their policy and procedures and identify who needs to be involved to meet their identified goals (Pfeffer, 1992). Based on the previous recommendations, schools may be best positioned to achieve broader, more sustainable changes when involving local experts that may include university-district partnerships (such as in the current initiative), parents or caregivers, and an inclusive group of school personnel with different vantage points of the problem (e.g., administrators, teachers, noncertified staff). In doing so, the necessary buy-in will be established and implementation will likely be strengthened (Plog, Epstein, Jens, & Porter, 2009). To support the implementation of anti-bullying efforts, schools are encouraged to (a) build administrative and staff buy-in for the effort; (b) connect the policies, procedures, and practices to the overall goals and mission of the school; and (c) establish a program champion (i.e., school psychologist) who can support the efforts, communicate with parents and those on the periphery of the school as needed, and provide training to those within the school (Plog et al., 2009).

Conclusions

Collectively, results of this initiative lend support to collaborations between universities, state departments of education, and local school district personnel in developing and implementing effective responses to the problem of bullying. Given the adoption of anti-bullying legislation in most states across the United States, identifying effective mechanisms to educate schools on the best ways to respond to such legislative mandates is essential. Accordingly, the promising initiative detailed in the present article may be useful in efforts across the nation to assist schools and their constituencies to effectively respond to legislative and legal mandates requiring a response to this concerning problem among youths.

Funding

Funding for this initiative was provided by the Kansas State Department of Education, Award #KAN0070825. No potential conflicts of interest are reported by the authors.

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