Engage Students to Embrace Civility

An approach to foster civility through an emphasis on positive social norms, increased student competence, resilience, and restoration.

It is necessary for school leaders to take an honest, growth mindset, perspective, look at the data, and accept the fact that, despite best intentions and efforts, what schools are currently doing to reduce and respond to bullying is not achieving positive results.

It is not reasonable to expect that continuing to implement the same approach will achieve better results. What is necessary is a shift that is is based on values that most all educators strongly believe in—a positive approach that supports resilience and restoration.

The Centers for Disease Control has included a question about bullying on its Youth Risk Behavior Survey since 2009. There has been no decline in the rate at which students report they are bullied —despite a decade of significant focus on bullying prevention. Recent meta analyses of research studies of bullying prevention programs have noted that such programs have achieved marginal to no positive impact—with zero effectiveness at the secondary level.

While educators appear to think that the bullying prevention approaches implemented at their school are largely effective, overwhelmingly students report in research studies that schools are not doing enough, staff often ignore bullying, and staff make things worse if they intervene. The "tell an adult" strategy is ineffective. The vast majority of students do not report.

This document will present recommendations for a more comprehensive positive relations approach that is grounded in increased student voice and leadership, increased student competence, trauma informed care, and restorative practices.

HARMFUL IMPACT OF BULLYING

There is every reason to be profoundly concerned about the harmful impact of bullying on students who are being bullied, engaging in bullying, and on the school community. Students who are bullied and some who also engage in bullying can suffer lifelong mental and physical health challenges. Bullying is associated with chronic absences and school failure. Schools with higher levels of bullying have lower levels of achievement.

Bullying is implicated in youth suicide. Most youth suicides occur during the school year. This means that what is happening to students while they are at school is a contributing factor. In recent years, the rate of youth suicide and attempts has been significantly increasing.

Bullying is also implicated in school violence, including school shootings. The majority of school shooters have experienced being bullied. Students who are bullied, distressed, and feel unsafe at school are significantly more likely to bring a weapon to school.

Bullying is a form of trauma. As schools look to implement trauma informed practices to address the trauma students have or are suffering outside of school, it is equally important to address the trauma that students are suffering while at school.

HURTFUL BEHAVIOR

Schools have been directed to address "bullying." There are three confusing definitions of "bullying:" 1. The academic definition of intentional, repeated hurtful acts, where there is an imbalance of power. 2. The statutory definition of repeated hurtful behavior that has caused an interference in a student's right to receive an education. 3. Common definition that "someone has been hurtful, I am upset, and I can't get this to stop." Schools must address all forms of hurtful behavior to improve school climate and not just respond to incidents that are more serious.

There is a profound misunderstanding about the nature of bullying behavior. Some students who engage in bullying, especially those who have been bullied, have other risk factors, which must be addressed.

However, the primary source of bullying is popular, socially skilled students who are being hurtful to achieve social dominance and status. These students target both those who they view as "different," as well as rivals or potential rivals. These students are compliant and are generally not considered to be the source of any trouble.

Students who are perceived as "different" most often experience bullying. This includes students with a minority sexual orientation or identity, those with disabilities, those of a minority race or religion, or a difference in appearance. Sometimes these students also have social relationship challenges that contribute to their being targeted.

A significant amount of hurtful behavior in schools is bi-directional or impulsive retaliation. Such "drama" is emotionally distressing and creates a negative school climate that interferes with student learning.

Risk prevention approaches will not change this kind of hurtful behavior. This is dominance behavior; not risk behavior.

The issue of staff who are hurtful to students or who fail to intervene when hurtful incidents occur in their presence must also be addressed. Bullying of students by staff is a serious, generally ignored, concern that models bullying for students and causes profound distress.

Schools are advised to seek to foster positive relations, reduce all forms of hurtful behavior, empower students and staff to respond effectively to more minor hurtful incidents, and ensure an effective response to the more serious situations by school leadership.

INCREASED RESILIENCE AND STUDENTS AS LEADERS

Some students who are hurtful and many students who are targeted have or are experiencing trauma or toxic stress. Trauma informed practices provide an underlying foundation for success. The key components of this effort must include positive staff-student connections, mindfulness and de-escalation practices, problem-solving skills, a focus on personal character strengths, and a focus on kindness.

However, it will not be possible to reduce bullying using only trauma informed practices approaches. The path to achieving high social status within the school must change.

This requites a focus on positive social norms. The majority of students do not like to see their peers be hurtful and truly admire those who are kind and compassionate and step in to help.

It is necessary to engage a diverse group of kind, compassionate, and inclusive students in leadership roles to promote positive relations and increase student voice in all aspects of improving school climate.

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

One of the additional reasons the current approach of schools is not working at the secondary level is grounded in youth development. As students approach puberty, their profound interest is in gaining independence and handling their own interpersonal relationship challenges. To them, "tell an adult" is "admit personal failure and prepare for shame."

Schools must empower students by assisting them to gain greater effectiveness in social relationship skills. This includes how to effectively respond if they witness hurtful behavior, have been treated badly, or have been hurtful. These instructional efforts must support increased resilience, as well a personal accountability and remedy.

REPORTING AND RESPONSE CONCERNS

The majority of students who are bullied, even those who are distressed, do not report these concerns to the school. They think that the school will not respond or that reporting will make things worse. It is absolutely imperative to improve the manner in which school leaders respond to reports of bullying and any other concerns regarding the well-being of students.

Increased student reporting of serious concerns to a trusted adult at school is the essential foundation for increased school safety, not only for students who are being bullied, but in relation to other threats.

Effective threat assessment can only occur if someone reports. Most school shooters and students who attempt suicide have demonstrated signs of concerns that have been witnessed by peers. The fact that most students think reporting bullying to the school will make things worse is likely related to the very real concern that they also may not report these other very serious situations.

The underlying problem is that schools have been directed by statute to make "bullying" a violation of the disciplinary code, create a reporting system, investigate student reports, and impose disciplinary sanctions.

While rules and consequences are necessary, this approach frequently leads a school leader to shift his or her focus from seeking to fully understand and resolve the hurtful situation to an assessment of whether the accused student has violated the disciplinary code and should be punished. Issues of due process and privacy emerge.

Often the targeted student is simply told, "I handled, but can't tell you how because of privacy." The harm this student has suffered has not been remedied. Reporting often leads to retaliation—which the targeted student does not report because reporting the first time has only made things worse.

Further complicating matters is that under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), schools must make an annual public report of the number of bullying incidents—a "black mark." This acts as a huge disincentive for a school leader to decide that a reported situation meets the statutory definition of "bullying."

In states that earlier had implemented this same annual reporting requirement by state statute, this has led to a massive underreporting of bullying incidents and a steady increase in the percentage of students who report being bullied on state youth risk surveys.

The federal restrictions on suspensions have also had an impact. Suspensions are clearly not effective. Restorative approaches should be utilized. But school leaders have not been provided with adequate guidance on effective resolution strategies.

It is necessary to switch from thinking in terms of possible "disciplinary code" violation to a more comprehensive investigation and response to the harmful situation.

EFFECTIVE INVESTIGATION AND INTERVENTION

Under federal civil rights regulations, in situations where protected class students have been harassed, the requirements are helpful. It is necessary for the school leader conduct a prompt, thorough, and unbiased investigation and then develop a strategy that is reasonably calculated to end the harassment and stop any retaliation, remedy the harmful effects on the victim, and correct the hostile environment.

These requirements should be followed in all serious or chronic hurtful situation, regardless of whether the target is in a protected class. Bullying of or by students with disabilities must be fully addressed in an IEP or 504 meeting.

A recommended approach to conduct a thorough investigation is:

- Identify whether any involved students have challenges that must be addressed through increased resilience and improved skills.

- Determine the motivation of those being hurtful and identify their supporters, who must also be held accountable.

- Inquire into how any involved students are being treated by staff and determine whether any staff member was present during a hurtful incident and how that staff member responded.

- Ask all involved students for their insight into how best to proceed to resolve the situation. Ensure their full participation in all matters that impact them.

A recommended response that supports resilience and restoration is:

- Develop a positive action plan to support any involved student who has underlying challenges to assist that student in gaining greater resilience and more effective social relationship skills. Ensure ongoing positive staff-student connections and support.

- Implement a protection plan, if necessary, to protect the safety of any targeted student.

- Hold both the student who was primarily hurtful and his or her supporters accountable through a private discussion process that leads them to accept personal responsibility. Then, engage these students in collaborative problem solving to identify how they will remedy the harm to the target and to the school community. Require that they engage in daily acts of kindness to others and report these acts to the school leader as part of this remedy.

- Correct any aspects of the school environment that have been identified as presenting concerns. Focus on how to increase inclusion. Address any concerning behavior of school staff in being hurtful or not responding—also in a restorative manner.

- Ensure ongoing monitoring until all parties have indicated that things have gotten better.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Schools must regularly conduct anonymous surveys and focus groups on school climate that assess staff-student relationships, student-student relationships, negative incidents, and the effectiveness of staff responses and interventions.

The data should provide the basis for the development of objectives. To address these objectives, schools should identify research-informed approaches, develop implementation plans, and engage in ongoing evaluation of effectiveness.

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