

Anti-Bullying Efforts, Purpose and Effectiveness

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Review Article

Received date: 14/10/2016
Accepted date: 17/12/2016
Published date: 24/12/2016

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Keywords: Bullying, Cyber, Nevada, Revised,
Statue, Prevention, Program

ABSTRACT

Bullying is a national concern in Pre-K-12 grade education in the United States. All fifty states have enacted legislation that addresses bullying in the school systems. Nevada and Elko County School District have implemented legislation and policies directing teachers and schools to facilitate comprehensive anti-bully programs. Discussion of the effectiveness of anti-bully programs, as well as clear definitions of bullying and cyber-bullying are discussed. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is highlighted as one such anti-bully program that has been utilized to affect change. The importance of creating a positive school climate is explored, along with an explanation of the need for all stakeholders that have an impact and influence on students work together to address anti-bullying efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying and cyber-bullying are issues that have plagued schools for quite a long time. Recent law adoption by all fifty states has mandated that schools address these issues in and outside of schools. Teachers and administration are tasked with implementing measures to combat the issue of bullying. This topic brief will discuss efforts within the State of Nevada, Elko County School District, and Carlin Combined Schools to implement an effective anti-bully program.

Bullying affects the ability for students to learn in an effective manner. Students need to feel safe and secure physically, emotionally and socially before learning can occur. Bullying actions by peers in and outside of the school environment can negatively affect student's abilities to learn. Therefore, it is vital that the schools implement a comprehensive anti-bully program that is effective ^[1].

RESEARCH AND LITERATURE FOUNDATION

Nevada and Elko County School District Anti-Bully Law and Definitions

In 2014 the State of Nevada revised the anti-bully legislation for the states system of public instruction and defined it as follows:

NRS (Nevada Revised Statue) 388.122: Bullying means a willful act which is written, verbal or physical, or a course of conduct on the part of one or more persons which is not authorized by law and which exposes a person repeatedly and over time to one or more negative actions which is highly offensive to a reasonable person and:

- Is intended to cause or actually causes the person to suffer harm or serious emotional distress;
- Exploits an imbalance in power between the person engaging in the act; or
- Conduct and the person who is the subject of the act or conduct
- Poses a threat of immediate harm or actually inflicts harm to another person or to the property of another person
- Places the person in reasonable fear of harm or serious emotional distress; or
- Creates an environment which is hostile to a pupil by interfering with the education of the pupil (Nevada Revised Statue (NRS) 388, 2015)

In 2015 Nevada updated NRS 388.123 to define cyber-bullying. NRS 388.123 Cyber-bullying defined: "Cyber-bullying"

Research & Reviews: Journal of Educational Studies

means bullying through the use of electronic communication. The term includes the use of electronic communication to transmit or distribute a sexual image of a minor.”

The State of Nevada defines “sexual image” as a visual depictions, including, without limitation, any photography or video of a minor simulating or engaging in sexual conduct or of a minor as the subject of a sexual portrayal ^[2].

The Elko County School District (ECSD) in turn updated ECSD policy in section “J” STUDENTS addressing Students Discipline: Bullying and Cyber-Bullying of Students Prohibited, to reflect the State of Nevada revised statute. Additionally the generally policy statement reads:

“No member of the Board of Trustees of the school district, nor employee of the Board of Trustees, including, without limitation, an administrator, principal, teacher or other staff member, not any student of the school district shall engage in any conduct on or off school property which results in “bullying”, or cyber- bullying of any student on school property, at an activity sponsored by a school or on any school bus.”

Under NRS 388 the State of Nevada outlines clearly the requirements of school districts and school administrators to implement anti-bully programs, curriculum, and investigations of violations. Schools cannot simply ignore or turn a blind eye with statements such as “kids will be kids” any longer- school districts, schools, administrators, and individual teachers can now be held civil and criminally liable for not intervening where bullying exists ^[3].

Court Cases Involving Bullying

Nevada does not currently have explicit laws against bullying. Only a few states formally criminalize cyber-bullying but many bully and cyber -bullying behaviors already fall under existing criminal or civil legislation (harassment, stalking, libel, defamation of character, etc.).

One of the issues with lawsuits involving bullying is that few can agree on the point in which a behavior crosses the line and becomes something other than isolated or trivial. Most states including Nevada have declined to pass new laws to further criminalize bullying and have instead passed legislation directing public schools to deal with the issue.

Federal Courts and the U.S. Supreme Court seem reluctant to take up bullying cases. In December 2013 the Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal seeking to hold a Pennsylvania school district responsible for repeated bullying of high school students by a peer. The 3rd U.S. Court of Appeals has ruled several times using the same language that “there is no special relationship between schools and students that would give rise to a duty to protect them from harm from other students.”

Two tragic court cases in Nevada highlight the importance of implementing a comprehensive anti-bully program both cases stem from Clark County.

The first case is Lambert V Clark County School District (CCSD) in which the Lambert family sued CCSD for wrongful death. The Lamberts asserted that in 2013 CCSD failed to follow state laws regarding school bullying- specifically citing NRS 388. The Lamberts claimed that the administration at White Middle School did not inform them that their daughter Hailee was being bullied at school ^[4].

The parents claim experienced severe and abusive acts of bullying in the months before her death. An example was a voicemail message recorded on phone that mocked her seizure condition and stated, “Where are you? I hope you died”. He committed suicide on December 12, 2013. A federal judge dismissed the lawsuit filed by the Lamberts. U.S. District Judge Andrew Gordon found that the family could not claim CCSD violated their daughter’s constitutional rights. The judge remanded the case back to state court, ruling the Lamberts did not have solid ground to claim due process violations since federal law does not impose a duty on school districts to protect students from bullying. He further ruled that the constitution did not guarantee a right on or her parents for government assistance to prevent her suicide.

The second court case involved two families also suing CCSD. They claim that chronic bullying scarred both of their sons. They claim severe bullying was inflicted on them at Junior High School. According to a Las Vegas Sun newspaper article written by Paul Takahashi, “the bullying began as taunts and homophobic slurs with other students calling the boys gay boyfriends”. The bullying continued and escalated from the verbal taunts to physical assaults including: “unwanted touching, hair pulling, elbowing and pushing”.

The physical assaults continued to escalate until eventually the bully stabbed one of the boys in the genitals with a pencil and beat the other boy on the legs with the slider of a trombone in the band room. After the parents complained and meet with school administration the bullying ended during band class but continued in other locations on campus ^[5].

The homophobic slurs also continued, with the bullies recording their acts against the boys, threatening to post the acts online at YouTube. Both parents continued to try to resolve the issue with administration whose response was summed up by one parent as “tepid”. Both families felt forced into moving their children out of CCSD to protect them: one to a private Christian academy and the other to a charter school. Both parents said the lawsuit “isn’t about seeking damages, but about holding CCSD accountable for failing to adequately protect its students from bullying”. One of the mothers said “Bullying has to end. We want our kids to be safe”.

Why is Bullying Prevention Important?

Reported in the article, *Bullying In Schools*, the authors state that nearly 28% of all students' ages 12-18 reported being bullied physically, verbally, and/or online at least once during the year according to a 2013 U.S. Department of Education report. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) also reported that in 2014, 20% of high school students were bullied on school property and 15% through electronic means over the past 12 months. The authors assert that "schools have a responsibility to safeguard the physical and psychological safety of students".

Cornell and Bradshaw state in their article: *From a Culture of Bullying to a Climate of Support: The Evolution of Bullying Prevention and Research in School Psychology Review*, that "the culture of peer bullying and harassment" has been a "largely neglected problem in most schools". A common theme of solution to combat bullying is to change the climate of schools and communities toward bullying behaviors. One observation of note was their finding that intervention programs can have a biasing effect on measurement, such as sensitizing students to bullying so that they make increased reports in the absence of an actual increase in prevalence^[6].

This serves as a reminder that some of the data collected about bullying is self-reported and such data presents an issue. Self-reported data can impair our ability to assess the effectiveness of anti-bully efforts accurately. Bullying is an extremely complex and can contain very subtle behaviors that are not easily detected or observed.

Bullying is not an issue new to public schools; however, more attention is being paid to the increase deadly and highly publicized events. Cyber-bullying has been shown to have a correlation in many teen suicide cases including Hailee Lambert in Las Vegas as well as "Ryan Halligan in Vermont in 2003, Megan Meier, in Missouri in 2006, Jessica Logan in Ohio in 2009, and Tyler Clementi in New Jersey in 2010".

In 2011 the CDC labeled school bullying and cyber-bullying as a public health crisis. Both the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice have linked bullying and cyber-bullying to school violence and low academic achievement. Jones and Augustine assert that up to "45% of students in schools were involved in bullying practices, either as the target or the bully". Cyber-bullying is especially troubling because harassment may be posted anonymously and can occur outside of school. In 2011, 16% of high school students reported experiencing cyber-bullying^[7].

Students who are involved in bullying and/or cyber-bullying either as the bully or the recipient suffer many consequences of this behavior. Students may experience bodily harm (minor to severe), report high levels of depression, social anxiety, loneliness, thoughts of suicide, lower self-esteem and general feelings of unhappiness. Bullied youth also report greater levels of general discomforts such as: headaches sleep problems, and abdominal pain.

In the resource book, *Class Meetings That Matter*, the authors assert bullying prevention programs are important "that bullying can have an adverse impact on academic achievement", and bullying is "sometimes described as a gateway behavior", in which a pattern of bullying behavior can become more ingrained in the students interactions with others and may take the form of "illegal antisocial behaviors in adulthood"^[8].

The focus of a quality anti-bully curriculum should be on changing the climate of the school so that students understand that inclusiveness with an emphasis on learning should be fostered. Joe Sylvester reports that anti-bullying programs across the country have "lessened bullying incidents", and comprehensive anti-bully programs such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program have been "nationally recognized for its effectiveness in reducing bullying and violence among students".

Effective Anti-Bully Practices

It is vital to understand that anti-bully strategies are not one size fits all. A comprehensive program, with many facets implemented over a long span of time, is what is shown to make lasting changes in school climate. All stakeholders should be educated as to the definition of bullying and steps to take to address it. Stakeholders include all school staff: teachers, paraprofessionals, custodians, food service workers, office staff, and administration. Additional stakeholders include: students, parents, community leaders and the business owners where students frequent. Experts suggest combining strategies that address the reality of the effects of bullying along with positive educational programs. One such comprehensive program that has garnered success in the United States and in other countries is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP)^[9].

A two year study was done in Pennsylvania from between 2008 to 2010, yielding the following results: 13% decrease in students who reported being bullied on a regular basis and 41% decrease in the number of student bullying others. In 2012 was recognized by the American Psychological Association for Distinguished Contributions to Research in public Policy. Olweus proponents stress that for real change to occur a system wide change is critical. The focus of an anti-bully program should be on creating a climate in which school values and expectations result in all children feeling safe and valued.

Traditionally unmonitored areas such as the hallways, bus, locker room, restrooms, sporting events, etc., must be better managed because bullying tends to migrate to unmonitored areas when a program is implemented. An effective anti-bully plan should include the following components: a clear definition of bullying and cyber-bullying, classroom and/or homeroom activities that focus on self-reflection, a structured discipline plan for dealing with bullying, continuous assessment of bullying incidents,

locations, and overall feelings of school climate, and on-going training for stakeholders: teachers, staff, coaches, community partner, and administration. Concerted effort everyday by stakeholders needs to be made, so all children feel valued at school, ultimately allowing them to learn and grow ^[10].

Field Activity

In response to NRS 388, Elko County School District implemented the Olweus Bully Prevention Program. Administration at Carlin Combined Schools decided to participate as a pilot school for the program and began the process a semester prior to most other schools in the district. The program was implemented for all students, teachers, and staff on campus- pre-school 12th grade. For this field activity I conducted informal interviews with administration, high school teachers, and high school students. I would like to conduct a broader field study to gather information and actual statistics on reported bullying activity before and after the implementation of Olweus. I would also like to gather information from other schools in the district not only my own school. I serve as the teacher adviser to a core group of ten students who most of which have been with me for two and a half years (some students have moved and a few have been added). We meet once a week for 25 minutes to discuss anti-bully topics, self-reflection, and strategies ^[11]. Overall students report that school climate has improved; they report that in the last two years they have experienced and/or witnessed far less physical and overtly verbal bullying. They have however, reported an increase in subtle (whispered verbal bullying), and cyber-bullying. The students indicate that they have learned to “hide” their bullying because they know it is not tolerated at school and that there are clear consequences. Teachers report less physical bullying in the hallways and during school wide activities. Administration reports a decrease in physical bullying including fistfights at school; however, they also report an increase of reports of cyber-bullying outside of school. I would like to dig a little deeper with students and try to understand why cyber-bullying has increased and what they feel should be or could be done to combat this issue.

Theory to Practice

Bully prevention efforts take a considerable amount of time and consistency to implement to effect change. The focus needs to be on fundamentally creating an overall positive atmosphere in all areas of the school community. Students must be taught to recognize their own behaviors and to be empathic toward others at school. At Carlin Combined School, the efforts of the comprehensive Bullying Prevention Program have made a difference to improve the overall school climate. Students feel more included and valued while at school.

A large issue of concern with upper elementary and secondary students is the increased use of social media and cell phones as a way to cyber-bully. In this case more effort needs to be placed on parental education of the issue. Schools need to continue to discuss cyber-bullying, express that it is unacceptable, and allow students to self-reflect on their social media behaviors ^[12].

Teachers, staff and administrators need to receive ongoing training and support to effectively implement the program. More attention should be paid to new teachers and staff to explain the program. New teachers are often unsure of all of the components on the program. Ongoing yearly, evaluation of the effectiveness of the program needs to occur and involve all stakeholders.

Parents need to be educated as to how students are engaged in these behaviors and the steps they should take to monitor and decrease such behaviors. Students self-report that parents monitor their social media activities very little if at all and usually do not impose limits on their cell phone usage, apps, or text messages. More effort needs to be made to fully bring parents (in particular secondary parents) on board to help fully implement a strong change in creating a positive school climate.

Relevance to Professional Goals

The professional goal for researching the effectiveness of anti-bully measures is to know why focus on anti-bullying is important and what types of programs truly effect lasting change in behavior. There two main reasons why it is important to understand anti-bully measures the first because it is Nevada law for teachers to help prevent bullying within schools and the second to create a safe environment at school that fosters a positive climate conducive to student learning.

The topic of anti- bullying directly relates to the following two National Board Professional Teaching Standards: Teachers are committed to students and learning and Proposition 4: Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience. Two main bullet points under Proposition 1 tie directly to anti-bully efforts: They are concerned with their students’ self-concept, their motivation and the effects of learning on peer relationships and NBCTs are also concerned with the development of character and civic responsibility. One of the main purposes of bullying prevention program is to work to increase the self-concept of students, improve the school climate, and relationships within the school. These points, that continuous effort by the school community to fully develop positive character traits students will need to possess for successful adult life ^[13].

Further relevance of the importance for teachers to focus on a bullying prevention program is Praxis topics III and V. Praxis topic III is: Managing Organization Systems and Safety and Praxis topic V is Ethics and Integrity. Praxis topic III maintains that an educational leader ensures a safe environment by proactively addressing challenges to the physical and emotional safety and security of students and staff. When students feel threatened or harassed by a bully or bullies at school their safety and security become a large concern. Ernest facilitation of a bully prevention program enables teachers to assist in maintaining a safe and secure school environment. A very important saying for teachers to always keep in mind is “more is caught than taught”, teachers

have an obligation to model ethical and legal behavior standards to the upmost of their ability at all times. Students often lack ethical role models and it is important to their development that behavior is modeled by caring adults at school.

Why this is Important for PreK-12 Students?

Social, emotional, intellectual, and physical developments are lifelong process all of us undergo continuously as human beings. Emphasis needs to be placed by schools that our job is not to simply focus on students' intellectual development, but rather see students as complete multi-faceted people that need guidance in all four areas of development. Teachers and schools are tasked with delivering educated productive citizens that can contribute and get along in society. When students participate in a sustained comprehensive bullying prevention program the goal is that they will be empathetic and kind citizens. Students can more fully focus on learning when their physical and security needs are satisfied. Consistent emphasis on a bully free positive atmosphere helps to facilitate the best environment for learning. Learning should be the ultimate goal of teachers and schools, working on the school climate through anti-bullying efforts helps to facilitate that goal ^[14].

CONCLUSION

Schools and teachers have a responsibility to protect and nurture the children under their care. Implementation of a strong bully prevention program that works to safeguard the physical, social, and emotional of students is an environment that all teachers and schools need to focus on. Harassment, bullying, and cyber-bullying compromise the healthy development of students. Harmful effects from these destructive and negative behaviors can follow students into adulthood.

Anti-bully efforts need to be continuously monitored, adjusted, and customized to address the issues that a school currently has. A once size fits all or implement it and forget it approach simply fails to meet the complex social and emotional needs of students. Schools, teachers, parents and communities have to work together to create positive, respectful and supportive learning communities that will provide lasting effects for generations to come.

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