School Safety and School Climate: Policy Implications

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The U.S. has no greater responsibility than safeguarding the well-being of our children. Ensuring safe schools and communities is paramount to this responsibility.

Welcome to School Safety!

The Center for School Safety, School Climate and Classroom Management is an interdisciplinary research center that promotes basic and applied research and facilitates educational and outreach efforts. The Center consists of faculty members representing a broad span of academic orientations including education, psychology, law, social work, criminal justice, nursing, and policy development.

The Center, which was initially formed in 2000, is focused on both research and outreach/service projects involving school safety, school violence prevention, school climate, classroom management, and related issues. Current areas of research include prevention of bullying, cyberbullying, and the criminal sexual exploitation of children. Additional research involves assessing protective and risk factors in school environments and assessing the impact of educational and policy interventions on these factors.

Recent Publications

- High School Students’ Perceptions of Motivations for Cyberbullying: An Exploratory Study
- Measuring Students’ Self Efficacy in Bullying Situations
- A Case Study with an Identified Bully: Policy and Practice Implications
The Center: Mission and Goals

• To promote understanding and attention to the problem of school safety, school climate and classroom management.

• To increase children’s academic success, as well as social and emotional development, through alleviation of school violence and related issues.

• To encourage and conduct interdisciplinary research and scholarship.
The Center: Mission and Goals

• To disseminate information and best practices.

• To affect public policy through findings about school violence and effective strategies to reduce violence and its negative effects.

• To contribute knowledge and research that assists children, schools and communities at local, state and national levels.
The Center: Our Work

- School Safety and School Climate

- Bullying Prevention and Intervention
School Climate Defined:

- **Safety**
  - Rules and Norms
  - Physical Safety
  - Social and Emotional Security

- **Teaching and Learning**
  - Support for learning
  - Social and civic learning
School Climate Defined:

- **Interpersonal Relationships**
  - Respect for Diversity (e.g., Character Education programs)
  - Social support – adults
  - Social Support - students

- **Instructional Environment**
  - School connectedness/engagement
  - Physical surroundings
December 2012 Connecticut School Shooting Position Statement

Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence

Journal of School Violence (2013)
Position Statement

• **Balance in how we approach the issue** – we need to go beyond strict security measures to include preventing and protecting students

• **Communication** – we need to continue to develop close communication and trust between students, schools and communities
Position Statement

• **Connectedness** – what binds us together as families, friends, and communities that leads to safe schools and neighborhoods.

• **Support** – it is critical for schools to provide effective prevention and related comprehensive support programs.
“We won’t be able to stop every violent act, but if there is even one thing that we can do to *prevent* any of these events, we have a deep obligation, all of us, to try.”

President Obama statement after the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy
School and Community Violence

- Research shows that exposure to community violence can impact children’s mental health and development and can substantially increase the likelihood that these children will later commit violent acts themselves.

- In a 2011 national survey of high school students:
  - 12% reported being in a physical fight on school property in the last 12 months.
  - 5.9% reported that they did NOT go to school on 1 or more days in the last 30 days because they felt unsafe at school on or their way to or from school.
  - 20% reported being bullied on school property and 16% reported being bullied electronically during the last 12 months.
School Discipline

• School discipline policies mandated by No Child Left Behind Act (2001).

• Lack of evidence of the effectiveness of Zero Tolerance policies.

• School suspensions and expulsions are the most common discipline response utilized in schools.

• Most suspensions and expulsions are applied for relatively minor behaviors (e.g., tardies, truancies) despite data indicating that suspensions are NOT effective in reducing undesirable behaviors NOR are they effective in promoting prosocial behaviors.
A Review of School Discipline Policies

• **Mild Behaviors** – Class disruption, cheating, dress code violation, electronic devices, loitering, misuse of computer, tardies, truancy

• **Discipline** – Detention

• **Moderate Behaviors** – Bullying, fighting, intimidation/hazing/general harassment, extortion/negative verbalizations, social exclusion, vandalism

• **Discipline** – In-school suspension and classroom removal
A Review of School Discipline Policies

• **Severe Behaviors** – Alcohol offenses, arson, assault/threats, battery, bomb threats, sexual harassment, racial slurs, theft, weapon offenses

• **Discipline** – Out-of-school suspension, Expulsion, Alternative School Placement, Police Involvement

**Summary:** Majority of school policies utilized punitive discipline approaches. Limited proactive consequences (peer mediation, teacher and parent conference, mental health intervention) included in the majority of school policies examined.
State Policies on School Climate

- **24 States** have some form of school climate policy in place within their state education policies.

- State school climate policies are NOT typically stand-alone policies.

- Within most states, policies addressing school climate can be found within their academic school approval, accountability and strategic planning policies, school health and safety policies, or in a combination of areas.
State Policies on School Climate

- **Georgia**’s education laws mandate the creation of the School Climate Management Program to assist systems in developing school climate improvement and management processes.

- **Tennessee** received federal funding from the Safe and Supportive Schools grant to develop a statewide measure to assess school climate from parents, teachers, and school personnel.

- **Mississippi** has developed its own climate assessment entitled “Mississippi Safe and Orderly School Instruments”.
State Policies on School Climate

- **2 States** (Ohio and Wisconsin) have developed specialized school climate standards/guidelines. Both are voluntary standards that schools are encouraged but not required to implement.

- The importance of the **role of students** in State School Climate Policies. For example, in West Virginia’s Board of Education Student Code of Conduct Policy it is stated that….’students will help create an atmosphere free from bullying, intimidation and harassment.’
State Policies on School Climate

- Our Center has been working with the State of Georgia (1) to incorporate items to assess school climate in the GA Student Health Survey-II and (2) to develop criteria to recognize Persistently Safe and Supportive Schools.
State Policies on Bullying

• Prior to 1999 there was **NO State** legislation addressing bullying.

• Since 1999 State Legislatures have enacted more than **120 bills** to address bullying, with 70 statutes between 2007 and 2010 (U.S. DOE, 2011).

• 16 components (e.g., how the law is defined) of state legislation have been identified with only **2 States** (MD, NJ) addressing all 16.
State Policies on Bullying

- **45 States** mandate school districts to adopt bullying policies with little guidance on the substance of those policies or the methods used to reduce bullying.
- **42 States** require schools to prohibit bullying but there is a wide variation in what constitutes bullying and what the consequences would be.
- **25 States** mandate professional development for school personnel.
State Policies on Bullying

- **10 States** mandate or encourage the use of task forces or committees to oversee bullying prevention efforts.
- **13 States** provide provisions for the mental health needs of victims **ALTHOUGH approximately half of the ‘model’ policies mention these needs.**
- **Only 6 States** mandate a funding stream to support these initiatives.
Cyberbullying

• As of 2012, **15 State** laws have provisions that prohibit ‘cyberbullying’.
• **45 States** refer to electronic harassment.
What is missing in current state policies?

- Encouraging the use of evidence-based programs or practices to reduce bullying.
- Procedures to monitor the levels of bullying – data collection.
- Efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of prevention efforts.
What is missing in current state policies?

- Mental health services from prevention to intervention.

- Required professional development for all adults in school buildings regarding issues of school climate and school safety.

- Funding to support these initiatives........
Promoting School Safety and a Positive School Climate

• Prevention-oriented approaches to discipline – School-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) and social emotional learning (SEL).

• Teaching expected behaviors including self-control, self-regulation, conflict-resolution, and social cognition.

• Importance of school-belonging and school connectedness for adults and students.
Promoting School Safety and a Positive School Climate

• Tiered approach to discipline with proactive (teaching skills) and reactive punitive responses.

• Consistent approaches to discipline in the school environment.

• Utilize suspension and expulsion for serious offenses.
A Call for Prevention Efforts

• Increase School Resource Officers and School Mental Health Professionals to help prevent school crime and student-on-student violence.

• Develop evidence-based school discipline policies.

• Community and school personnel work to establish trusting relationships with students that can result in threats being detected and crises averted.
A Call for Prevention Efforts

• School psychologists, social workers, and school counselors can help create a safe and nurturing school climate by providing mental health services to students who need help.

• Train crisis intervention teams in schools and operate in collaboration with community members (e.g., police, mental health organizations).

• Develop, implement, and evaluate school comprehensive emergency management plans.
A State and National Call to Action

1. Increase access to mental health services and supports in schools.

2. Develop safe and supportive schools.

3. Implement school safety initiatives that consider both psychological and physical safety.
A State and National Call to Action

4. Improve screening and threat assessment procedures to identify and meet the needs of individuals at risk for causing harm to themselves and others.

5. Establish trained school safety and crisis teams.

6. Conduct a national campaign to reduce stigma around mental illness and to promote mental health on par with physical health.
A State and National Call to Action

7. Improve policies that limit exposure to media violence among children, youth, and vulnerable populations.

8. Review and revise as needed current policies and legislation addressing access to firearms by those who have the potential to cause harm to themselves or others.
Where do we go from here?
Role of State Legislators

• Evaluate your state’s current policies on school climate: Are the four dimensions (safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, institutional environment) of school climate represented? Do your state’s policies send the message that school climate is important?

• Consider adopting comprehensive school climate standards or guidelines that make the connection between bullying prevention/intervention programs, safety, student engagement, community engagement and a positive school climate.
Where do we go from here?

Role of State Legislators

• Consider incentives the state might offer to districts and/or schools that demonstrate exemplary school climate processes and progress towards improved school climate. Incentives could included financial incentives, additional technical assistance targeted to that district/school, or a recognition/award program.

• Once school climate policies are established in the state, examine levels of technical assistance provided to districts and schools to determine if additional assistance is warranted.
Where do we go from here?
Role of State Legislators

- Work with in-state institutions of higher education to elevate the role of school climate in teacher, administrator, and school mental health professionals preparation programs.

- Encourage school, community and state collaborations.

- Advocate, advocate, advocate!!!!!
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