A Framework for School-Wide Bullying Prevention and Safety

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) is committed to supporting accessible, high-quality education that prepares our children for college, work, and citizenship. Creating safe and supportive schools that are free from bullying, discrimination, harassment, aggression, violence, and abuse is essential to this mission. Bullying among school-age youth is a particularly serious, insidious, and pervasive problem that undermines the teaching and learning environment, increases mental health and behavior problems, diminishes school connectedness, and violates the right of students to receive equal educational opportunities in a safe environment. In response, schools have an ethical and legal responsibility to prevent bullying of any kind, ideally as part of a comprehensive approach to ensuring school safety and promoting positive behavior.

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NASP developed this document to provide a guiding framework to local education agencies and school administrators for implementing effective, sustainable school-wide bullying prevention and safety efforts. Specifically, effective school-wide approaches to bullying:

- establish clear practices and policies that emphasize prevention;
- regularly assess and monitor needs and effectiveness of efforts;
- implement timely and consistent prevention and intervention strategies;
- provide social, emotional, and mental health supports for students involved in bullying, including bullies, victims, and bystanders;
- encourage positive discipline; and
- elicit engagement and commitment by all members of the school community.

NASP represents more than 24,000 school psychologists who work with students, educators, and families to improve students' learning, behavior, and mental health. The guidance provided in this document supplements the information provided in NASP's position statement, *Bullying Prevention and Intervention in Schools* (NASP, 2012; http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/position_paper).

BACKGROUND

Bullying is unwanted, repetitive, and aggressive behavior marked by an imbalance of power. It can take on multiple forms, including physical (e.g., hitting), verbal (e.g., name calling or making threats), relational (e.g., spreading rumors), and electronic (e.g., texting, social networking).

Estimates of the prevalence of bullying in the United States vary significantly depending on methodology, setting,

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or age groups studied, revealing the absence of consensus. Nevertheless, research on bullying and victimization generally suggests that approximately 70% to 80% of school-age students have been involved in bullying at some point during their school years, whether as bully, victim, or bystander (e.g., Graham, 2011; Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001).

Effects of Bullying on Students

Involvement in bullying creates barriers to learning and is associated with a host of negative outcomes including increased risk of substance abuse, delinquency, suicide, truancy, mental health problems, physical injury, and decreased academic performance. Students involved as both bullies and victims (i.e., bully-victims) are often the most troubled or negatively impacted. Importantly, even those witnessing bullying in school are at an increased risk to experience adverse mental health problems as a result, including depression, anxiety, substance abuse (Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009), and an increased sense of vulnerability (Glover, Gough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2000).

Contributing Factors

Bullying occurs as part of a broad social and environmental context that includes individual, family, community, and school factors (Swearer, Espelage, Koenig, Berry, Collins, & Lembeck, 2012). Successful bullying prevention efforts in schools should consider this range of factors and facilitate active involvement from families and the community.

- Numerous *individual factors* may contribute to involvement in bullying either as a bully, victim, or bystander, including (but not limited to) choice of peer groups, social interaction skills, popularity, attitudes toward violence, gender, age, intelligence, the existence of depression, degree of empathy and self-esteem, and being part of a particularly vulnerable population (e.g., students with disabilities and LGBTQ youth).

- *Family factors* that may influence bullying behavior include the degree of adult supervision and modeling of positive conflict resolution, problem solving, and prosocial behavior.
- *Community factors* may include community connectedness, levels of participation in community organizations or activities, levels of poverty, and extent of exposure to community violence.
- Within the *school context*, adult indifference or lack of awareness, poor school engagement and connectedness among students and faculty, and negative or ineffectual discipline policies may contribute to or exacerbate bullying behaviors. Bullying, in turn, negatively affects the social environment of a school, creating a climate of fear among students and reinforcing a belief that adults simply do not care or are unable to do what is needed to protect students.

PREVENTING BULLYING AND IMPROVING SCHOOL SAFETY

Creating a safe and supportive school environment is critical to preventing and deterring bullying, mitigating the effects of aggression and intimidation, and supporting learning and academic achievement. A positive school climate is associated with less involvement in bullying as a bully or victim (Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011; Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008; Nansel et al., 2001), reduced peer rejection (Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012), and increased academic achievement (Spier, Cai, & Osher, 2007; Spier, Cai, Osher, & Kendziora, 2007). Furthermore, students who perceive their school as safe and supportive are more likely to report threats to safety (Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2009).

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Programmatic Approaches

Several programs intended to recognize, prevent, and intervene in bullying behavior have been developed and replicated in schools across the country (see Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Merrell, Guelder, Ross, & Isava, 2008). These include, but are not limited to, adult training

programs, antibullying campaigns, restorative justice, and intervention programs that focus on individuals, small groups, classrooms, and whole schools. Such approaches often include a standard set of materials and instructions to be delivered by selected staff, for specified students, and for specified periods of time.

Single, stand-alone bullying prevention programs tend not to be optimally effective or sustainable.

Some packaged antibullying programs have evidence of moderate levels of success in reducing bullying behavior. The success of these programs is often dependent on the intensity and duration of the program, which must be long-lasting to have a significant impact (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Single, stand-alone bullying prevention programs, however, tend not to be optimally effective or sustainable because they:

- are fragmented;
- are seen as another task to do by only selected individuals;
- view bullying as an issue affecting a subset of students instead of the larger school context;
- rely on strategies that have proven ineffective, or even counterproductive, such as punitive discipline and zero tolerance policies;
- do not fully consider the unique characteristics of the local context, including family and community factors; and
- lack coordination between multiple grade levels and among faculty and staff.

A Comprehensive, Sustainable Approach

To be effective, bullying prevention must be part of a comprehensive, cohesive, and integrated school-wide system of learning supports (see UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools and the National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.) that creates a cultural norm of safety, connectedness, acceptance, and support. This approach integrates and unifies parallel initiatives that may otherwise operate in a fragmented, uncoordinated, and inefficient fashion (e.g., separate initiatives to prevent drug abuse, bullying, gang violence). The ability to reduce duplicate efforts and close gaps in services is particularly important at a time when schools are being asked to do more with less.

Schools that effectively implement this framework provide physical, social–emotional, and academic supports that enable schools to decrease bullying and victimization and improve outcomes for all students. Indeed, school-wide interventions are more likely to positively affect the school climate and reduce bullying than individualized or classroom-level interventions implemented in isolation (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Importantly, creating this kind of school environment takes time and requires an integrated, whole school approach, and an ongoing commitment from school leadership, staff, students, parents, and the community.

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Guiding Principles

NASP advocates for the following guiding principles in developing comprehensive, integrated, school-wide approaches to bullying prevention and improving school safety.

- Prevention and intervention efforts must use evidence-based strategies and services that are developmentally appropriate, coordinated across grade levels, comprehensive in scope, adequately funded, collaboratively implemented, and implemented with fidelity.
- Ongoing engagement, evaluation, consistency, and commitment are necessary components to ensure sustainability.
- Students and their families should be actively engaged in policy and program development and implementation.
- The availability and accessibility of school-employed, specialized instructional support personnel with knowledge and training in creating safe schools (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, school nurses) is paramount to improving school environments.
- A school safety team—which focuses on overall school climate—must be established to help sustain efforts over time.
- Staff training should reinforce the importance of bullying prevention and response efforts throughout

all classroom and nonclassroom interactions and settings (e.g., cafeteria, hallways, playground, digital media, bus stops, school-sponsored events off school grounds).

- Discipline policies should:
    - be clear, consistent, and fair;
    - safeguard the well-being of students and staff;
    - teach students alternative, positive behaviors;
    - avoid harsh discipline and overly punitive policies (e.g., zero tolerance); and
    - cover before and after-school activities, as well as bullying and harassment via digital media.

STEPS TO EFFECTIVE SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-WIDE BULLYING PREVENTION

1. Conduct an assessment of the school's environment to:

    - determine perceived safety and supportiveness of the school among students, staff, and parents;
    - identify specific strengths and needs of the school;
    - identify specific groups at risk in the school (e.g., racial and ethnic groups, LGBTQ youth, students with disabilities); and
    - identify where and how bullying occurs.

2. Identify existing resources and efforts in the school by:

    - garnering involvement from student support and mental health personnel such as school psychologists, social workers, and school counselors;
    - incorporating bullying prevention strategies into classroom learning (e.g., writing assignments, art projects, health curricula);
    - determining the existence of initiatives in the school that should be coordinated with antibullying efforts (e.g., positive behavior support, multitiered response to intervention); and
    - working and communicating with families and related organizations (e.g., PTA).

3. Create a school safety team—ideally made up of an administrator, school psychologist or counselor, teachers, parents, and students—that maintains responsibility for:

    - identifying a lead person to deal with bullying prevention and school safety;

    - establishing and communicating the roles and responsibilities for administrators, teachers, students, and parents in developing and maintaining a safe and supportive school environment;
    - designing and providing professional development and training to ensure that school safety efforts are coordinated and integrated with other school improvement initiatives;
    - recognizing contributing risk factors to bullying in the school and communicating those factors with school staff; and
    - ensuring that the school's policies are in compliance with state laws and school board policies.

4. Incorporate the school safety and bullying prevention efforts into the school's or district's official policy on student and employee conduct. This should include:

    - clear and defined boundaries for appropriate behavior;
    - protocols and mechanisms for reporting concerns or violations, and maintaining a record of those reports;
    - guidelines for investigating incidents of bullying or other threats to student safety, including those that occur after school hours, off campus, or through digital media;
    - guidelines for responding to reports of bullying behavior or other threats to student safety (avoiding overly harsh and punitive discipline such as zero tolerance policies); and
    - access to prevention and intervention services provided by school mental health professionals (school psychologists, counselors, and social workers) to remediate bullying behaviors and support victims, bullies, and bystanders as needed.

5. Establish positive discipline policies and practices that:

    - are fair, clearly understood, and consistent;
    - identify and consider contributing factors to student misbehavior;
    - teach all students alternative, prosocial behaviors; and
    - incorporate family involvement to the greatest extent possible.

6. Engage the entire school community by communicating policies with students, staff, parents,
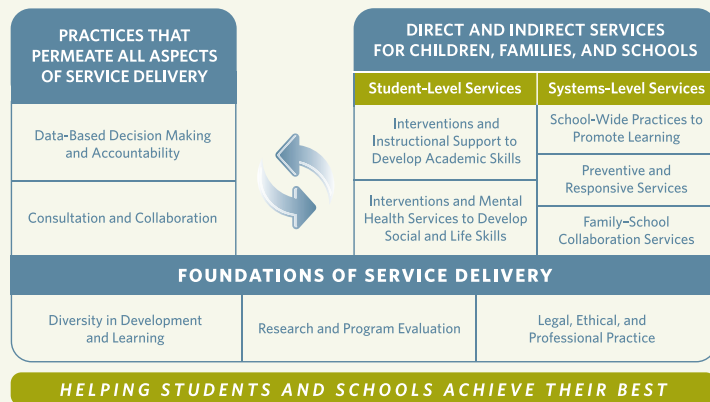
and other stakeholders (e.g., staff at after-school programs). This communication should include:

- open avenues for input and feedback;
- transparent access to bullying and other school safety data; and
- dialogue to ensure consistency of policies and responses to bullying across settings.

7. Regularly assess the school climate to determine effectiveness and whether additional supports are required. This process should be transparent and engage effective data analysis that helps inform evidence-based practice.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Model for Services by School Psychologists

PRACTICES THAT PERMEATE ALL ASPECTS OF SERVICE DELIVERY	DIRECT AND INDIRECT SERVICES FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND SCHOOLS	
	Student-Level Services	Systems-Level Services
Data-Based Decision Making and Accountability	Interventions and Instructional Support to Develop Academic Skills	School-Wide Practices to Promote Learning
		Preventive and Responsive Services
Consultation and Collaboration	Interventions and Mental Health Services to Develop Social and Life Skills	Family–School Collaboration Services

FOUNDATIONS OF SERVICE DELIVERY

Diversity in Development and Learning	Research and Program Evaluation	Legal, Ethical, and Professional Practice

HELPING STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS ACHIEVE THEIR BEST

Note. Reprinted from *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, NASP Practice Model Overview* [Brochure], by National Association of School Psychologists, 2010, Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. Retrieved from www.nasponline.org/standards/practice-model/Practice_Model_Brochure.pdf. Reprinted with permission.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

School psychologists are uniquely trained school-based professionals who help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. They collaborate with educators, parents, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments. The broad-based role of school psychologists, as well as the range of competencies they possess, is described in the *NASP Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (NASP, 2010).

School psychologists have substantial training and preparation in data-based decision making (at the individual and systems levels) and research and program evaluation. Thus, they possess the knowledge and skills required to help lead efforts related to needs assessments, establishing progress monitoring systems, evaluating and interpreting data, and helping use data to inform future directions for bullying intervention and prevention efforts. Additionally, school psychologists are trained in counseling, positive behavior supports, and other school-based intervention techniques necessary to help prevent and remediate bullying behavior.

School psychologists possess skills in consultation and working with others collaboratively, including fellow educators, families, and community stakeholders, making them prime candidates to serve on school safety teams and advisory boards. With extensive knowledge of education law, they can also help ensure legal compliance.

With their extensive understanding of school systems, knowledge of student development and behavior, and understanding of mental health, school psychologists offer a unique perspective. As a result, they can help design appropriate discipline procedures, identify individual student and school-wide factors that may contribute to bullying and victim behavior, facilitate the establishment of systems of support for students, design methods for teaching prosocial behaviors, and offer suggestions for how to respond to incidents of bullying.

SUMMARY

Bullying prevention in schools requires strong leadership and the commitment of all members of the school community. The framework described within this document provides research-based guidance to school and public policy leaders to effectively address bullying and improve students' learning and life outcomes, and is consistent with the key policies identified by the U.S. Department of Education (see Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011). Essential to this work is the creation of safe and supportive school environments through comprehensive and integrated school-wide approaches. Safe and supportive school environments decrease bullying and the effects of aggression and intimidation while improving teaching, learning, and academic achievement. Such efforts, however, take patience, coordination, commitment, and resources to ensure effectiveness and sustainability. School psychologists are ideally positioned to support these efforts given their broad range of skills in data-based decision making, collaboration and consultation, mental health, school-wide reform, and program evaluation. And while legislative efforts increasingly are mandating this work, it is vital that school communities remain steadfast in their commitment to implementing practices that create safe schools where children are ready and able to learn and teachers are empowered to teach.

For further bullying prevention and school safety guidance and resources, visit *http://www.nasponline. org/bullying.*

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