

## Creating Safe, Fair, and Responsive Schools

Students at risk for bullying include those who “don’t fit in”, such as those who are or are perceived to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning, those who differ from the majority of their classmates with regard to race, ethnicity, or religion, those who have differing social or physical abilities, and those who are economically disadvantaged. Students are more likely to feel safe and connected to their schools if the school reflects their realities, if they think that they are being treated fairly, and if they believe that teachers are supportive and approachable. Yet too many published bully-prevention programs do not address how cultural norms and stereotypes differently impact children’s sense of safety and fairness, feelings of connectedness to school, and teacher support or approachability. If bullying is largely about the imbalance and abuse of power, educators need to move beyond targeting student-to-student bullying and appreciate the ways in which gender, race, class, sexual identity, religion and ability position some children as more powerful and privileged in schools than others. Schools can feel especially unsafe and unsupportive when informal norms and/or formal rules unwittingly enhance the power or advantage of some children and youth over others. Since students take their cues from the adults in the school and learn how to treat one another through school norms and rules, such inequities can have a direct effect on the degree and nature of school-based bullying.

### **Schools that are safe for *all* students:**

- **Have an explicit commitment to social justice** and teach, both formally and informally, about the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression that impact all students. Such a commitment is reflected in an inclusive curriculum that teaches critical thinking, and a school environment that encourages and supports the development of active and effective student groups that reflect this commitment, such as Civil Rights teams and Gay/Straight Alliances.
- **Appreciate the social context of bullying** and how power differences between cultural and social groups give rise to bullying behavior. For example, what looks like bullying from a white middle class student may be a sign of self-defense or survival in a hostile or unfair climate from a white working class student or a student of color. The behavior needs to be addressed in both cases, but the response must consider these differences in social and cultural realities.
- **Offer diversity training** to all school staff to increase awareness of the differing needs of students and appreciation of culturally different communication styles and social interactions.
- **Develop clear social norms and rules** that respect all students and consistent consequences and interventions that challenge staff and student homophobia, sexism, racism, and classism.
- **Provide opportunities for students to participate** in the development of such school norms and rules and offer creative strategies for helping all students think critically and to feel safe, respected, supported, and comfortable approaching an adult with problems.
- **Educate staff about the motivations behind different forms of bullying**, distinguishing relational aggression (more often used by those with less power) from physical forms

of aggression, and help educators respond to indirect as well as direct forms of bullying.

- **Do not use bullying as a euphemism for sexism, racism, and homophobia** and make clear distinctions between bullying and illegal sexual or gender harassment, racial harassment, criminal hazing or assault. A gender neutral re-labeling of violence and victimization in schools (bullying) can undermine the rights of students to a school environment that is gender-safe by stripping victims of powerful legal rights and remedies, particularly federal law Title IX.
- **Educate staff about the role gender plays in bullying or harassing behavior** and how gendered behavior varies with social and cultural context. For example, the ways boys across all social classes feel pressure to conform to a conventional form of masculinity that includes a need to define oneself as “not gay” or the ways middle class girls feel pressed to hide their anger and aggression to conform to conventionally feminine notions of nice girls, whereas working class girls are more likely to express their anger openly and directly.
- **Offer media literacy to staff and to students at every grade level.** Children learn physical violence and relational aggression, as well as every form of “ism”, from media they watch and interact with. Just as they develop critical skills for interpreting the written word, so should they develop the skills to critically interpret the 3000 media images they confront daily. Moreover, bullying among girls can be motivated by competition over media ideals of beauty and female perfection.
- **Examine (through self-study) school practices that unwittingly support unfairness, competition, and divisiveness among students**, such as the uneven distribution of resources, and eliminate or alter practices that privilege some students more than others. For example, social class differences are often subtly exacerbated in school functions and sometimes small changes can help poor and working class youth feel less vulnerable and exposed: schools that issue and publicly celebrate yearbooks should ensure that *all* students receive a yearbook; school functions that enlist students to raise funds by selling products to their families and friends can eliminate public “selling contests” that underscore the haves and have-nots; special “school-wide” events tied to monetary contributions (such as birthday celebrations for those children who contribute a library book, as is the practice in one elementary school), should be eliminated unless they are, in fact, subsidized and available to all students. Tracking systems, if they must exist, should be examined for the over-representation of poor or working class students or students of color.
- **Courageous school leadership at all levels (school board, superintendents, principals, teachers, etc.)** that shows a clear willingness to stand firm on behalf of fairness and justice for all students.

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