

# Effective Intervention *for* Bullying

Effective prevention of harassment, intimidation, and bullying involves both proactive and reactive strategies.

An action team promptly and sensitively investigates incidents and plans the school's response.

The team also coordinates schoolwide training and other measures to prevent future incidents.

**M**ost professional educators are aware that every school should have an effective approach to harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB) prevention in which every member of the school community participates. Regardless of the approach a school takes, all students and all staff members should be knowledgeable participants who have been trained to understand and use the adopted strategies.

Although there has been a burgeoning emphasis on programs to prevent bullying, effective prevention also includes strategies to address incidents of HIB when they occur. Strategies should be viewed as falling along a continuum that has prevention at one end and intervention at the other, with each aspect integrally influencing the other. That is, preventive efforts will reduce incidents and point to strategies that address incidents effectively, which in turn will help prevent further incidents.

Every intervention provides an opportunity to assess and review the effectiveness of the school's overall approach to HIB prevention. Incidents also serve as possible indicators of weaknesses in the school's culture and climate—or, at least, its negative impact on certain subgroups. Incidents should automatically lead to a reflective administrative response: *This HIB incident occurred despite our prevention program. How can we improve our preventive efforts so that this type of incident does not occur again?*



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### Steps to Intervention

Every confirmed HIB incident involves a student who has been hurt and has significant implications for schoolwide functioning. Therefore, every occurrence must be treated with urgency and sensitivity. If the administrators and staff members do not respond that way, the student and his or her family may feel that they alone bear the responsibility for driving the response. As soon as the administrators and staff members are aware that an incident has occurred, they must make clear that the school community has a vital interest in understanding and addressing the situation.

This is an important shift in dynamic that can be better appreciated by looking at an analogous situation: In domestic violence cases, an important progressive change over the past few decades has been that police who have been called to the scene of a violent incident no longer rely on only the victim's willingness to pursue a complaint. Instead, the police now assess the situation themselves and will arrest and charge an apparent perpetrator even if his or her spouse becomes ambivalent and withdraws the complaint.

Similarly, in the case of HIB incidents at school, the steps a school takes must not depend on how vocal a student or his or her family is or how persistent they are in pursuing a complaint, but on the school's own commitment to understanding and addressing HIB. A clear mechanism for prompt investigation and

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action is essential. Staff members must respond to each report of an incident of HIB as they would to any other report of violence within the school's jurisdiction. Investigators must determine whether an incident has occurred and then take appropriate action in a timely manner. Implicit in the success of this approach is shared understanding among all school personnel about what is and is not HIB across all subgroups in the school.

### **The Action Team**

Each school should have an HIB action team, a specialized team that responds to incidents and all other types of victimization. The composition of this team may vary from school to school, but generally it should consist of administrators, pupil services personnel (such as school counselors, psychologists, and social workers), instructional staff members, child study team staff members, and other student assistance personnel. Some of these people may be adjunct team members who are called upon as needed.

Recruiting members of existing school-based student assistance teams allows the action team's procedures to be aligned with other ongoing school procedures and existing regulations and mandates. For example, school districts in New Jersey must establish an intervention and referral services team in every school; that team annually reviews the intervention and referral services and student action plans so that it can make recommendations for improving school services. This team's role could grow by adding a review of HIB incidents.

The action team should report

to the school administrators as well as to the state department of education, which can strengthen and support the functioning of the action teams in all schools and districts by providing training and ongoing support and networking among teams. A key focus of such training should include guidance about how to assist the victims and address the perpetrators.

### **The Investigation Process**

The cornerstone of the work of the action team is to establish a procedure for investigation and follow-up of HIB allegations.

#### **COMPONENTS OF INVESTIGATION**

Ultimately, the principal or his or her designee must conduct a prompt and thorough investigation of all alleged incidents. Following recommendations promulgated by the US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (2010), the investigation should attempt to:

- Identify all the perpetrators and victims.
- Alert victims and their parents of their rights and responsibilities.
- Thoroughly interview participants individually and include alleged victims, perpetrators, and key bystanders. The interviewer should document the discussion. The action team reviews the data gathered and makes an objective determination of the level of threat.
- Determine whether there is a confirmed incident of HIB, and if so, inform the parents or guardians of the victim and the perpetrators of the school's subsequent process, leading to a specific response.
- Identify and evaluate the kinds of damage caused by the incident.
- Consider all of the other factors necessary for complete corrective action, including encouraging parents to pursue options for redress beyond the local school if they are not satisfied with the result of the school intervention. For example, the protocol in New Jersey is for the family to seek intervention from the district superintendent, then the county superintendent, then to appeal to the the state commissioner of education, beyond which is the option of court involvement. If the HIB is discriminatory, an appeal can be made to other government agencies, such as the division on civil rights.

#### **FOLLOW-UP PROCEDURES**

When an investigation has determined that an HIB incident has occurred, further steps should be taken and documented:

- A member of the action team is selected to carry out the succeeding steps with the support and knowledge

of the whole team. Other staff members are involved as needed.

- A follow-up meeting and discussion is held with the student who has been victimized to obtain further information about the incident and to express the concern and support of the whole school community. The student's parent or guardian should concurrently be contacted and invited to participate in the intervention process.
- That meeting is immediately followed by an assessment of the victim's overall social situation at school, with the intention of strengthening support for the student through relationships with staff members and staff member-initiated peer-support methods. Such meetings and discussions should be held with the student and his or her parents only. The perpetrator and his or her family members and supporters should not be present, involved in, or informed about these meetings. Other members of the action team can be involved as appropriate.
- Once the perpetrator is properly identified through the investigative process, a follow-up meeting and discussion should be held with him or her. A member of the action team should meet with each accused student, as well as separately with those who witnessed the incident.
- Using a preprepared rubric, the principal and a member of the action team (if needed) should inform each perpetrator, in consultation with his or her parents, that HIB incidents are unacceptable to the school and that the school metes out a range of specific consequences for such actions, depending on the frequency and severity of the behavior. The student should then be informed of the consequences he or she will face and those consequences should be applied.
- Using a parallel protocol and procedure, provisions are made to follow up with the victim and the bystanders. For the latter, consideration is given to each bystander's emotional state and preparedness to become an "upstander" and take positive action if he or she sees incidents of HIB in the future, including cyberbullying.

### **SOME CAUTIONS FOR INTERVENING**

Although peer mediation and conflict resolution are useful strategies for dealing with conflicts that do not involve HIB, they are contraindicated for HIB. Use of those techniques in HIB situations implies that they are conflicts between students of equal power who can resolve their differences through increased communication or negotiation. Further, the use of peer mediation relies on students, however trained or supported, to address and resolve episodes of violence, a responsibility not appropriate for students to have.

Relatedly, if not handled with sensitivity, making a clinical referral for the bullied student may imply that the school views him and her as being responsible in some way for the victimization. It should never be assumed that the victim of HIB has specific clinical needs or deficits. Ideally, such issues should be identified and addressed before victimization occurs. Of course, psychological and support needs that arise from trauma must be addressed. Therefore, if a clinical referral is made, careful communication with the student and his or her parents must take place to ensure that no message of blame for the occurrence is conveyed.

It also follows that providing services to discrete groups of students should be used with caution. In the absence of highly skilled facilitation, such groupings may unintentionally create negative effects. For students who have been bullied, "vulnerability grouping" may imply that they are responsible for being bullied and reinforce negative social status. For perpetrators, "deviance grouping" may lead to strengthened bonds that support negative norms.

All interventions should be in accord with the school's student code of conduct, which should clearly emphasize positive expectations for safe and civil student behavior. In general, all actions should avoid shame and humiliation of victims and perpetrators. Public reporting processes in which students are specifically identified are strongly discouraged.

So-called zero-tolerance policies and approaches should be avoided. They are typically applied unevenly, and consequences are meted out more frequently to minority student populations, especially those of color. Zero-tolerance consequences are typically extreme—such as suspension or expulsion—and do not differentiate according to the frequency or severity

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of the offense (American Psychological Association, 2006). This results in a perceived lack of fairness by students as well as staff members.

### **Schoolwide Responsibilities**

The HIB action team has schoolwide responsibilities that complement individual investigations and follow-ups, including:

- Coordinating HIB prevention and intervention efforts across grade levels and throughout the building.
- Developing approaches for staff members to use when dealing with victims and perpetrators and actively communicating those approaches and their underlying rationale to all members of the school community, including students and parents.
- Assessing HIB incidents to determine whether there are widespread, systemic problems in the school's culture and climate.
- Recommending further professional development for staff members as well as appropriate training for the school community.
- Reviewing past incidents periodically to determine the effectiveness of prevention procedures and school climate improvement efforts, especially for minority populations in the school, and to provide periodic reporting to the district superintendent, the board of education, and the state department of education, according to the state's reporting requirements.

When a review finds that HIB incidents are based on discrimination, in addition to the school informing the parent of the option to contact their state's division on civil rights or similar agency, the school itself should act to address any pattern of bias.

### **Conclusion**

Appropriate intervention facilitates prevention. When schools have systematic procedures in place to investigate, assess, and deal with incidents of HIB, they are clearly communicating to their students that HIB behavior is not acceptable. Conversely, inadequately addressing such incidents communicates that the school does not meaningfully support a safe and civil school climate. Reflexive, overly punitive reactions can leave those involved further traumatized and students leery of reporting incidents. Every school and district can adapt this outline to effectively address incidents of HIB, leading to healthier, safer school environments. **PL**

### **REFERENCES**

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