



A Center Policy & Practice Brief

Embedding Bullying Interventions into a Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports

(April, 2011)

Abstract

Everybody agrees that school bullying is a major problem, but considerable controversy exists over the best way to address the problem. The following discussion presents (a) a brief analysis and synthesis of the current state of the art, (b) underscores the need to avoid another piecemeal set of policy and practice initiatives, and (c) stresses that the growing emphasis on school bullying provides an opportunity to accelerate development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of student and learning supports. Implications for policy are presented.

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Embedding Bullying Interventions into a Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports

Bullying can be extremely damaging to students, can disrupt an environment conducive to learning, and should not be tolerated in our schools.

Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education

Everybody agrees that school bullying is a major problem, but considerable controversy exists over the best way to address the problem. The following discussion presents (a) a brief analysis and synthesis of the current state of the art, (b) underscores the need to avoid another piecemeal set of policy and practice initiatives, and (c) stresses that the growing emphasis on school bullying provides an opportunity to accelerate development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of student and learning supports. Implications for policy are presented.

Bullying: A Burgeoning Concern

The reality is that almost everyone has experienced and has been a witness to aggressive interpersonal behavior at one time or another (e.g., teasing, taunting, name calling, hitting, rejecting peers). About a third of teenagers report being bullied during a school year with about 7 percent indicating they were bullied every day (e.g., Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009).

Ragozzino and O'Brien (2009) highlight the types of bullying described by researchers (e.g., Center for the Study and Prevention of School Violence, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007):

“Direct bullying is a relatively open attack on a victim that is physical (hitting, kicking, pushing, choking) and/or verbal (name calling, threatening, taunting, malicious teasing) in nature. Indirect bullying is more subtle and difficult to detect. It involves one or more forms of relational aggression, including social isolation, intentional exclusion, rumor-spreading, damaging someone’s reputation, making faces or obscene gestures behind someone’s back, and manipulating friendships and other relationships.

Students increasingly bully others using electronic communication devices and the Internet. Cyberbullying involves sending hurtful or threatening text messages and images with these devices in order to damage the target’s reputation and relationships. This form of bullying can be very difficult for adults to detect or track, and almost half of those victimized do not know the identity of the perpetrator. Electronic bullying most commonly involves the use of instant messaging, chat rooms, and e-mail.”

As Secretary Duncan suggests, bullying behavior in schools can be a major barrier to learning and teaching. And clearly it can be detrimental to the physical and psychological well being not only of many students but their families and all who work in a school.

Growing attention to bullying at school has led the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights to warn schools that, under some circumstances, bullying may trigger legal action (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Concern about bullying also has generated increasing emphasis on the behavior as a predictor of delinquency, violence, and other anti-social acts in adulthood (Bender & Losel, 2011; Farrington, Ttofi, & Losel, 2011).

As concerns about bullying have burgeoned, policy makers at federal and state levels have stepped up action. In August 2010, the federal government held the first-ever *Federal Bullying Prevention Summit* and has launched an interagency bullying resource website (<http://stopbullying.gov>). In March 2011, the *Anti-Bullying and Harassment Act of 2011* was introduced in Congress. And, so far, at least forty-five states have passed legislation related to bullying or harassment in schools.

In schools over the last 25 years, bullying prevention programs have received increasing attention. For even longer, schools have pursued strategies for punishing and controlling perpetrators. Intervention concern focused on victims has been less forthcoming.

With increased attention, a wider range of victimization has come under the rubric of bullying

One result of increased attention to aggressive behaviors at school is that a wider range of victimization has come under the rubric of bullying (e.g., various forms of physical and relational aggression and violence, acts of prejudice and discrimination, antisocial attacks, cyberspace attacks, physical and sexual harassment, etc.). This trend to overgeneralize blurs understanding of the bases for different aggressive behaviors and what to do to prevent victimization and raises cautions about premature labeling of students as bullies (Brown, 2008). Because of this trend, bullying is now designated as the dominant type of school violence and, thus, the dominant form of externalizing behavior.

Time to Refine the Definition to Better Account for the Victims

Various definitions of bullying have been formulated. Farrington and Ttofi (2010) have synthesized the common elements in discussing school bullying. Below we highlight the key elements; then, we suggest a few refinements.

As synthesized with specific reference to children and youth, Farrington and Ttofi highlight three key elements of bullying:

- (1) “physical, verbal, or psychological attack or intimidation that is intended to cause fear, distress, or harm to the victim”
- (2) “an imbalance of power (psychological or physical), with a more powerful child (or children) oppressing less powerful ones”
- (3) “repeated incidents between the same children over a prolonged period.”

To further clarify these elements and to help differentiate bullying from other aggressive behaviors, Farrington and Ttofi stress that “It is not bullying when two persons of the same strength (physical, psychological, or verbal) victimize each other. Bullying primarily involves imbalance of power and repeated acts.” And, they also stress that while bullying is a type of aggressive behavior, “it should not be equated with aggression or violence; not all aggression or violence involves bullying, and not all bullying involves aggression or violence.”

All three elements can be seen as criteria for identifying a student as a bully, with the third element perhaps the one that clearly differentiates bullying from other aggressive behaviors.

Bullying is defined as *school bullying* not only when it occurs at school but also when the event happens on the way to or from school. As with other forms of violence, conditions at school in the surrounding neighborhood can minimize or worsen bullying.

Cyberbullying is seen as fitting the above definition (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, et al., 2008; Cyberbullying Research Center, 2011), with some research suggesting that it be viewed separately from physical, verbal, and relational forms of bullying (Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2011).

From the perspective of identifying *bullying victims* (as contrasted to those victimized by other aggressive events), the three elements require some modification. In particular:

- the first element encompasses too many forms of externalizing behavior. The key point with reference to a bullying attack is the *intent/motivation to victimize another* (i.e., to produce physical and/or emotional harm).
- the power imbalance element doesn't account for differences in (a) circumstances and situations and (b) personal, social, and cultural values and norms. Also, while the bullying of a student may be precipitated by a more powerful individual (not always a child), others who join in may not be very powerful. Thus, this element needs to be qualified. For example, *Under circumstances and situations where there is an imbalance of power (verbal, physical, social, and/or psychological), bullying involves an individual with more power (sometimes joined by others) victimizing one or more individuals who do not appear to defend themselves from the harm.*
- While bullying often is a repeated pattern involving the same individuals, it is not clear why any attack *intended to victimize* another isn't bullying. Certainly, repeated incidents between the same children over a prolonged period produce many problems that require attention. *However, one such event can produce significant physical and/or emotional harm for the victim and others in the situation.*

For the victim and others in the situation, one event can produce significant physical and/or emotional harm

At any rate, the problem for policy making and practice is that current definitions of bullying remain rather general, and as a result, too many aggressive behaviors are designated as bullying. While it is evident that most aggressive behavior at school can be a significant problem, it is also clear that the majority of aggressive behavior is motivated and dealing with it effectively requires appreciating differences in what motivates the behavior. All this has major implications for research and intervention, as is evident from meta-analyses of efforts to identify predictors of bullying (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010).

What Motivates Aggressive Behavior in General and Bullying Specifically?

To understand aggressive behavior, one must appreciate the roots of misbehavior, especially underlying motivational bases. For many individuals, misbehavior grows out of psychological needs, especially intrinsic motivational considerations (e.g., need to feel competent, self-determining, and connected with significant others). Intrinsic motivational theory encompasses not only notions of power and control, but the desire for popularity, wanting to develop close intimate relationships within a group, desires to create excitement, enhance security, and escape from fear – all of which are emphasized in the bullying literature. Over time, such motivational factors shape attitudes, dispositions, and related patterns of misbehavior (Deci & Moller, 2005).

Bullying can be proactive or reactive (Roland & Idsoe, 2001; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). *As such, it reflects approach or avoidance motivation.*

Noncooperative, disruptive, and aggressive behavior patterns that are *proactive* can be rewarding and satisfying to an individual because the behavior itself is exciting or because the behavior leads to desired personal and/or subgroup outcomes (e.g., peer recognition and enhanced status within a subgroup, feelings of competence or autonomy). Intentional negative behavior stemming from such approach motivation can be viewed as pursuit of deviance. Think about the bullying behavior associated with those designated as “jocks” (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2010a).

Misbehavior also can be *reactive*, stemming from avoidance motivation. This behavior can be viewed as protective reactions. Students with learning problems, for example, can be seen as motivated to avoid and to protest against being forced into situations in which they cannot cope effectively. For such students, many teaching and therapy situations are perceived in this way. Under such circumstances, individuals can be expected to react by trying to protect themselves from the unpleasant thoughts and feelings that the situations stimulate (e.g., feelings of incompetence, loss of autonomy, negative relationships). In effect, the misbehavior reflects efforts to cope and defend against aversive experiences.

Depending on many factors, proactive and reactive misbehavior may be direct or indirect and include aggression toward others, defiance, physical and psychological withdrawal, and diversionary tactics. What causes the behavior to take the form of bullying is unclear. Some suggest it is modeled; others point to peer norms and encouragement; others argue for reciprocal determinism.

Implications of Labeling Students as Bullies and Victims

It is widely acknowledged that those students labeled as bullies constitute quite a heterogeneous group in terms of the reasons they become bullies. Bullies differ in terms of demographics, developmental level, motivation, gender, ethnicity, and more. The heterogeneity is reflected in where and how their bullying behavior is manifested and what is needed to reduce that behavior.

Victims are also a heterogeneous group in terms of their characteristics and how a bullying attack affects them. They may be attacked because of personal characteristics and/or because of a specific subgroup identification. The impact of single or multiple events may be (a) mild to severe, (b) manifested narrowly or broadly, and (c) short- to long-term. Any degree of impact may be experienced as a problem requiring therapeutic attention.

It should be stressed, however, that mild, narrow, and short-lived problems should not be diagnosed as disorders. There is a long-standing pathological bias that permeates efforts to differentiate garden variety behavior, emotional, and learning problems from true pathology. And this continues to work against developing child and youth interventions (especially in schools) to promote healthy social and emotional development, prevent victimization, and intervene to address mild reactions.

In general, as with all labeling of students, classification of students as bullies and their targets as victims has a downside. All labeling is subject to error stemming from poor methodology, bias, and prejudice. Of particular concern is the bias toward labeling problems in terms of personal rather than social causation. This bias is bolstered by factors such as (a) attributional bias – a tendency for observers to perceive others' problems as rooted in stable personal dispositions and (b) economic and political influences – whereby a particular problem such as bullying rises in visibility and is assigned a high priority for policy making only because of the power of special interests.

Designating a student as a bully or a victim can be a life shaping event. Many hear such labels as an indication of internal pathology or at least as an indication that the student has a severe, pervasive, and chronic problem. It is a commonplace to stereotype bullies as having low self-esteem and being poor students and those who are attacked as having victim personalities and as candidates for post traumatic stress syndrome and depression. Even bystanders are seen either as bullying supporters or as potentially traumatized. Such stereotyping contributes to self-fulfilling prophecies and a deemphasis of an individual's positive attributes. And, of course, any environment/contextual factors shaping the behavior are downplayed, and this works against efforts to make changes that enhance a positive school climate.

Classification of students as bullies and their targets as victims has a downside

Clearly, bullies, those who are bullied, or those who witness bullying should not be ignored. But, remember, most students fit into one or more of these groups, and most will grow into reasonably healthy adults. Also, remember that overemphasis on classifying problems in terms of personal pathology skews theory, research, practice, and public policy.

Bullying perpetrators need to be viewed as individuals; so do those who are attacked and the bystanders. And, as with all interventions, a personalized approach to identifying and meeting needs is essential, as is an awareness of strengths, special talents, and what is known about resilience (Ungar, 2011).

Bullying is a Transaction

No single factor provides an adequate understanding of complex behavior such as bullying. Indeed, the causes of all behavior are best explained in reciprocal determinist (transactional) and dimensional terms (Adelman & Taylor, 1988; Bandura, 1978). A transactional perspective ensures consideration of ecological viewpoints (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010; Ungar, 2011), while not losing site of the individual's contribution to a given behavior. Exhibit 1 illustrates the point.

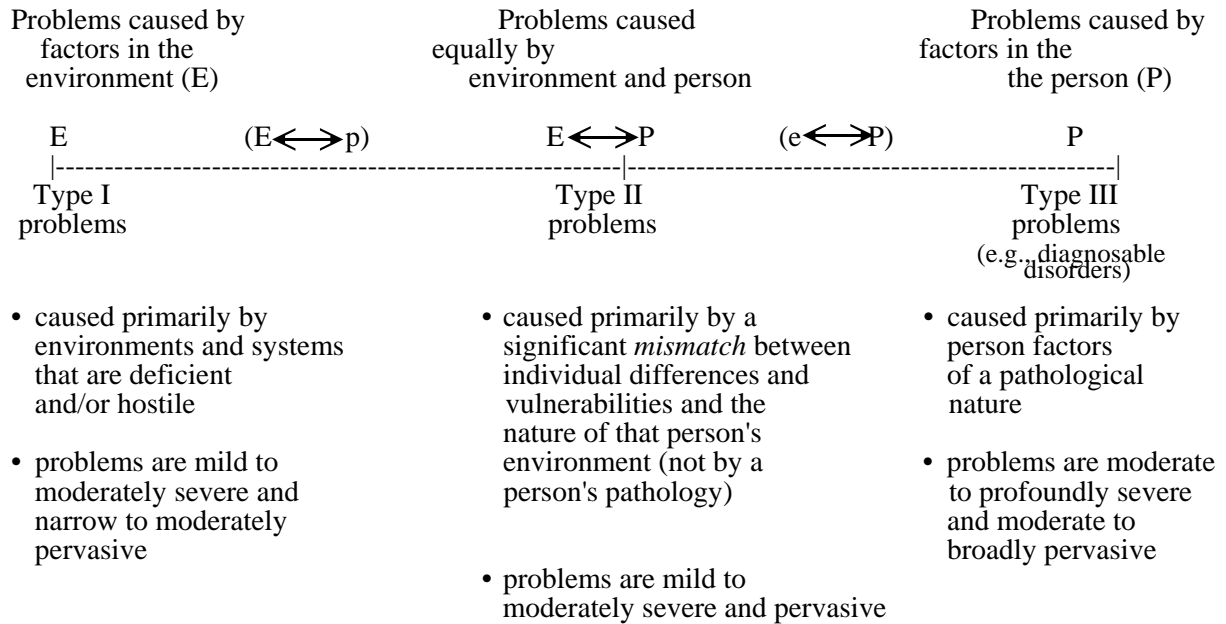
When misbehavior takes the form of bullying, a transactional model considers whether the primary instigating factors leading to the behavior stem from conditions in (a) the environment, (b) personal characteristics, or (c) a specific set of transactions. For example, some neighborhood, home, and school environments (as well as the internet) seem to be breeding grounds for aggressive behavior in general and for developing bullies and even groups of bullies (e.g., participation in gangs, cliques, and other peer groups that endorse aggressive behavior; living in an abusive family; exposure to corporal punishment at school; opportunities and incentives to aggress against others at school). Aside from those who are diagnosed with a psychopathological disorder, examples of personal characteristics associated with the development of bullying behavior include tendencies to seek excitement through aggression, be easily frustrated, have temper outbursts, react against rules and authority, and be antisocial.

Appreciating the transactional facets of bullying simultaneously emphasizes the role of context including bystanders and of both the bully and the victim.

Exhibit 1

A Continuum of Problems Based on a Transactional Understanding of Cause*

PRIMARY SOURCE OF CAUSE



*Using a transactional view, the continuum emphasizes the *primary source* of the problem and, in each case, is concerned with problems that are beyond the early stage of onset.

Adapted from the work of Adelman & Taylor and published in various resources.

Factors Influencing Bullying (from Ragozzino and O'Brien, 2009)

“There are numerous individual, peer-level, school-level, familial, and community factors that influence bullying. At the level of the peer group, social theories describing why bullying increases during late childhood and early adolescence include homophily theory, dominance theory, and attraction theory, and there is some research evidence supporting each.... Homophily theory states that people tend to form friendships and spend time with those who are similar to them in certain key ways. Students tend to hang out with others who bully at the same frequency, and among these bully-prone groups, bullying frequency increases over time. According to dominance theory, students use bullying as a strategy for moving higher in the social pecking order, particularly during the transition from elementary school to the middle grades, when patterns of social hierarchy are being established. Attraction theory posits that as children enter middle school, their attraction to aggressive peers increases.

Family interaction patterns may also influence peer interaction patterns. Children who are both victims and perpetrators of bullying at school are much more likely to also bully and/or be victimized by siblings.... Parents of children who bully others are more likely to lack emotional warmth and be overly permissive.... Parents of victimized children, in contrast, are more likely to be highly restrictive, controlling, and over-involved....”

Interventions: Current State of the Art

As noted, much of the intervention focus at schools is on reducing bullying through social control strategies and bullying prevention programs. Little intervention attention is paid to underlying causes and to differentiating among bullies with respect to motivation. Where prevention programs are in place, the emphasis is mostly on classroom-curricular approaches and some school contextual strategies.

It appears that few schools have well-designed approaches for addressing the impact on those bullied or bystanders. And counseling interventions to turn perpetrators around are mostly discussed in terms of guidelines and principles (e.g., see http://www.stopbullying.gov/community/tip_sheets/mental_health_professionals_bully_others.pdf).

About Interventions to Prevent Bullying

Most interventions to prevent bullying are designed as stand-alone programs and initiatives for all at a given school level (i.e., lower and upper elementary, middle, and high school). They focus extensively on increasing awareness about bullying and decreasing aggressive behaviors. The emphasis in reducing bullying is on (1) person-oriented changes (e.g., affecting cognitive, social, and emotional learning and development and changes in peer dynamics) and (2) changes in school rules about behavior and how the school handles misbehavior.

With respect to the latter, discussions for many years have stressed the need to do more to address the role the school environment plays in exacerbating or protecting against bullying (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999; Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994). The prevailing view currently is that school practices and policies should emphasize strategies designed to

- reduce conditions that contribute to bullying at school
- pursue school-wide approaches that establish a positive school culture and climate
- build on the foundation of school-wide approaches in implementing classroom programs
- personally intervene to turn bullies around and respond to any problems experienced by those who are bullied and those who witness bullying.

Consistent with this, researchers such as Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, and Hymel (2010) have called for social-ecological intervention to address peers and families and other factors that promote and sustain bullying perpetration. They stress that too many bullying prevention approaches do not account for “the changing demographics of communities and fail to incorporate factors such as race, disability, and sexual orientation.” At the same time, they argue that interventions need to pinpoint the “relatively small percentage of students are directly engaged in bullying perpetration (typically 10%–20% of students are the perpetrators of bullying).”

With respect to results, Merrell, Gueldner, Roos, and Isava’s (2008) meta-analysis focused on a broad range of school bullying intervention programs (e.g., whole school anti-bullying programs and interventions implemented with small groups of targeted students, in individual classrooms, or in clusters of selected classrooms). These researchers conclude that “school bullying interventions may produce modest positive outcomes, that they are more likely to influence knowledge, attitudes, and self-perceptions rather than actual bullying behaviors; and that the majority of outcome variables in intervention studies are not meaningfully impacted.” Farrington and Ttofi (2010) report findings of a meta-analysis of 44 evaluations of bullying prevention programs and conclude: “overall, school-based anti-bullying programs are effective in reducing bullying and victimization (being bullied). On average, bullying decreased by 20% – 23% and victimization decreased by 17% – 20%.”

As the above meta-analyses indicate positive findings are modest; some programs were effective, others were not. And those that were effective may or may not fit settings that differ from the ones where evaluations showed positive outcomes. Another concern is that the evaluations generally have not looked for negative outcomes.

**About Interventions
for Perpetrators,
Peers who Support
Bullying, and
Students who are
Negatively Affected**

From an educational and general well-being perspective, it is clear that students who bully and those who are affected by the actions of bullies warrant a personalized intervention focus. First, however, given a reciprocal determinist framework, the causes of bullying and peer encouragement of bullying need to be viewed in context. For us, the first intervention concern always is that of reducing conditions in the environment that contribute to bullying behavior. This includes working collaboratively with students and other school stakeholders to modify external factors triggering and

maintaining bullying behavior (e.g., reducing the chances of a bully acting out). Secondly, the focus is on individual and group developmental and psychological factors contributing to the behavior.

It should be noted, however, that limited attention has been given to directly addressing motivational and developmental concerns related to individuals who bully and those who support bullying. This also is the case with respect to assisting those affected by bullying.

With respect to personalized intervention, researchers regularly stress the importance of addressing the “unique problems of bullies, victims, and bully-victims” (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). In a recent discussion of bullies and those who are bullied, Graham (2009) expands on the matter stating:

“Understanding facts versus myths about bullies and victims is important for intervention. The problems of victims and bullies are not the same. Victims of harassment need interventions that help them develop more positive self-views and that teach them not to blame themselves for their experiences with harassment. Interventions for bullies do not need to focus on self-esteem. Rather, bullies need to learn strategies that help them control their anger and their tendency to blame other people for their problems. And peers need to learn that bullying is a whole school problem for which everyone is responsible. There is no such thing as an innocent bystander.”

Needed: a focus on addressing both external and personal factors

Working with Bullies. Strategies recommended for working directly with bullies essentially are generalized from those used with acting-out students and in responding to relational aggression (Child Trends, 2011; Doll & Swearer, 2006; Zins, Elias, & Maher, 2007). The increasing attention to relational aggression has led to a particular focus on interventions for bullying behavior by girls (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2010b; Leff & Crick, 2010). For example, some success has been reported in the use of brief strategic family therapy to reduce psychological and social problems of bullying girls (Nickel, Luley, Krawczyk, et al., 2006).

It is recognized that, among some peer groups, bullying is seen as normative and thus acceptable behavior (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). This makes it tempting to do group interventions with bullies (and those who encourage bullying). However, the research findings of Dishion and his colleagues provide a cautionary note about moving in this direction (Dishion, Capaldi, & Yoerger, 1999).

Working with Victims and Bystanders. Recently, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services released, *Evidence-Based Practices for Children Exposed to Violence: A Selection from Federal Databases*, which summarizes studies and program evaluations (http://www.safestartcenter.org/pdf/Evidence-Based-Practices-Matrix_2011.pdf). Despite the title, the evidence-based practices cited focus on prevention services and activities.

Personalized interventions specifically designed for victims (including observers) of bullying are relatively rare, usually consisting of short term individual and group counseling designed to help those affected. Examples of group social skills and counseling efforts are provided by DeRosier (2004) and by Hill (2006). These psychoeducational interventions are designed to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to deal more effectively with bullies, including ways to avoid provoking bullies, increase assertiveness, and personally cope with emotional distress. Pöyhönen, Juvonen, and Salmivalli (2010) focus on teaching peers ways to defend victims, and they especially argue for encouraging high-status students to do so. Such strategies are especially critical in situations where the school cannot guarantee freedom from attack.

Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, and Hymel (2010) postulate that “strategies to foster positive bystander responses in bullying situations may be more effective with younger, elementary students than with older, secondary students, given evidence that younger students are significantly more likely to take direct positive action as bystanders (e.g., direct intervention, helping the victim, talking to adults) and that passive (do nothing) and aggressive (get back at the bully) responses increase with age.”

With respect to ensuring a collective response to school bullying and victimization, Juvonen, Graham, and Schuster (2003) state: “it is essential 1) to educate teachers about ways in which schools can alter social norms toward bullying, 2) to assist them to intervene effectively with incidents of bullying, and 3) to work together with clinicians to deal with the symptoms of bullying and victimization.” In their discussion of peer victimization, Card and Hodges (2008) also note the importance of working with teachers and other staff so that they learn to “recognize instances of victimization and collaboratively develop plans to intervene.”

Embedding Bullying Interventions into Other School Initiatives: Moving toward Comprehensive Approaches

As with other complex behavior, emotional, and learning problems, bullying research indicates that narrowly conceived, stand-alone interventions are insufficient (Ttofi & Farrington, 2009; Vreeman & Corroll, 2007). Researchers such as Olweus, Limber, Espelage, and Swearer have long emphasized bullying reduction requires a multifaceted and integrated approach. Included in such an approach would be early age intervention, strong leadership and commitment, capacity building (with a strong focus on personnel development and enhancing cultural sensitivity), and parent, community, and public health involvement (CDC, 2011; Children’s Safety Network, 2011).

As interventions to reduce bullying become increasingly multifaceted, they overlap school efforts to address all forms of aggressive and acting-out behavior. And, it is not surprising that reviews of strategies and approaches for preventing or reducing these forms of externalizing behavior in children and adolescents report similar intervention trends and limited findings.

Thus, it is noteworthy that a current trend is to move toward more comprehensive approaches by embedding bullying interventions into other school initiatives designed to address barriers to learning and teaching and promote social and emotional learning.

In pursuing their mission, schools have consistently had to address a broad range of behavior, learning, and emotional problems. This has led to development of a variety of student and learning support programs and services. Some of these are directly concerned with bullying. Others, such as initiatives focusing on schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), social and emotional learning, mental health in schools, and school climate, are embedding bullying concerns into their frameworks.

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

The Illinois PBIS Network (2010) provides an examples of the move to embed bullying into PBIS. The Network website states: “Preventing and decreasing such specific and insidious behavior as bullying requires a systemic approach involving all staff, all students, as well as family/community. A school-wide system of PBIS, with its whole school focus on social climate and behavior change, offers a framework for effectively installing a bully prevention process. Additionally, PBIS has a strong focus on partnering with families and community, a necessary component of effective bully prevention efforts.”

Ross, Horner, and Stiller (2008) identify the following six key features of PBIS as ideal components of effective bully prevention:

- (1) The use of empirically-tested instructional principles to teach expected behavior outside the classroom to all students.
- (2) The monitoring and acknowledgment of students for engaging in appropriate behavior outside the classroom.
- (3) Specific instruction and pre-correction to prevent bullying behavior from being rewarded by victims or bystanders.
- (4) The correction of problem behaviors using a consistently administered continuum of consequences.
- (5) The collection and use of information about student behavior to evaluate and guide decision-making.
- (6) The establishment of a team that develops, implements, and manages the BP-PBIS effort.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Another example of efforts to embed bullying is seen in the current push by advocates for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Ragozzino and O'Brien (2009) state: "While bullying is a pervasive problem in many schools, schools can take specific steps to improve the school climate and encourage positive interactions designed to reduce or prevent bullying. Schools using a social and emotional learning (SEL) framework can foster an overall climate of inclusion, warmth, and respect, and promote the development of core social and emotional skills among both students and staff. Because bullying prevention is entirely congruent with SEL, it can be embedded in a school's SEL framework."

The SEL framework is described as having the following "five core categories of social and emotional skills:

- Self-awareness—accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths/abilities, and maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence
- Self-management—regulating one's emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; setting personal and academic goals and then monitoring one's progress toward achieving them; and expressing emotions constructively
- Social awareness—taking the perspective of and empathizing with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; identifying and following societal standards of conduct; and recognizing and using family, school, and community resources

- Relationship skills—establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; and seeking help when needed
- Responsible decision-making—making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate standards of conduct, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; and contributing to the well-being of one’s school and community.”

These skills are described as enabling children to “calm themselves when angry, initiate friendships, resolve relationship conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices. To develop these capacities, children need to experience safe, nurturing, and well-managed environments where they feel valued and respected; to have meaningful interactions with others who are socially and emotionally competent; and to receive positive and specific guidance” (Ragozzino and O’Brien, 2009).

**Comprehensive System
to Address Barriers to
Learning and Teaching**

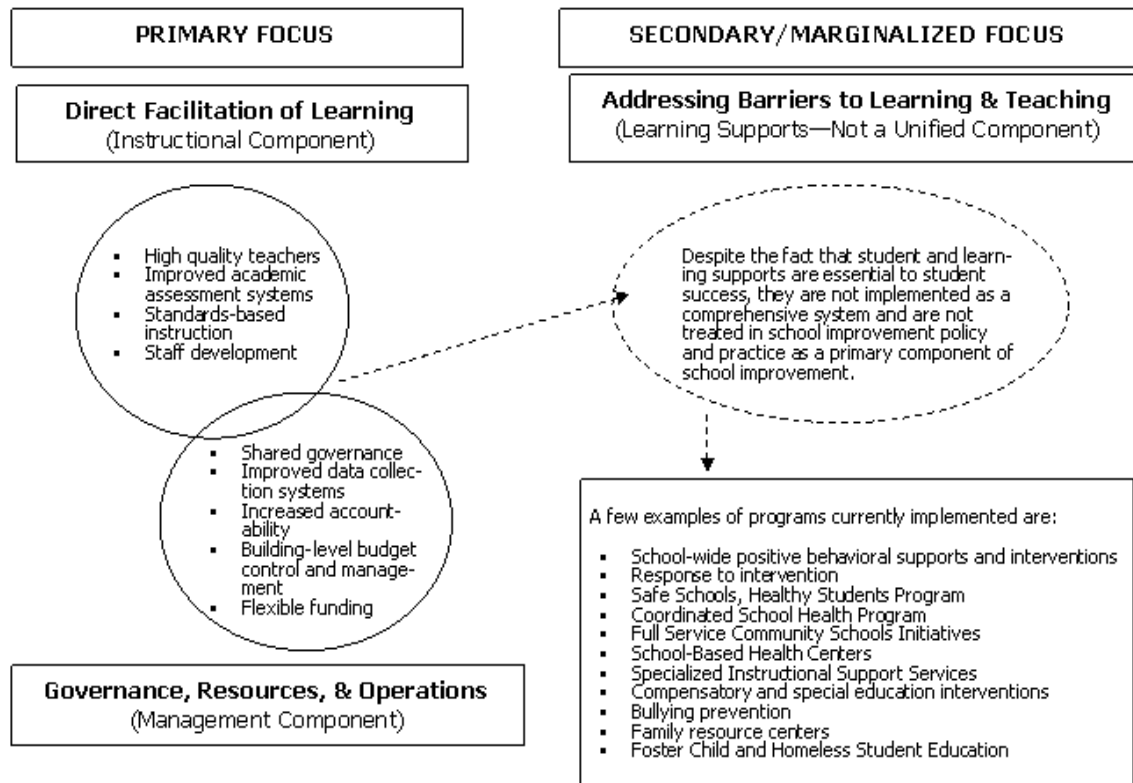
Our Center goes a step beyond the PBIS and SEL efforts by advocating for embedding all efforts to provide student and learning supports into a system to address barriers to teaching and learning. Rather than establishing so many separate initiatives and enacting so many piecemeal and fragmented policies for specific subgroups of students and problems, we highlight the commonalities in the underlying dynamics causing behavior, emotional, and learning problems. Our intent is to fully embed the concerns about behavior, learning, and emotional problems into a system of student and learning supports designed for all students. And we see the growing emphasis on school bullying as an opportunity to accelerate development of such a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system.

As Exhibit 2 graphically illustrates, the aim is to move from a two- to a three- component framework (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011a). The third component is focused on addressing barriers to learning and teaching (such as behavior problems) and re-engaging disconnected students. This component is intended to be fully integrated with efforts to improve instruction and management/governance and pursued as a primary and essential component of school improvement policy and practice.

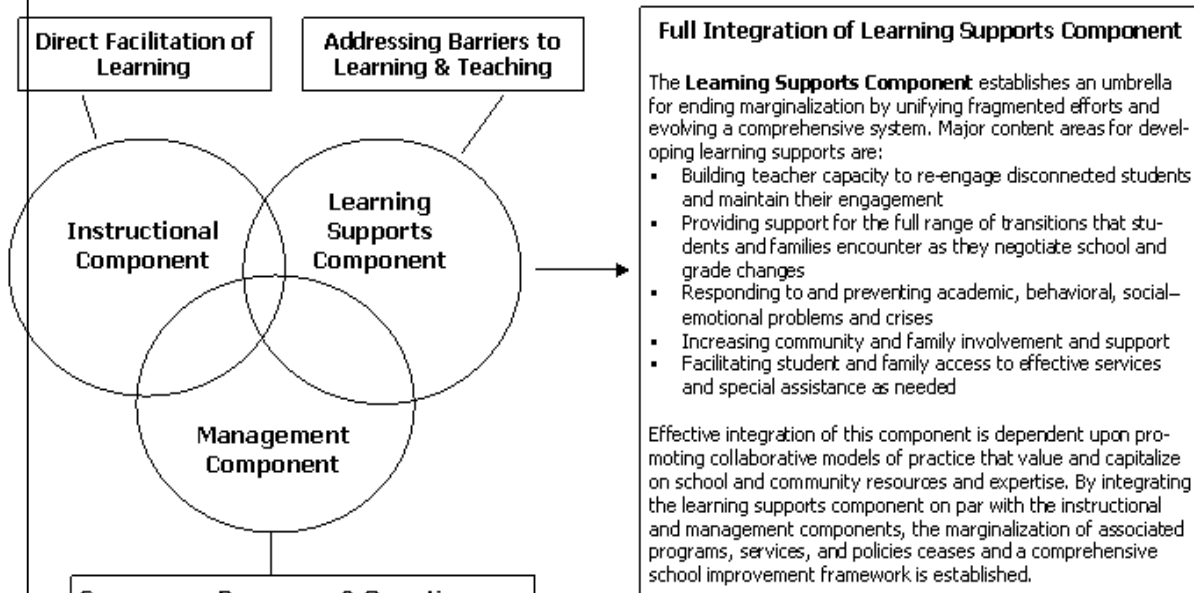
Exhibit 2

Moving From a Two- to a Three-Component Framework for Improving Schools-

A. Current School Improvement Framework



B. Needed: Policies to Establish an Umbrella for School Improvement Planning Related to Addressing Barriers to Learning and Promoting Healthy Development



The third component is designed to provide essential supports and assistance for those who require something more to address barriers and engage or re-engage them in schooling and *enable* their classroom learning (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b). Such a system is key to promoting the well-being and intrinsic motivation for school success of all students, their families, and the school staff and is a key element in facilitating emergence of a positive school climate.

A three component approach to school improvement is essential to a school's ability to accomplish its instructional mission

The third component consists of a continuum of interventions including promoting development and preventing problems, early-after onset intervention, and involvement in treatment for severe and chronic problems. To organize the content at each level, the component also has been organized around six content arenas that emphasize enhancing supports within the classroom and extending beyond the classroom to include school and community resources. Specifically, the focus is on:

- enhancing the ability of the classroom teacher and other to facilitate learning through prevention and intervention as early after problem onset as feasible
- increasing home involvement and engagement in schools and schooling
- providing support for the many transitions experienced by students and their families
- expanding community involvement and engagement through volunteers, businesses, agencies, faith-based organizations, etc.
- responding to and preventing crises, violence, bullying, substance abuse, etc.
- providing specialized student and family assistance when necessary.

The above elements are essential to a school's ability to accomplish its instructional mission; they do not represent an agenda separate from that mission. Moreover, the emphasis on classroom, school, home, and neighborhood helps create a school-wide culture of caring and nurturing. In turn, this helps students, families, staff, and the community at large feel a school is a welcoming, supportive place that accommodates diversity, prevents problems, and enhances youngsters' strengths and is committed to assuring equal opportunity for all students to succeed at school.

Implications for Policy Makers

- (1) Move from a two- to a three- component framework for school improvement, with the third component established as a primary and essential component of school improvement policy and practice and fully integrated with efforts to improve instruction and management/governance.
- (2) Expand the accountability framework for schools to encompass direct indicators of work carried out related to the third component
- (3) Write policy guidelines that specify:
 - (a) The aim over a period of several years is to establish a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system that encompasses all efforts to directly address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.
 - (b) Development begins with an analysis of all current resources used by schools for student and learning supports with a view to realigning and redeploying resources to reduce redundancy and identify high priority system gaps.
 - (c) Development and maintenance require identifying dedicated leadership and staff positions for the component and a connected operational infrastructure at all levels.
 - (d) Capacity building related to the third component includes:
 - redefining job descriptions of student and learning support personnel
 - connecting relevant resources across families of schools
 - enhancing collaboration with community resources in order to weave together overlapping functions and related resources into a comprehensive system
 - pursuing relevant professional and other stakeholder development.

While the proposed policy shift can be done at district and state levels under current policy, federal accountability demands result in the ongoing marginalization of student and learning supports. Therefore, the emphasis on a third component of school improvement efforts definitely should be a major focus in the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. With this in mind, in previous reports we have suggested specific changes in wording related to federal education law (e.g., see Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2007).

Concluding Comments

The time has come to move away from stand-alone programs for addressing problems such as bullying and other specific types of problems manifested by students. Such programs add to the marginalized, fragmented, and piecemeal approach to student and learning supports that has dominated schools for far too long.

Rather than pursuing one more discrete program focused on a specific concern, it is essential to use each concern that rises to a high policy level as an opportunity to catalyze and leverage systemic change. The aim should be to take another step toward transforming how schools go about ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. To this end, it is time to develop a comprehensive system of interventions for addressing the full range of barriers to learning and teaching and for re-engaging disconnected students. Such a system is needed to coalesce an intervention continuum ranging from programs for primary prevention (including the promotion of mental health) and early-age intervention -- through those for addressing problems soon after onset – on to treatments for severe and chronic problems.

Addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students is a school improvement imperative. Developing and implementing a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of student and learning supports is the next evolutionary stage in meeting this imperative. It is the missing component in efforts to close the achievement gap, enhance school safety, reduce dropout rates, shut down the pipeline from schools to prisons, and promote well-being and social justice.



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