

Safe Schools Summit

Ohio's First Lady
Frances Strickland, Chair



Policy Analysis on School Safety

Prepared for the Ohio Department of Education by the Ohio Collaborative, College of Education and Human Ecology, The Ohio State University

Overview:

The physical and psychological aspects of school safety have far-reaching implications, not only for education, but also for the future health and success of our youth, communities, cities and state. There is a wealth of research and many models pertaining to achieving and maintaining a safe and supportive school environment. Some models are very broad (state, county, or districtwide) and others are narrower, focusing on individual schools, families or students. Certain factors and practices are necessary, however, for the sustainability and success of chosen models:

- Collaboration among public administration and agencies; school administration and staff; and communities, families and students builds a broad base of commitment and support for change, whether at the state, district or individual school level.
- Adequate training, assistance and funding at the policy level encourages or mandates participation in selected programs or models.
- Best practices are integrated into the administrative and curricular infrastructure of every school in a district.

What is current Ohio Policy?

According to the National Association of State Boards of Education, many states have adopted policies and statutes to support the guidelines of their state boards and departments of education. Several states list policies and statutes that require districts to provide safe and orderly schools and healthy school climates, collaborate with law enforcement officials, and address bullying, harassment, gang involvement and fighting (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2007). Ohio currently uses statutes for:

- Mandating zero tolerance regarding violent, disruptive or inappropriate behavior;
- Requiring school safety planning regarding crisis-oriented safety issues, e.g. a school safety plan for each building;
- Requiring fire drill and lockdown procedures and practice;
- Permitting school discipline codes to address student misconduct that occurs off school grounds; and
- Requiring that schools establish an anti-harassment and bullying policy.

Beyond these statutes, Ohio primarily uses guidelines, which when used alone, may not be as motivating for local boards and districts because they lack accountability measures. The State Board of Education currently provides guidelines for:

- School substance abuse and violence prevention;
- Anti-harassment and bullying; and
- School climate.

What do we know about school climate?

Research has identified multiple factors within the area of school climate that are positively linked to students' academic achievement and social well-being. Four significant domains are:

- A sense of physical safety;
- High expectations for both academic learning and behavior;
- A feeling of connectedness to both school and the community at large; and
- High levels of support from administration for school staff and students for both academic achievement and social-skill building (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005).

Current best practices include monitoring student perceptions of the above domains and working to improve areas identified as not meeting their needs (Greene & Ross, 2005).

There are a number of factors that impact school climate. The issues highlighted in the rest of this section reflect, but do not address, all of those factors.

Multiple studies have found that exposure to violence can increase the likelihood that a child will behave aggressively and/or become the victim of violence or aggression (Rosenberg, 1999). For those children whose exposure to violence occurs outside of school, the climate inside their school may be even more important. A school climate that is disordered reduces teaching time, therefore reducing academic achievement (Crosse et al., 2002). This type of environment often creates distrust in both staff and students, so social development is misdirected, and social skills are not modeled or learned. It also can place children in a survival mode that increases their acting-out behaviors. Some studies indicate that exposure to violence results in distractibility, irritability, anxiety, anger and even attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in cases of chronic exposure (Flannery, 1997).

Even those schools that are relatively safe can have individual students or groups of students who feel unsafe due to aggression and bullying. In addition, victims of chronic bullying are responsible for many school shootings in the United States (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). Failure to address bullying is a disservice to the bully, their victims and bystanders. According to one study, boys identified as bullies in grades six through nine had a 60 percent likelihood of a criminal conviction by age 24. Both bullies and victims have a higher rate of suicide than youth not involved in bullying (Olweus, 1992).

Developing policies and procedures that do not permit the aggressive behavior of bullying and harassment and that encourage and reinforce the anonymous reporting of these incidents (e.g. school Web sites, surveys) can be helpful. Some studies have indicated that reporting by teachers and peers has been more accurate and a better predictor of future discipline referrals than self

reporting (Furlong, Morrison, & Greif, 2003). Students who bully are not as likely to report for fear of reprimand, and victims may fear negative repercussions and lack of intervention.

What do we know about improving school environments?

State and federal agencies have made substantial investments in studying and evaluating initiatives to improve school climate. The complexity of school environments and the communities in which they operate, as well as the frequent use of inferior research designs, have limited the return on those investments by schools (Lefkowitz & Woempner, 2006). However, important factors in improving school climate have emerged as the body of research literature has grown.

Skills training for staff and students and the use of common language to define and identify inappropriate acts are core aspects of school climate improvement. There should be a limited number of clear, concise rules developed with input from students. When needed, consequences for rule violation should be consistent, equitable, culturally sensitive and predictable (Metzler, Biglan, Rusby, & Sprague, 2001).

Families and community organizations should be involved in prevention and intervention as needed, and school administrators should avoid suspension and expulsion. If these consequences are unavoidable, there should be a referral to an alternative program with a plan for re-entry back into the home school. Studies show that students who have been suspended are often performing poorly in academics. This may be a causal factor in their misbehavior. Following suspensions, they fall further behind and have a significantly lower graduation rate. However, considerable evidence exists demonstrating that clustering high-risk youth in targeted preventive interventions or treatments has a high potential for unintended harmful effects. Longitudinal studies indicate that even interventions that appear to have positive or mixed effects in the short term, typically show only negative effects when followed up long term (Dishion & McCord, 1999). Additionally, the potential for unintended harmful effects, such as deviancy training that is almost certain with the clustering of high-risk youth in middle school and early high school groups, increases with age.

We also know that safe and supportive school environments are connected with their respective communities and the existing cultures and practices of those communities (Gottfredson et al., 2005). Studies have shown that use of drugs and alcohol, sexual activity and criminal activity among youth often occurs between 3 and 6 p.m. This is the time of the day when students are home, but parents are still at work. Many studies show that well-staffed after-school and summer programs for students are beneficial both for the community at large and for the students and their schools. It is important that these programs are designed so that families find them appealing; students become engaged in learning so they will improve their social skills and academic performance; and that educators evaluate program outcomes. (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007).

In short, research has shown that creating and maintaining climates in our schools that teach and foster positive relationships, self-discipline, academic engagement, as well as reinforcing respectful behavior can enhance every child's academic and social experience (Bucher &

Manning, 2005). Research also has begun to identify models that have proven successful in these areas.

What models are available for improving school environments?

This document does not go into detail regarding specific models, as there are many identified in the research literature and the choice of a particular model depends on the needs, resources and culture of a community and school. However, this document will report the common components of successful models and implementation. Some of these components include, but are not limited to, teaching, modeling and enhancing:

- social-emotional skills;
- conflict resolution;
- communication skills;
- clear expectations for staff and students;
- family and community involvement;
- academic achievement;
- high support from administration;
- training for educators and families;
- diligent evaluation (Mihalic, Fagan, Irwin, Ballard, & Elliott, 2004).

The earlier children are introduced to social-emotional skills, conflict resolution and communication skills by the adults in their learning environments, the more successful they are likely to be both socially and academically. Research indicates that children who have not experienced some form of early childhood education that introduces them to these concepts either at home or in a program may be up to two years behind in school readiness when entering kindergarten and may be at risk of not catching up with their peers (Hair, Halle, Terry-Humen, Lavelle, & Calkins, 2006; Powell, Dunlap, & Fox, 2006; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

When selecting school or district-specific models designed to improve school climate and safety, the individual needs and characteristics of the school and community should be considered (Erickson, Mattaini, & McGuire, 2004). As there has been some concern regarding accurate self-reporting from school districts (i.e., when schools are sanctioned based on rates of severe disciplinary incidences, there is motivation for schools to “game” the system by under reporting), independent surveys such as the Schools and Staffing Surveys, as well as student surveys could be used to help identify pertinent issues (U. S. Department of Education, 1996). It is also important to address existing school organizational environments. It is unlikely that the successful implementation of any model can occur in an environment where students, staff and administrators are not able to work or communicate well together. Organizational and administrative issues must be addressed (Erickson et al., 2004).

Assuring the commitment to implementing a model will increase program effectiveness. This requires a dedication of time, funds and support for intensive training of teachers and administrators (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Graczyk, & Zins, 2005). By providing teachers time for ample training, guidelines for mandatory learning requirements, and opportunities to pursue areas of personal interest, the commitment of teachers and administrators to implement a specific model will be greater than if they feel that it is simply another task added to an already busy schedule (Porter, Garet, Desimone, Yoon, & Birman, 2000). Assuring that the model selected

has the support of school and district administration, as well as teachers, is imperative. This will greatly increase the likelihood that adequate training and resources will be provided. The model or models chosen must be proven effective in similar environments, relatively easily implemented in the selected environment, be sustainable and cost effective (Rosenberg, 1999). Committing to the use of a specific model for a sufficient period of time allows diligent, ongoing evaluation to determine efficacy.

There are other successful models of school improvement that require a much more involved and political process. These models are likely to be considered longer term solutions. They typically involve a regional approach and often meet with suburban resistance. Some models, such as The Choice Is Yours program in Minnesota, allows students of color living in the Minneapolis school district and attending high poverty schools to enroll in participating suburban schools. The results thus far have been very positive in rapidly raising test scores and general academic achievement, and have not had a detrimental effect on the suburbs (Palmer, 2003). Other even broader models suggest a regionalized district that shares the education of the highest poverty children with the city and allows for a more equitable distribution of resources. Providing positive and effective learning environments and opportunities for all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, creates a community mindset that all children are able to learn. This can increase academic engagement, feelings of connectedness, and family and community involvement, all of which contribute to a safer and healthier school climate (Orfield & Lee, 2005).

What are best practices in state policy?

The state of Illinois provides an example of policy in the area of social and emotional development. Required educational policy is incorporated into the Children's Mental Health Act (Public Act 93-0495, ICMHA). Illinois provides model policies to its districts, along with instruction and support services for social and emotional development. Districts in Illinois must submit plans for social emotional learning to the State Board of Education (Taylor et al., 2005). Some states, including Colorado, offer specific grants to improve climate and achievement, especially in highly impoverished districts. Colorado is improving state funding to keep pace with inflation (Amendment 23, House Bill 1232), and increasing the budget by an additional 1 percent per year to assist in recouping losses from past under-funding. The Boulder Valley school district has successfully met goals to reduce the achievement gap between students of color and white students by establishing and implementing policy and developing a long-term, collaborative plan within its community. These achievements correlate directly with improved school climate and safety (Garcia, 2005).

What are the implications for Ohio?

Ohio has multiple urban, suburban and rural districts. This can make model selection, funding initiatives and policy development more complex. Climate issues that affect predominately white suburban schools can be very different from those that affect predominately African-American urban schools. In addition, several of Ohio's urban areas are economically impoverished.

It is necessary to understand the implications of failing to improve the current situation of children of color living in poverty (LaFree & Arum, 2006). African-American children are concentrated in the neighborhoods with the highest poverty rates. Many of these schools have a

disproportionate number of young, inexperienced teachers coming from vastly different backgrounds than those of their students. These teachers have limited experience in cultural differences and behavioral issues. Without intense training, either from their school district employers or college programs, they will not thrive in these positions. Instead, these teachers will move on to other schools and districts. This dooms the cycle to repeat. Minority children represent the fastest growing segment of the grades kindergarten through grade 12 population in the United States. The benefit of improving their future has positive implications for the entire region (Acevedo-Garcia, McArdle, Osypuk, Lefkowitz, & Krimgold, 2007).

Recommendations:

- **Zero Tolerance** – Ohio has adopted legislation regarding zero tolerance; however, current research does not support the interpretation and use of this type of policy. It was originally implemented for serious crimes, but has expanded the authority of superintendents to impose expulsion for infractions such as verbal threats and disruption. Clarifying and limiting interpretation of this legislation at a state and local level would provide more equitable and predictable consequences for behavior infractions (Skiba, 2004).
- **Student Surveys** – Implement regular student surveys regarding the four domains referenced on page two to provide an accurate baseline and improvement data for current school climate and post-model implementation.
- **Bullying and Harassment** – The State Board of Education currently directs the Ohio Department of Education to provide districts with models and means of collecting data. Mandates or requirements would increase the compliance by districts. The routine collection and reporting of data (such as student and teacher surveys) will ensure measurement of the current status and show predetermined expectations for improvement.
- **School Climate** – Ohio provides guidelines and benchmarks for school climate. Although many of the concepts are positive, there are ambiguities in the areas of authority, implementation, enforcement, reporting and monitoring. Improving clarity, expectations and enforcement could enhance the performance and commitment of administration, “stakeholders,” communities and staff.
- **Ohio Senate Bill 1** – In 1999, this law required every school district to have a crisis plan. However, there is no accountability for the development of a quality plan or practice. Legislation could be strengthened to delineate components of effective crisis planning and preparedness, including the development of a plan that identifies the unique vulnerabilities for every school building in the district and the requirement to annually practice building plans.

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