Bullying Prevention in Urban Schools
Strategies for Success

Urban schools are often impacted by a range of complex social issues, which can complicate school improvement efforts. This guide was designed to address factors known to impact the success of bullying prevention efforts in urban schools by drawing from research on bullying prevention and the experiences of professionals who have played a role in supporting bullying prevention efforts in urban settings.

Bullying is prevalent among youth in all communities; however, urban school administrators report higher rates of bullying-related discipline problems, (see Table A).[1] Issues such as these can contribute to a negative school climate and interfere with student learning.[2] This is why it is critical that all schools adopt a comprehensive approach to dealing with school climate and bullying, which includes strategies aimed at reducing discipline problems and peer aggression, while improving relationships among students and between students and teachers.[3, 4, 5]

Table A: Discipline Issues Effecting School Climate and Bullying Prevention

Locale	Rate of bullying as a discipline problem (per 1,000)
City	20.5
Suburban	12.7
Rural	12.0

Strategies known to support bullying prevention and school climate efforts in urban communities can be strengthened through efforts that:

- **Improve the capacity of schools to attend to diversity-related issues.**
- **Mitigate the effects of student and staff mobility.**
- **Address issues that impact bystander behaviors.**
- **Engage families and community-based organizations in bullying prevention efforts.**

Comprehensive strategies that align policies, procedures and practices across the school setting are most effective in improving school climate. In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education released nine evidence-based practices for addressing bullying in schools.[6]

- Use a comprehensive multi-tiered behavioral framework.
- Teach students and staff what bullying is and how they should respond to it.
- Provide active adult supervision, particularly in areas where bullying is known to occur.
- Train and provide ongoing support for staff and students.
- Develop and implement clear policies to address bullying.
- Monitor and track bullying behaviors.
- Notify parents when bullying occurs.
- Address ongoing concerns.
- Sustain bullying prevention efforts over time.

All nine recommended practices should be implemented on an ongoing basis and integrated with other school climate improvement efforts. Yet comprehensive strategies, such as these, can be difficult to implement with consistency. Research in Philadelphia, for example, found that less than 50% of urban schools that attempted to implement an evidence-based bullying prevention program were successful in implementing the program as it was designed.[7, 8] Schools that did not implement the program as designed did not see improvements in bullying issues.

Approach 1: Address Diversity Issues as Part of School Climate and Bullying Prevention Efforts

Diversity is an asset. Yet, issues associated with religious, racial, language and cultural diversity can present challenges to schools. It is recommended urban schools adopt a proactive stance in dealing with the issue in diverse settings in order to ensure that all students feel safe at school and students are not bullied or harassed because of perceived differences.

- **Examine discipline, bullying and harassment data.** Attend to patterns that may be occurring among subgroups of students.

- **Provide professional development.**

- **Ensure all staff is sensitized** to challenges of diversity and they are able to facilitate effective conversations about diversity with youth.

- **Check in with students.** Ensure all religious, racial, language and cultural groups feel respected and valued by adults and peers in the school.

- **Talk about diversity.** Integrate discussion about cultural norms and practices into daily lesson plans and impromptu discussions of current events.

- **Select representative materials.** Posters, books and resources should represent the diversity present in the school (languages, images, rituals, appearances, etc.).

- **Translate or interpret bullying terms.** The terms "bully," "bullying" or "bystander" may not be understood by all cultural or language groups in the school. Spend time working with diverse groups to convey the meaning of the term and ways that make sense to them.

Approach 2: Plan for Student and Staff Mobility

Frequent student and staff turnover is a reality in many schools. As a result, schools may face challenges in ensuring all educators and students have a common understanding of what bullying is and how they should respond. In anticipation of these challenges, districts are encouraged to:

- **Adhere to district-wide rules and procedures.** Ensure a consistent set of rules and expectations, reflective of the district's bullying prevention policy, are used in every building within the district.

- **Provide information in writing.** Bullying policies and procedures should be communicated to students and staff in writing each year and should be included in orientation packets and presentations for new teachers and students.

- **Train staff and students on how to respond to suspected bullying.** Review expectations and include bullying prevention in new staff orientation training.

- **Assist new teachers with class management.** Assign "mentor teachers" to support teachers in class management, bullying prevention and discipline.

- **Help new students connect with supportive peers.** Assist new students in establishing social connections by developing a "buddy" or "ambassador" program.

- **Keep talking about bullying behaviors and school climate.** Provide time at monthly staff meetings for teachers and administrators to discuss school climate improvement efforts, including bullying prevention.

- **Work collaboratively** with teacher unions to ensure they are supporting bullying prevention and intervention activities.

- **Schedule regular behavioral health and school climate assessments.** An assessor can help make recommendations tailored to your school on improving the culture and possible retention of staff.

Approach 3: Understand and Address Issues That Impact Bystander Behaviors

If school discipline problems are pervasive or violence is common in the community, students may be reluctant to intervene in or report bullying behaviors for fear of retaliation. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 86% of respondents indicated that their communities experienced some form of silence code, "with 47% identifying the stop snitching phenomenon, specifically" (p. 12).[9] In areas where gang or street violence is prevalent, the fear of retaliation from criminals on individuals who report crime can translate into fear of retribution from students reported for bullying.

To address students' reluctance to report, urban schools are encouraged to:

- **Implement positive approaches to discipline and supervision** which recognize students for positive behaviors and minimize opportunities for disruption or aggression (e.g., well-defined procedures, organized play during recess, etc.).

- **Refrain from using terms like "snitch" and "tattletale"** when students report concerns. These phrases reinforce the idea that students should not discuss their concerns with adults at school or other helpers.

- **Employ safe ways for students to report bullying.** Adopt procedures to protect those who report incidents from retaliation (e.g. tip lines, anonymous reporting and safety planning for students who provide information).

- **Cultivate positive relationships with law enforcement** (e.g., local or state police, school resource officers and school police officers) and school security officers to encourage a proactive partnership that supports school safety and youth violence prevention efforts while creating a positive, nurturing school climate.

- **Educate families and students** about how to prevent, recognize and respond to bullying behaviors.

Engaging Urban Parents in Bullying Prevention

Parental communication and outreach is critical to successful bullying prevention and intervention. Urban administrators and teachers may or may not live in the neighborhoods where they work or may not reflect the cultural diversity present in their school. Adults at schools should come to an understanding that:

- Cultural norms and beliefs may differ from their own.

- Behavioral expectations in school may differ from those in an individual home or neighborhood.

- Value is found in understanding these differences and bridging them as much as possible during practice.

Approach 4: Engage Families and Community Organizations in Bullying Prevention Efforts

Many urban schools are neighborhood schools, closely surrounded by the homes and community organizations that serve their students and families. Some urban schools have deep, well-established relationships with these organizations and may already partner with them on multiple projects and initiatives. Urban schools should also include these partners in bullying prevention and positive school climate activities, which will provide consistency for students both in and out of school. By sharing rules and behavioral expectations, schools and their community partners provide support and reinforcement to their students.

Schools may use the following strategies to promote optimal family, school and community engagement in bullying prevention efforts:

- **Include parents and community representatives** on leadership teams that address school climate and bullying.

- **Engage community partners in family outreach, education and support efforts.** Offer bullying prevention and intervention training to families and community partners. Partner with community-based organizations to align their bullying prevention messages and supportive activities with those of the school.

- **Introduce and reinforce bullying prevention efforts regularly**, such as during school open houses and parent–teacher conferences. Consider offering incentives to increase parental attendance at these events.

- **Recognize that students may be exposed to violence outside of school.** Work with families to understand the strategies they use to keep students safe outside of school. Reinforce school expectations regarding students' responses to violence in school.

- **Keep lines of communication open** to address issues as they arise.

- **Link bullying prevention principles to existing community safety efforts**, such as Safe Corridors, Neighborhood Watch and afterschool programs.

Recognizing High Stressors in Urban Settings

Urban educators must prioritize self-care to ensure their ability to deal with various job related stressors, including:

- Larger class size.
- Higher staff and administration turnover.
- Limited funding and resources.
- Higher rate of staff assaults.
- Adult and workplace bullying.

Conclusion

The strategies described in this report have been used by urban schools to support their ongoing bullying prevention efforts.

Rather than approach these strategies as additional activities, successful schools integrate bullying prevention strategies into these approaches.

While not addressed as a specific approach within this guide, individual factors can play a role in bullying issues.[10] For example, some students' social, emotional and behavioral characteristics can place them at risk for involvement in bullying and other risky activities. To prevent problem behavior and ensure students have the skills to deal with challenging social situations, urban educators should dedicate some class time to teaching important social and emotional skills.

In addition, schools should link bullying prevention efforts with existing referral systems and supports, such as the Student Assistance Program (SAP) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Given the prevalence of violence in some urban communities, trauma-informed practices and interventions may also be relevant to bullying prevention and intervention.

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Note: The information in this publication was updated in 2024 by Center for Safe Schools, to reflect current best practices and research. This publication was originally created in partnership with Highmark Foundation, in 2017, as a companion piece to the Pennsylvania Bullying Prevention Toolkit. All current information and bullying prevention toolkit resources are now on CenterForSafeSchools.org.

Visit CenterForSafeSchools.org for bullying prevention resources and services.