



Background

Every state in the U.S. has some form of a bully prevention statute. These statutes inform school districts and principals about the degree to which they must adopt policies and practices in addressing bullying. Yet, research is still determining how these policies and practices may be playing out at school. This qualitative study examines principals' use and practices of investigating incidents of bullying that are informed by their state's bully prevention statute that was adopted by their school district.

Literature Review

- A clear definition of bullying is fundamental to successful legislation and policy implementation. Nearly 50% of state statutes fail to differentiate harassment and bullying, and frequently broaden the definition of bullying by using peer conflict, threats, and aggression synonymously... Overall, efforts to address school bullying can be impacted by a school's level of resources and by a principal's prioritization and perception, including federal policy mandates... The efficacy of anti-bullying programs is promoted through explicit school policies on bullying, teacher trainings, and consistent, school-wide support and intervention strategies

MATERIALS and METHODS

- A non probability sample of 9 urban school principals (7 White; 2 Bi-racial) all K-8th grade levels, within Indiana. Length of time the participants had been principals: Two to 20 years with a mean of 7.5 years. Two focus groups were facilitated; Principals were interviewed once in their focus group for 1.5 hours. Thematic analysis focused on the identification of patterns and themes embedded within data

Seven interview questions were asked:

- 1) What has been your experience with bullying at your school?
2) What intervention strategies do you use to address substantiated reports of bullying?
3) Who do you rely on to assist you in addressing bullying behavior?
4) How do you see outside programs impacting school bullying?
5) How does your own philosophy compare to your school policy on responding to school bullying?
6) Parents, can you describe your encounters with parents as they report their child is being bullied?
7) If you had the power to change one thing about your role in addressing bullying, what would you change?

Procedures in Place to Investigate

Principal 1 "...when someone reports bullying...there is a form that we do that says we investigated it, you only have so many hours to investigate it, and then what was the finding, okay."

Principal 2: "The system I'm talking about with the tracking, and the step one, step two, that's just what we do."

Determining if Bullying... or Something Else

Principal 1: "So if it wasn't that [bullying], if it was a conflict or something else... We want to make sure that child still knows we are concerned that they were upset by the behavior... we use peer mediation, like this why this person thought you were doing this, then you start working with the two of them. But if it was substantiated [bullying] we bring the parent of the bully in for a conference, the first time. Ehm, if it happens again then there is a suspension involved. Because they need to know right away this is not going to be tolerated."

State Law has Meat and Teeth

Principal 3: "What I like about it is it puts some meat and some teeth to it. Sometimes when the legislature passes more laws about things we are supposed to do in school it's like, 'oh my gosh this is one more thing that we are trying to add to.' We've got to train everybody by such and such a day we have to do this many times a year and so forth. But for this one, you know, having had your coaches and volunteers go through training, you know, doing things for your parents it just puts some teeth to it that this isn't just the principal saying, 'no, you can't act that way'. This is state law, you cannot do this."

SUMMARY

- School principals respond to several stakeholders related to bullying. They must be responsive to the district's mandates from adoption of the state bully prevention statute. School principals must also be responsive to reports of bullying made by students or their caregivers to begin investigations. A coordinated effort by the principal's team is needed to determine if the report is bullying or another form of aggression (i.e. peer conflict). These principals use a process that is universal throughout the large urban district. In cases where parents may not be taking the bullying situation seriously, principals can demonstrate to parents the seriousness of the behavior by referring to the state's bullying statute. Principals report that this process can be motivating for parents to provide help for the student.

CONCLUSIONS

These principals are using a district-wide definition of bullying and step by step procedures provided by their district that originates from their state statute to investigate and determine if a reported incident was bullying or peer conflict. Further, principals tell of their intervention practices that are uniquely different for bullying and peer conflict. Lastly, they say having a state law in place helps promote the seriousness to parents who may resist seeking help for their child who is bullying.

REFERENCE

Bauman, S., Rigby, K., & Hoppa, K. (2008). US teachers' and school counsellors' strategies for handling school bullying incidents. Educational Psychology, 28(7), 837-856.
Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Terry, G. (2014). Thematic analysis. Qual Res Clin Health Psychol, 24, 95-114.
Cascardi, M., Brown, C., Iannarone, M., & Cardona, N. (2014). The problem with overly broad definitions of bullying: Implications for the schoolhouse, the statehouse, and the ivory tower. Journal of School Violence, 13(3), 253-276.
Cunningham, C. E., Mapp, C., Rimas, H., Cunningham, L., Mielko, S., Vaillancourt, T., & Marcus, M. (2016). What limits the effectiveness of antibullying programs? A thematic analysis of the perspective of students. Psychology of Violence, 6(4), 596.
Dake, J. A., Price, J. H., Telljohann, S. K., & Funk, J. B. (2004). Principals' perceptions and practices of school bullying prevention activities. Health Education & Behavior, 31(3), 372-387.
Gladden, R.M., Vivolo-Kantor, A.M., Hamburger, M.E., & Lumpkin, C.D. (2014). Bullying surveillance among youths: uniform definitions for public health and recommended data elements, version 1.0. Atlanta, GA; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control.
Hall, W. (2017). The effectiveness of policy interventions for school bullying: a systematic review. Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research, 8(1), 45-69.
Limber, S. P., & Small, M. A. (2003). State laws and policies to address bullying in schools. School Psychology Review, 32(3), 445-455.
Menesini, E., & Salmivalli, C. (2017). Bullying in schools: the state of knowledge and effective interventions. Psychology, Health & Medicine, 22(sup1), 240-253.
Patchin, J. W., & Hinduja, S. (2016). Bullying today: Bullet points and best practices. Corwin Press.
Stuart-Cassel, V., Bell, A., & Springer, J. F. (2011). Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies. Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, US Department of Education.

Principals' Pathways to Investigating School Bullying

