

ELEMENTS OF A COMPLETE ANTI-BULLYING PROGRAM: How Can You Tell if You Are Missing Something?

By Dr. Paula C. Rodríguez Rust, Spectrum Diversity LLC

An effective anti-bullying program requires the coordination and cooperation of every segment of the school community, and requires the development of a culture and structures that support school-wide anti-bullying efforts through comprehensive programming. Whether your school or district develops a home-grown anti-bullying program, adopts a model program, or utilizes the services of outside providers to create a custom program, use this overview of the elements of complete anti-bullying programming to identify gaps that might leave your students, and your school or district, vulnerable.

OVERVIEW (See Detail Below)

1. Cultural Components
 - a. Positive, Pleasant School Atmosphere
 - b. Sense of Shared Responsibility for Climate
 - c. Norms—*not only* “rules”—against bullying
 - d. Respect for Diversity, Specific Focus on Reducing Bias and Bias-Related Behavior
2. Assessment, Evaluation, Evidence of Effectiveness
 - a. Assessment / School Survey
3. Education for All Segments of School Community
 - a. Professional Development for Faculty/Staff
 - b. Education for Administrators.
 - c. Education for Non-Professional Staff
 - d. Education for Students
 - e. Education for Parents
4. Structural Components
 - a. Anti-Bullying Leadership Team
 - b. Clear School Rules, Consistently Applied, Collectively Developed
 - c. Supervision of Unstructured Areas
 - d. Reporting, Communication, Documentation
 - e. Liaisons to law enforcement and other community resources
5. Strategies to address different types of bullying
 - a. Bias-based bullying
 - b. Cyber bullying
 - c. Relational bullying
 - d. Verbal and physical bullying

DETAIL

1. Cultural Components:

- a. **Positive, Pleasant School Atmosphere.** The atmosphere in a school is established by the interactions of the people within it. When students enter your school in the morning, how are they greeted? When visitors enter, how are they greeted? What posters or displays are visible on the walls? How do faculty treat each other in the faculty lounge? When students are corrected for minor misbehaviors, are they respectfully reminded of appropriate behavior or are they shamed or embarrassed for misbehaving? What types of interactions do adults in the school role model for students? What types of interactions do older students role model for younger students?
- b. **Sense of Responsibility for Climate.** In general, we live in a very individualistic society, in which success is measured in terms of individual achievement and responsibility is defined in terms of one's own responsibility to take care of one's self and to refrain from personal misbehavior. To the extent that we can teach our students that they are responsible not only for themselves and their own friends, but also for the welfare of everyone in their environment, and for the *quality of the social climate itself*, the more empowered our students will be to participate in the creation of a climate that actively discourages bullying.
- c. **Norms—*not only* “rules”—against bullying.** “Norms” are the collective sense of what it is “OK” or “not OK” to do. Norms are more than each individual person’s belief about what is right or wrong; norms are the collective sense of what “we” as a community consider appropriate behavior. If your school has “rules” against bullying, but students laugh at inappropriate comments instead of disapproving of them, or target vulnerable students instead of supporting them, and if adults do not take all types of bullying seriously and intervene in bullying behavior whenever it occurs, then students learn that bullying is tolerated, despite what the rules say.
- d. **Respect for Diversity, Specific Focus on Reducing Bias and Bias-Related Behavior.** Students who are bullied are often singled out because of a difference, whether this difference is one of the enumerated categories (race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.), or any other difference, such as weight or social ability. Under Title 18A, including the Students’ Bill of Rights, bullying is *defined* as hurtful behavior motivated by an enumerated difference or “any other distinguishing characteristic.” Court decisions have made it clear that, under the Law Against Discrimination, schools must do more than respond to bias-based incidents; *bias in the environment* must also be pro-actively addressed using *effective preventive education*. Strategies designed to create a general “positive climate” might not effectively reduce bias; therefore, to comply with the law and effectively address bullying, anti-bullying programming must include strategies specifically designed to reduce bias in the school environment.

2. Assessment, Evaluation, and Evidence of Effectiveness

- a. **Assessment / School Survey.** Students, staff, and parents can be surveyed. A survey of students provides a baseline assessment for use in identifying areas of primary concern, and provides evidence of the success of anti-bullying programming when compared to follow-up surveys conducted in subsequent years. A survey of staff can assess staff knowledge and feelings of preparedness, identify barriers to effectiveness, and pinpoint specific resources and training needed by staff. Surveys of parents yield useful information, and can help motivate parents to participate in the school’s anti-bullying efforts.

3. Education for All Segments of the School Community:

- a. **Professional Development for Faculty/Staff**, including teachers and professional support staff such as psychologists, social workers, guidance and SAC counselors, child study team members, school resource officers, etc. Although the skills and information needed by teaching and non-teaching professional staff overlap, professional support staff can also benefit from specialized training because their roles vis-à-vis students in general, and students involved in bullying incidents in particular, differ from the roles of teachers. PD training should include certain key topics, and meet criteria that support a school-wide approach.
- b. **Education for Administrators**. Active and informed support of both school and district administrators is key in the success of an anti-bullying program. Regardless of the quality of their training and the sincerity of their motivation, teachers cannot effectively address bullying unless they have, and know they have, full support from their administration. Administrators who attend faculty PD workshops become aware of any concerns or needs voiced by staff during the training, demonstrate that staff are expected to take bullying seriously, and prepare themselves to support and coordinate staff anti-bullying efforts. In addition, administrators need information about legal requirements, jurisdictional issues, reporting and procedural requirements, and school-wide oversight.
- c. **Education for Non-Professional Staff**. Aides and other non-professional staff also have roles to play in a school-wide anti-bullying program. Although many are not required by law, policy, or contract to receive training, they often observe student behaviors from a different perspective than professional staff, and can be empowered to participate in a school's bullying prevention program. Maintenance personnel, for example, see the graffiti before cleaning it off the walls, and aides are often present in the "unstructured" areas in which most bullying occurs; they need training, and have insights to share.
- d. **Education for Students**. This includes both highly visible, one-time events, as well as ongoing curricular attention. Many pre-packaged curricula are available for students, including social skills curricula, lesson plans pertaining to various aspects of diversity, anti-violence programs, etc. Many of these curricula are now being marketed as "anti-bullying" programs; investigate thoroughly, because many of these curricula can be included as important components of an anti-bullying program, but do not in and of themselves constitute a complete anti-bullying curriculum, much less a complete anti-bullying program. In addition to standard social skills, socio-emotional learning, and character education curricula, anti-bullying education for students should include 1) social skills training for students in their roles as bystanders to peer misbehavior, 2) *intercultural* competence skills, 3) education about human diversity that goes beyond diversity in food and clothing, and includes a deep understanding of differences in cultural values and beliefs, and the role of prejudice, stereotypes, and historical disadvantages, 4) concordant attitudes, e.g., a positive attitude toward difference, and motivation to put forth the extra effort to understand someone who is different from one's self. Student assemblies are a valuable component of bullying prevention, but to be part of a school's anti-bullying program, assemblies must be supported by other changes in school climate and procedures.
- e. **Education for Parents**. Although it can be difficult to encourage widespread involvement on the part of parents who juggle multiple responsibilities, it is important to provide parent education. Informed parents are better able to work with schools to prevent bullying, are more likely to understand the actions taken by a school if their child is involved in a bullying incident, and are less likely to engage in activities, or give advice to their child, that will disrupt school efforts to address bullying.

4. Structural Components:

- a. **Anti-Bullying Leadership Team**, representing all segments of the school community, including administration, teaching staff, professional non-teaching staff, non-professional staff, students, parents, and key community members. This team should meet regularly to oversee, plan, and assess the school's anti-bullying efforts. The team ensures that attention to bullying is ongoing, responsive to changing circumstances and issues, and reflects the needs of the entire school community. Although students, parents, and community members should be included on the team because their perspectives are valuable and their buy-in is important, the confidentiality of student information must be protected. The Students' Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights requires each school to have a "safety team;" this requirement refers to this structural component of comprehensive bullying prevention.
 - b. **Clear School Rules, Consistently Applied, and Developed Collaboratively with Students.** School rules against bullying must be clear, and understood by all segments of the school community. Responses to misbehavior must be consistent, and students must know and expect that school rules will be applied fairly and equally to all students, without favoritism. School rules should include guidelines encouraging students to speak up on behalf of others, and expected behaviors should include not only respectful behavior toward others, but also proactive behaviors that contribute to a respectful and welcoming school climate for all students. Develop school rules with active student participation, not only to enhance student investment, but because the very act of discussion among the students about the type of school climate they want to create will help create that very climate.
 - c. **Supervision of Unstructured Areas of the School.** Most bullying occurs during less structured times during the school day, and in less structured areas of the school, including lunch time, recess, rest rooms, and hallways. During these times, students are not otherwise occupied with academic activities, and they are often supervised by non-teaching staff so they will choose these times to misbehave. Staff who supervise these areas require training, and need to know that they are expected and authorized to pro-actively prevent and respond to bullying behaviors in these areas.
 - d. **Reporting, Communication, and Documentation.** Clear communication is essential in any coordinated effort. Types of communication that are necessary components of an effective anti-bullying program include: 1) Explicit procedures for reporting incidents, including clear instructions regarding which types of incidents should be reported, and to whom, 2) Clear and explicit procedures for documenting incidents, including suspected incidents, that ensure the recording of information that is necessary not only to respond to individual incidents, but to detect developing patterns including bias-based patterns of behavior, 3) Procedures for follow-up with offenders, targets, witnesses and reporters designed to assess the effectiveness of the initial response, identify whether additional responses are necessary, and promote faith in the ability of the school to respond effectively while also respecting confidentiality and preventing retaliation, 4) Documentation of investigatory and responsive measures taken, 5) Sharing of information about incidents with staff who might be in a position to prevent, notice, or respond to subsequent incidents, e.g., counselors, school resources officers, social workers, and teachers who supervise the students involved. The Students' Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights places new requirements on schools regarding reporting and documentation.
5. **Specific Strategies to Address Different Kinds of Bullying.** Bias-based bullying, cyber bullying, relational bullying, and verbal and physical bullying all present different challenges to schools and require somewhat different approaches to prevention. Ensure that your anti-bullying program is designed to address all forms of bullying.