

2011

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Recommended Citation

Gulemetova, Michaela; Drury, Darrel; and Bradshaw, Catherine P. (2011) "National Education Association Bullying Study," *Colleagues*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol6/iss2/11>

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National Education Association Bullying Study

Findings From The National Education Association's Nationwide Study Of Bullying: Teachers' And Education Support Professionals' Perspectives

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Executive Summary

This research brief reports the results of a National Education Association (NEA) survey of teachers and education support professionals (ESPs)ⁱ that addresses the problem of bullying in America's public schools. The study finds that bullying is not only pervasive in the nation's schools but also widely perceived by school staff to be a serious problem, particularly in middle schools and in schools located in urban areas. The vast majority of school staff reported that their district had implemented a bullying prevention policy. However, ESPs were significantly less likely than teachers to have received formal training or to have been involved in bullying prevention activities, such as committees, teams, or prevention programs. In light of these disparities, it is not surprising that, although ESPs were nearly as likely as their teacher counterparts to indicate that it was "their job" to intervene, they expressed significantly less comfort in taking action in a wide range of bullying situations. The fact that ESPs report high levels of connectedness to their respective school communities, combined with evidence that such subjective feelings tend to be associated with a greater willingness to intervene, suggests that ESPs represent an invaluable resource and should be included in the design and implementation of future prevention programs. The very presence of ESPs in areas throughout the school where bullying regularly occurs—on playgrounds, school busses, cafeterias and hallways—further substantiates this conclusion.

Introduction

Bullying continues to be a major concern among students and staff in the nation's public schools and, most recently, has been the focus of widespread public attention as a result of several high-profile incidents. The National Education Association (NEA) has had a long history of involvement in bullying prevention efforts.ⁱⁱ With 3.2 million members, representing both teaching and non-teaching staff, the NEA is in a unique position to address bullying from a whole-school perspective—through its existing programs and through research aimed at developing a better understanding of the role that a united

this critical issue. Toward that end, in April 2010 the NEA drew upon its membership to implement a national survey examining school staff members' perceptions of bullying among students. The overall goal of the study was to identify strengths as well as areas of need related to bullying prevention to inform future prevention efforts, both within the NEA and in collaboration with other agencies.

The NEA study is the first of its kind to examine both teachers and education support professionals (ESPs)—including bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians, and other support staff—in a nationwide study of bullying.ⁱⁱⁱ Much of what is currently known about bullying prevention is limited to how teachers and students perceive bullying and the actions they take in response to such behavior. However, bullying incidents regularly occur outside of the classroom and, therefore, may be beyond the awareness of teachers. Inasmuch as ESPs represent about one-third of school staff and typically work in non-classroom settings where bullying often takes place, it is essential that we develop a better understanding of the attitudes,

behaviors, and concerns of ESPs pertaining to this issue and apply that knowledge to the design and implementation of more effective prevention programs. This brief summarizes findings from this unique study in an effort to promote collaboration in bullying prevention in the nation's public schools.^{iv}

Key Findings from the NEA Bullying Study

School staff perceived bullying to be a problem in their school; they witnessed bullying frequently and students reported it to them in large numbers. Over 40 percent of respondents indicated that bullying was a moderate or major problem in their school, with 62 percent indicating that they witnessed two or more incidents of bullying in the last month, while 41 percent witnessed bullying once a week or more. Although more teachers (45%) than ESPs (35%) indicated that a student reported bullying to them within the past month, all staff members equally indicated that parents had reported bullying to them (16%). Across school levels and communities,

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staff working in middle schools and in urban areas were more likely to report that they had frequently witnessed bullying (66% and 65%, respectively) and were more likely to perceive it as a serious problem (59% and 54%, respectively).

There was a discrepancy between the existence of school district bullying policies and staff members' self-reported training on these policies. Although the vast majority of school employees (93%) reported that their district had implemented a bullying prevention policy, only about half of all staff had received training related to the policy. ESPs were significantly less likely to report that they had received training on their district's policy than teachers (45% and 54%,

as well as the more recent phenomenon, "sexting." All school staff reported the greatest need for training on cyber-bullying and bullying related to sexual orientation and gender issues; they also reported being the least comfortable intervening in these types of bullying situations. In addition, ESPs reported that they were less comfortable intervening in physical, verbal, and relational forms of bullying.

Although school staff reported being very willing to intervene in bullying situations, slightly over half of the survey respondents indicated that there were few formal bullying prevention activities present in their schools, and less than 40 percent were directly involved in these activities. Across all school levels and communities, most school employees felt

was their subjective sense of connectedness to the school, defined as "the belief held by adults in the school that they are cared about as individuals and professionals involved in the learning process." Specifically, school staff members' perceptions of their relationships with colleagues and school administrators, their perceptions of safety, and their overall sense of belonging within the school community were associated with a greater likelihood of intervening in bullying situations. Moreover, staff members' belief that other school staff were likely to intervene in bullying incidents was associated with a greater likelihood that they themselves would intervene. ESPs reported high levels of personal connectedness, connectedness with the administration, and overall connectedness to the school community. This may, in part, be attributable to the fact that ESPs tend to reside within the neighborhoods surrounding the schools in which they work. Feelings of connectedness also varied across school levels and urbanicity, with staff in high schools and in schools located in urban communities reporting the lowest levels of connectedness.

Conclusions and Implications

Given the high rates of bullying in schools, it is not surprising that teachers and other school staff express great concern about this issue. Although bullying policies appear to exist in many districts, there seems to be a lack of sufficient instruction on the implementation of those policies. School staff, especially ESPs, reported a great need for additional training to help them confidently intervene in bullying situations. With less than 60% of members reporting that their school had formal bullying prevention efforts in place, there should be a greater emphasis on the implementation of evidence-based bullying prevention programs.

There is ample evidence that students who experience bullying suffer a range of adverse academic and health effects (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Large numbers of students are seeking help from teachers, as well as from ESPs. The findings from the current study indicate that ESPs tend to live in the community served by their schools and express high levels of connectedness to the school community. ESPs' strong connections to both the school and students make them a natural source of support for students in need. Moreover, given the fact that a significant portion of bullying occurs in areas such as the cafeteria, playground, and school busses, intervention programs should more actively include ESPs and other school staff who have the opportunity to supervise these areas. ESPs appear to represent an untapped resource in schools, many of whom appear eager to be involved in preventative interventions programs.

This study suggests that school staff connectedness may serve as an important lever for bullying prevention efforts, as the

Figure 3. Percentage of Staff Who Responded 'Yes' Regarding Bullying Policies and Prevention Activities

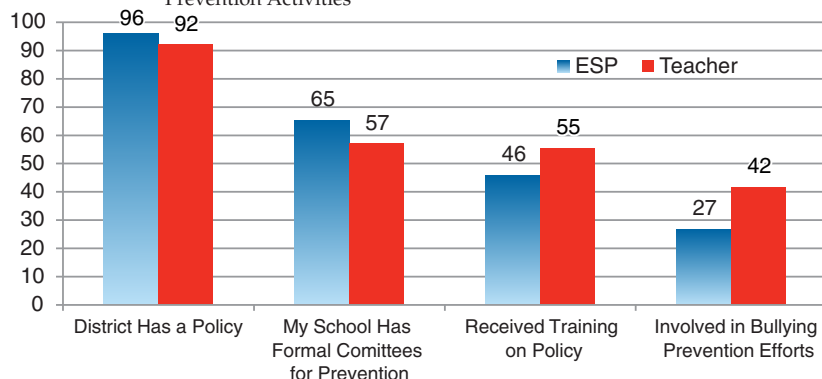
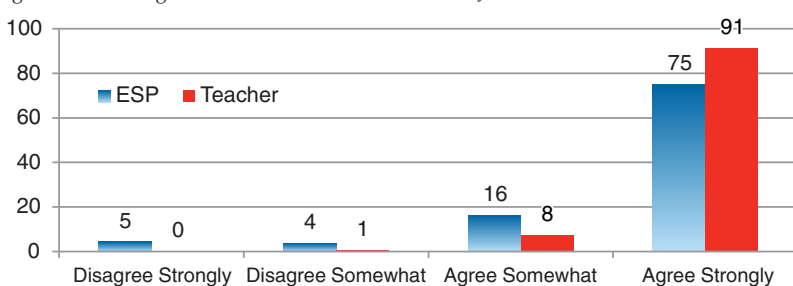


Figure 4. Percentage of Staff Who Perceived It Is Their Job to Intervene



respectively). Staff in urban schools, where the rates of staff-reported bullying were highest, were less likely to report the existence of a district-wide policy (88%) and less likely to have received training on the policy (51%).

Bullying takes many forms, with school staff reporting that verbal (59%), social/relational (50%), and physical (39%) forms were of greater concern in their school than cyber-bullying (17%). All staff reported that bullying based on a student's weight (23%), gender (20%), perceived sexual orientation (18%), and disability (12%) were of concern in their school. Both teachers and ESPs reported a need for additional training in intervening with different forms of bullying, but ESPs expressed greater need than teachers in dealing with physical, verbal, and relational bullying,

that it was 'their job' to intervene when they witnessed bullying incidents, though teachers and ESPs differed in their responses (99% of teachers and 91% of ESPs agreed). Overall, however, only 58 percent of staff reported that their school had implemented formal bullying prevention efforts such as school teams, committees, or prevention programs. Even fewer reported the presence of such prevention activities in schools located in urban areas (47%) and in high schools (51%). Teachers were significantly more likely than ESPs to be directly involved in bullying prevention activities (42% and 27%, respectively). The lowest level of staff involvement in bullying prevention activities was in high schools (24%).

An important predictor of staff members' willingness to intervene in bullying situations

more connected school employees feel to their school community, the more likely they may be to become involved in bullying prevention efforts. A recent study of School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports found that high fidelity implementation of the model was associated with significant improvements in staff members' connectedness to others within the school (Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009); thus Positive Behavior Supports may also have an impact on staff members' willingness to intervene and participate in prevention efforts, as well as on students' bullying behavior (Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2011).

Taken together, the findings of the NEA Bullying Study provide great insight into staff members' perceptions of bullying, including the unique perspectives of different groups of ESPs (e.g., bus drivers, cafeteria workers, security officers), who are often overlooked in the literature. To our knowledge, this investigation presents findings from the only large-scale nationwide survey fielded to examine different staff members' perspectives on bullying and prevention efforts. As such, this study helps to elucidate the specific needs of various groups of adults who work in schools across the country. These findings may also inform the creation of professional development and training materials tailored for different school staff and for those working with special populations of students across different grade levels and community contexts.

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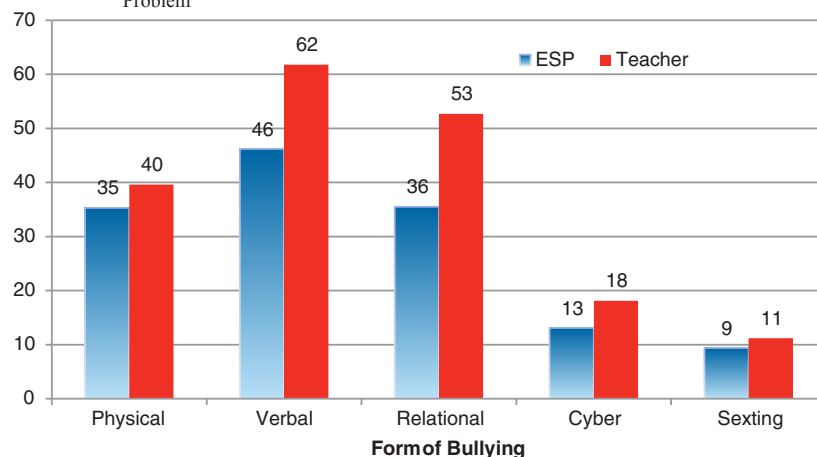
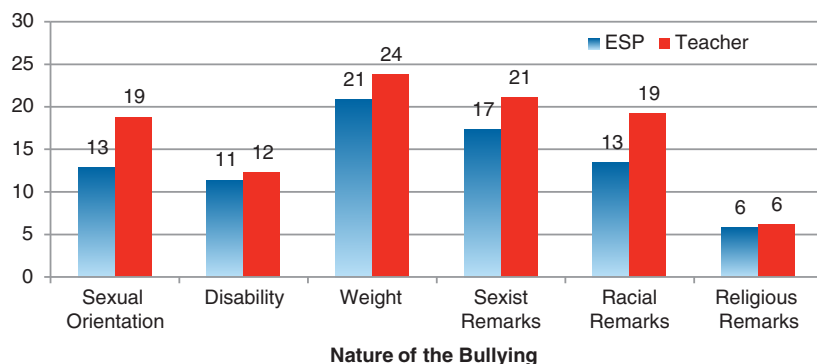


Figure 6. Percentage of Staff Who Reported That Bullying Behaviors Were a Moderate/Major Problem



Waasdorp, T., Bradshaw, C.P., & Leaf, P.J. (2011). *The impact of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) on bullying and peer rejection*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

- i Education support professionals include paraprofessionals, maintenance staff, clerical staff, school transportation staff, cafeteria staff, security staff, health staff, technical staff, and other non-teaching support staff.
- ii In the mid-1990s, the NEA membership mandated that the Association create a training program for its members on student-to-student sexual harassment and bullying. The NEA developed and constantly updated training curricula on these topics and has continued to conduct such training since that time.
- iii The research-based NEA Bullying Survey was developed by a team of experts in this field from John Hopkins University (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & O'Brennan, 2010a). Bullying was defined on the survey as "...intentional and repeated aggressive acts that can be physical—such as hitting—verbal—such as threats, or name calling—or relational, such as spreading rumors, or influencing social relationships. Bullying typically occurs in situations where there is a power or status difference." The data were collected from a nationally representative sample of 5,064 NEA members, including 2,163

teachers and 2,901 ESPs, in April 2010 using web- and phone-based surveys. The sample was designed to allow for comparisons across grade level and job category, with particular emphasis on ESPs, who have been largely overlooked in previous research on bullying (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & O'Brennan, 2010b). The weighted sample reflects the NEA population, with 82% professional staff (teachers 85%, special educators 4%, remedial/ESL 2%, librarians 2%, counselors 3%, and other 4%) and 18% ESPs (paraprofessionals 49%, maintenance 14%, clerical 10%, bus drivers 10%, cafeteria workers 7%, security 1%, health 2%, technical 2%, and other 6%). Women represented 80% of the sample and 89% self-identified as White (Black 5%, Hispanic 4%, and others 2%). The sample included staff employed in a variety of school locations (suburban 34%, small town 24%, urban 24%, and rural areas 18%). Approximately 39% worked with students in elementary, 19% middle, and 27% high schools, with the remaining 16% working across multiple grade levels. Certain variables were statistically adjusted for in the analyses (i.e., school level, school location, web vs. phone survey modality, and amount of time spent with students), as they may have influenced participants' responses to survey questions.

- iv For a full report of the NEA Bullying Study findings, see Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan, and Gulemetova (2011).