

School Safety Technical Assistance Council and Center Report

November 1, 2016

The School Safety Technical Assistance Council (council) and the School Safety Technical Assistance Center (center) continue to build the capacity of Minnesota's school districts and schools to create and sustain safe and supportive learning environments. This report highlights work completed by the council and the center from October 27, 2015, to November 1, 2016.

School Safety Technical Assistance Council

The School Safety Technical Assistance Council provides guidance to the School Safety Technical Assistance Center on multiple fronts, including:

- Establishment of norms and standards for prevention, intervention and support around the issues of prohibited conduct.
- Advancement of evidenced-based policy and best practice related to bullying issues.
- Development and dissemination of resources and training.
- Development of policies and procedures for services provided by the center.

During its second year, the council met twice, on April 26 and August 16. Its February meeting was canceled due to inclement weather.

Council Workgroups

Much of the council's work happens in smaller workgroups created by the council to focus on emerging needs of schools, educators, school support staff, students, families and communities. The council has three active workgroups: the Social Emotional Learning Workgroup, Gender Inclusion Resource Guide Workgroup and the Cyberbullying and Electronic Aggression Workgroup.

Social Emotional Learning Workgroup – Early on, council members identified the need to provide technical assistance to educators who are interested in incorporating social emotional learning (SEL) into their schools. Research shows that SEL can be an important part of improving school climate. The Safe and Supportive Minnesota Schools Act calls for districts and schools to use “evidence-based social and emotional learning to prevent and reduce discrimination and other improper conduct (bullying and harassment).” More and more educators, school district leaders and school administrators are looking to the council and center for guidance in this area.

The SEL workgroup members and center staff are focused on developing guidelines that will provide interested schools and school districts with a framework for integrating evidenced-based SEL strategies into schools. The SEL guidelines will be based on the five social emotional learning core competencies identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional

Learning (CASEL). Earlier this year, CASEL awarded the center a grant and selected Minnesota as one of 17 states to participate in its Collaborating States Initiative Phase I Community of Practice.

As a participant in the CASEL Collaborative, the center receives access to CASEL's national team of expert advisors, ongoing consultation from CASEL, resources from CASEL and other states and districts, including evidence-based teaching practices and guidelines for creating a positive school climate and classroom environment. The council and center will continue working on the guidelines this year (2016) and next year (2017) with the aim of having the SEL resources available in early 2018.

Gender Inclusion Resource Guide – Ensuring that transgender students and gender nonconforming students feel safe and supported in school has been an emerging issue throughout the nation and in schools and school districts throughout Minnesota. An increasing number of schools and school districts have been contacting the center seeking technical assistance on issues involving gender identity, gender expression and how to create safe and supportive environments for all students, including transgender students. In response to increasing requests for technical assistance in this area, the council formed a workgroup in April to review and gather resources and materials for a gender inclusion resource guide. The workgroup continues its work, which includes identifying and compiling resources, sample policies and best practices.

Cyberbullying and Electronic Aggression Workgroup – This workgroup has completed its work. The subgroup developed guidance documents for parents and school staff and those materials are available on the website.

School Safety Technical Assistance Center Work

The School Safety Technical Assistance Center supports schools and families in creating safe and supportive communities, so that all Minnesota students have learning environments that maximize their learning potential to be successful in school and in life.

The center's goal is to help schools promote positive school climates and improve student academic achievement. To do this, the center helps schools and communities develop and implement comprehensive, sustainable school climate improvement by providing training and professional development to support comprehensive, district-wide school climate improvement; providing technical assistance to districts, schools, parents and community partners; developing materials and sharing information about effective programs, tools and resources to support districts and schools and establishing and strengthening partnerships to further efforts to create safe and supportive schools. Center staff includes Craig Wethington, director; Brooke Stelzer and Amy Marsicano, adolescent sexual health consultants; Heather Hirsch, school climate specialist; Patty Mattern, communications consultant; and Nancy Riestenberg, restorative practices specialist.

Center Provides Technical Assistance

Center staff members provide parents, guardians, students, teachers, school personnel, principals, superintendents, school board members and community members with the guidance and technical assistance they need to address bullying issues and improve school climate.

During the last year, a growing number of schools, school districts and parents have contacted the center seeking technical assistance on issues involving gender identity and gender expression and the well-being of transgender students. In response, center staff provide training and technical assistance that includes evidence-based best practices, sample policies and resources to help schools and school districts take steps to ensure that they are creating safe and supportive environments for all students, including transgender students.

Educators, parents, students and community members have also expressed growing concerns about increases in bullying of Muslim students. Center staff say that events in the news locally, nationally and internationally and the resulting harmful rhetoric may be contributing to increased bullying, harassment and discrimination of students based on their actual or perceived religion, race, national origin, gender, gender identity or sexual orientation. Center staff provide resources, materials and training to help schools, educators, parents and students prevent and address this bullying and harassment.

Center staff members also give parents resources to help them to work with schools to address any bullying or harassment that has happened as well as resources that will help them support their child if the child has been bullied or harassed.

Four center staff members connect with people who contact the center for assistance. During the 2015-2016 school year, about 200 callers have contacted the center seeking technical assistance. So far this school year, 20 people have called the center. The majority of calls come from parents. The center has received calls from parents whose child or teen has experienced bullying.

During the calls, parents ask for guidance on how they can address the bullying and how to prevent it in the future. Parents also want to know how they can best help their child heal, so their student can thrive socially and academically in the school environment. Once learning the callers' stories, center staff members outline specific approaches or resources that can be used to resolve bullying issues and support the student who was bullied.

Working in partnership with a student's school is usually the most effective and successful way for parents to address bullying. To help parents do this, center staff developed the tool "How to Work With the School to Address Bullying." The resource guides parents and families through the process of working with the school, including tips on having an effective meeting with school personnel, what questions to ask and, collaboratively developing a plan to keep the student safe.

Staff emphasize that the parents' first step in addressing bullying should always be to contact the teacher, principal, assistant principal or counselor at the school to report the bullying and discuss concerns. After talking with callers on the phone, center staff follow-up by emailing resources to them and encourage the parents to contact the center again if they need more assistance.

Some parents have sought further help in addressing bullying issues or concerns and, in most cases, the technical assistance provided by the center helps resolve the problems. In some instances, parents have indicated that they believe a school district or school is not complying with the school's bullying prohibition policy or the Safe and Supportive Schools Act. A process is

in place that gives students, parents and educators the option of filing a complaint with Minnesota Department of Education Commissioner if they believe the school is not complying. Filing a formal complaint is something that people resort to after they've exhausted all other options.

During the 2015-2016 school year, three formal complaints were filed. The center director investigated the complaints and, in two cases, issued letters stating that the school districts were in compliance with the law. In one case, the center director determined that the school district was not in full compliance with the law and has recommended that the school district provide additional training on bullying recognition, intervention, report taking and investigation to district staff and school leaders. The center director has also offered the school district further technical assistance.

The department and center's primary charge is not to punish schools or districts if they are not in compliance with the law, but to help school districts and charter schools implement the Safe and Supportive Schools Act. If a school or district is not in compliance, the department and center collaborate with the school district or charter schools to make the changes to bring them into compliance.

Center Provides Training and Tools Schools Need to Improve School Climate

The center provides comprehensive training and professional development that help educators and schools move forward in creating positive climates. The training covers a wide range of subjects including everything from the requirements of the model bullying prohibition policies to how to implement restorative practices in schools. The center delivers training and professional development through videos, webinars, institutes, conferences and workshops. Center staff also develop materials, tools and resources that can help school districts and schools take steps to create and maintain safe and supportive school environments for students. Between October 27, 2015, and October 27, 2016, the center has provided more than 300 hours of training attended by 2,700 people.

Policy Institute Focused on Supporting School Climate Improvement

In the fall of 2015, the center, in partnership with the National School Climate Center (NSCC) and Minnesota Service Cooperatives (MSC), hosted the one-day School Climate Policy Institute. The institute focused on supporting school climate improvement in Minnesota. The institute was designed for school district leadership teams, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, and school board members, as well as state education policy leaders

More than 100 people from 30 school districts and schools participated in the institute where participants learned how current school/school district policies and procedures – including everything from attendance policies to student discipline policies – impact school climate. The policy institute helped school district and school leadership teams analyze their current policies and consider changes they could make to the policies to improve school climate. During the institute sessions, participants learned about tools and resources that they could use to enhance their existing policies to improve school climate.

Center staff recorded the institute's three main presentations: "Establishing Shared Understanding School Climate;" "The Five-Stage School Climate Policy Development and

Implementation Process;" and "Equity Issues and School Climate Policy." Those videos and resource materials used during the institute are available on the center's website, so that others can learn more about school climate and ways to implement school climate improvement.

More than 400 People Attend Safe and Supportive Schools Conference

The center, in partnership with Hamline University and PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center, hosted its first Safe and Supportive School Conference on January 22, 2016.

When staff began inviting experts to speak at the conference to address bullying, planners estimated 250 people would attend. However, interest in the conference surged and more than 400 people attended the "Minnesota Safe and Supportive Schools Conference: Addressing Bullying in Schools." The conference could not accommodate all those interested in attending, said Craig Wethington, center director.

"We were bursting at the seams," Wethington said. "That tells me how committed educators, school staff members, school administrators, families, students and community members are to ensuring that all Minnesota students go to school in a safe and supportive environment."

Participants gathered to learn more about bullying prevention, intervention and how to create a positive school climate. David Esquith, director of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Healthy Students, delivered the opening keynote address – "The Challenges, Emerging Issues, and Promising Practices in Improving School Climate." He spoke about the current state of school safety from a national perspective saying that schools are safer than they've ever been, but there is still a lot of work to do.

Esquith talked about the importance of ensuring students feel connected and supported in schools – a point that emerged throughout many of the conference workshops and session. Students need to have trusting relationships with adults who they can turn to when bullied, Esquith said.

When students attend schools where they are engaged and feel connected with peers, teachers and other adults in the school community, students will find it easier to report bullying to an adult and such positive school climates can help prevent bullying from happening in the first place.

Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius spoke about the importance of student connectedness as well.

"As James Comer says, there's no significant learning that happens outside of a significant relationship," Cassellius said. "We're social creatures and we learn in social structures."

When there's dissonance or disruption in relationships, things like depression, withdrawal and bullying emerge, she said.

"Bullying is not something you're born with – negative behaviors are not something you're born with," she said. "It's learned behavior and children learn from us adults."

It is the adults that create the conditions in which children are successful, Cassellius said.

"If we're misbehaving with each other, we're not being good role models," she said.

Cassellius posed a challenge to adults to exemplify good behavior.

“We've got to change the discourse as adults to be more caring and loving to one another,” she said. “Even when we disagree on topics, we can still be respectful of one another.”

Cassellius thanked participants for attending the conference and for their efforts to address bullying and help Minnesota students.

“It is important for us to come together and recommit to ensuring that the schools we have our children in are schools where they're safe, welcome and they're thriving and they get to be their unique selves and that is valued and celebrated,” she said. “That's what so important and that's what we're trying to create here in Minnesota.”

During the conference, participants could attend one of four breakout sessions both in the morning and afternoon. Conference breakout sessions included:

- Gender Identity-Based Bullying.
- Working with Children and Adolescents Who Bully.
- Facebook Safety Basics.
- Restorative Interventions for Bullying in Schools: Stories and Guidance.
- Practical Strategies to Support Students in Bullying Situations.
- Using the MSS to Create Youth Profiles of Developmental Skills, Supports, and Challenges.
- The Biases Behind Bullying – Addressing the WHY.
- Bullying of Students with Disabilities.

Many attendees said the conference highlight was the student panel, “Youth Voices: Strategies for Addressing Bullying from Students.” Current Minnesota students shared their experiences and insights.

The conference concluded with David Osher, president of American Institute for Research, giving the closing keynote “The How to Efficiently Use a Comprehensive Multi-Tiered Approach to Build Conditions for Learning.”

The conference received high marks with 80 percent of participants saying they found the conference extremely or very helpful and 93 percent saying the conference helped them increase their knowledge about bullying prevention and how to create a positive school climate. Ninety-seven percent said they were likely or very likely to apply what they learned at the conference to their work and 95 percent indicated the conference gave them new ideas to help children/students in a bullying situation.

The center plans to host its second Safe and Supportive Schools Conference on January 25, 2017.

Cadre to Deliver Training on Reporting and Investigating Bullying and Harassment

The center has developed a training cadre of 13 people throughout Minnesota who are certified in training educators and school staff on the “McGrath Bullying and Harassment: Minimize the Risk” program. In the training, educators and school administrators will learn practical tools they can use to prevent and neutralize the effects of bullying.

This training will help school districts and charter schools meet the Safe and Supportive Schools Act requirement to train all staff on the bullying prohibition policy and how to identify, intervene and respond to bullying. The McGrath Bullying and Harassment training includes a comprehensive approach for reporting and investigating bullying and harassment. There are three levels of training.

- Level 1 – Duty to Respond – Teachers, staff, administrators, and counselors are trained and empowered to identify, intervene, record and inform building principals regarding incidents that may be bullying or other prohibited conduct.
- Level 2 – Incident Intake and Inquiry Investigation – This training addresses the initial inquiry investigation to determine whether bullying and/or harassment are involved based on undisputed facts and if policy has been violated. The training also covers how to design appropriate remedial responses, discipline and follow-up.
- Level 3 – From Intake through Investigation – This training addresses formal investigations, which include multiple witnesses and disputed facts, with possible significant harm. During this training, participants will walk through all the steps of intake, inquiry and investigation (Levels 1 and 2). Participants will also receive training on conducting interviews about complaints with students and school staff.

Discipline Scenarios Webinars Offer Strategies to Address Challenging Situations

School Discipline policies and practices have a significant impact on individual students as well as the school's climate. Center staff collaborate with colleagues throughout the Minnesota Department of Education to hold webinars that help school leaders and educators rethink discipline policies and practices.

Discipline Scenarios Webinars provide administrators, teachers and other district staff members with additional strategies and perspectives on addressing challenging situations that are traditionally thought of as discipline issues. During the webinars, presenters share stories based on calls received from parents and school districts. The presenters brainstorm new ideas and solutions to the most relevant discipline challenges facing schools and touch on broader compliance issues including alternatives to suspension closing the achievement gap, diversity and equity, and restorative justice. They also explore how all of these issues intersect. In addition to center experts, panelists include presenters from the department's Divisions of Compliance and Assistance, and Special Education.

In spring 2016, the department held four discipline scenarios trainings, including an in-person workshop at the Minnesota School Boards Association conference for 40 people and a series of three online webinars reaching 180 people.

The use of real world examples is contributing to the popularity of these trainings. The team launched the fall discipline webinar series with the session “Expulsions and Exclusions: The

Process, Policies, Appeals, and the Minnesota Supreme Court Ruling in the Matter of Expulsion of AD (Minnesota 2016).” This webinar was designed to deepen participants’ knowledge on discipline and to help them prepare for discipline scenarios they may face this school year. The session explored the complexities of the most extreme discipline cases of expulsions and exclusions and reviewed alternatives to expulsions and exclusions and how district policy plays into decisions on these matters.

Other discipline webinar topics included in the fall series: Short-term Disciplinary Removals; Nondiscriminatory Administration of School Discipline; and Compliance with Title IX, Gender Inclusion Policies. Two webinars on each topic were being offered, so the training reached more people. More than 300 people have attended the webinars so far this fall and more than 100 people are registered for the webinar in November.

Training Educators on Using Restorative Practices in Schools

Restorative Practices emphasize the importance of inclusiveness and establishing positive relationships as central to building community in school. Incorporating restorative measures such as the use of circles to re-affirm relationships, restorative conversations as an intervention to restore relationships and circles or conferences to repair harm and re-build relationships help create, build and sustain a safe and healthy school climate. Restorative practices provide a process for holding students accountable for their behavior while also teaching them the skills of pro-social behaviors in the context of community and relationships.

The center’s Restorative Practices Specialist Nancy Riestenberg leads workshops throughout the state and has been instrumental in getting schools in Minnesota and across the nation to use restorative practices.

In partnership with Robbinsdale Area Schools and the Legal Rights Center, the School Safety Technical Assistance Center held its yearly Restorative Practices in Schools June Training workshops. Riestenberg and 16 other trainers provided nine sessions and 300 people participated in the workshops.

The week of workshops began with “Restorative Practices Foundations Training,” a one-day session which provided an overview of restorative justice principles and theory, restorative practices in schools, implementation guidance and a review of resources. The other sessions during the week included:

- “Restorative Family Group Conferencing in Schools,” a two-day session focused on how the Legal Rights Center has adapted restorative family group conferencing for schools, so schools can use it in response to significant behavioral concerns, as an alternative to expulsion, to support school re-entry following suspension, to address truancy, and/or to support family engagement. Through engagement of the student, family, school and community resources, a strengths-based accountability plan is developed to ensure that students are able to repair harm and that all parties help to restore the learning relationships between students and school, family and school, and student and family.
- “The Circle to Repair Harm,” a three-day session that explored how the circle process can be used to repair harm, especially when the harm may require several sessions or on-going support. Participants learned about the pre-meeting, the circle to repair harm outline and the celebration/follow-up circle processes.

- “Conferencing to Repair Harm,” a three-day session where participants learned about this script-directed repair of harm process to address a specific incident of harm.
- “Using Circle to Teach,” a two-day introductory circle training, focused on how to teach the circle process to students and on using the process to teach academic subjects as well as using the process to help students prepare for tests.
- “Advanced Circle Keepers’ Training,” a two-day session for people experienced with the repair of harm process, provided participants with an advanced experiential training for pre-meetings and face-to-face meetings as well as a whole class process.
- “Restorative Language and Chats,” a two-day session, covered the basics of restorative principles and practices in school, the basics of a talking circle, affective statements and restorative conversations or chats. Restorative conversations are an early intervention designed to help restore relationships after harm has happened.

On “Circle Networking Day,” restorative practitioners gathered together and discussed responding to challenging situations in schools regarding trauma, race, and privilege. They also discussed how schools, trainers and community organizations can work together to implement restorative practices.

During the past year, Riestenberg and center staff have done an additional 20 restorative practices trainings in schools and school districts with more than 800 people attending.

To assist educators, school staff, school administrators and community practitioners in their restorative practices work, the center has created and will continue developing resources and sharing best practices.

New this year is the [“Trainer's Guide for Working with Schools to Implement Restorative Practices,”](#) which captures ideas, experiences and resources available to community-based RP trainers working with schools. The trainer’s guide is accompanied by the [“Restorative Practices Trainer's Guide Activities,”](#) a booklet detailing activities that can be used in training, and the [“Restorative Practices – An Administrator's Checklist,”](#) an administrator’s guide for working with community trainers. The checklist includes benchmarks for moving toward a sustainable, school-wide, best practices RP program.

School Climate Improvement Certification Program

Seventeen people completed the School Climate Improvement Certification Program, an intensive 18-month training on school climate improvement processes. The training increased the participants’ capacity to help districts and charter schools create positive, safe, caring and supportive school climates that promote the academic and social emotional competencies of students. These people now serve as School Climate Improvement Leaders in Minnesota, expanding the center’s capacity to provide direct support to school districts and charter schools in enhancing their school climate to meet the statutory requirements of the Safe and Supportive Schools Act.

Thirteen staff members from the Minnesota Service Cooperative’s nine regional educational service agencies, leaders from the Red Wing and St. James school districts, and two center staff members participated in the program and worked directly with 30 schools to measure current school climates and develop plans to improve school climate.

The center will be working this year to develop additional resources, trainings and toolkits to support the certified leaders in their work to serve additional schools and districts throughout Minnesota.

Adolescent Health and Academic Equity Project

Having safe and supportive environments in schools is a risk-reduction and health-promotion strategy. If a school or school district does a good job creating safe and supportive school environments, it not only reduces bullying behavior but it protects against other student risk behaviors.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Adolescent and School Health, gives the center additional support to provide on-going technical assistance to nine Minnesota school districts participating in the Adolescent Health and Academic Equity Project. The Adolescent Health and Academic Equity Project's goal is to build the capacity of schools to develop and implement sustainable program strategies and activities to improve the health of students. This includes delivering comprehensive health education, increased access to sexual health services and establishing safe and supportive environments for students and staff.

During this project, school district teams assess, plan and implement sustainable, evidence-informed programs that meet the sexual health needs of students, thereby increasing students' academic achievement. By 2018, the partner districts will increase school safety and reduce disparities among youth in HIV infection, unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases experienced by young people.

School districts and partners working with the center on this project include Brooklyn Center Schools, Cass Lake-Bena Schools, Northeast Metro 916, Minnesota Internship Center, Red Lake School District, Red Wing Public Schools, Richfield Public Schools, St. James Public Schools and Yellow Medicine East. Center staff and partners provided several trainings and workshops throughout the year to support these districts.

Based on student needs, the district teams are producing comprehensive school district implementation plans focused on increasing capacity to address student health needs as well as strategies to address bullying and harassment. Center staff provide ongoing technical assistance to the district teams as they work on plan details involving resource allocation, stakeholder engagement, policy development and professional development. The plans will be implemented and monitored for fidelity and supported through July 31, 2018. By 2018, the partner districts will increase school safety and reduce disparities in HIV infection, unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases experienced by young people.

The lessons learned during this project inform the center's work in developing more resources and materials. A state leadership team and an inter-agency department agreement with the Minnesota Department of Health guide this project.

Understanding Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Workshops

Center staff members are part of a department team that gives workshops to help school personnel learn about Adverse Childhood Experiences and the negative effects that such traumatic experiences have on a child's developing brain and promoting resiliency in students.

Such traumatic experiences for children and youth can include physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, mental illness of a household member, problematic drinking or alcoholism of a household member, illegal street or prescription drug use by a household member, divorce or separation of a parent, domestic violence towards a parent, incarceration of a household member and being a refugee whose family has fled an unsafe homeland. In the ACEs workshops, staff go over strategies that can be used to reduce trauma and build resilience in children.

Other School Climate Improvement Training

In addition to the trainings highlighted, center staff have conducted trainings on topics including Creating a Supportive Classroom Climate, School Climate Improvement Strategies, Connecting Social Emotional Learning to Professional Development, School Climate and Classroom Management and School Climate Assessment.

Looking Ahead: Every Student Succeeds Act

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) recognizes the strong relationship between positive school climate and student learning and success. In addition to requiring states to include data related to school climate and safety in annual school report cards, the law provides significant opportunity for school leaders to create learning environments that support the success of all students. The provisions include supporting schools and school districts in work to reduce: bullying and harassment incidences; overuse of discipline practices that remove students from the classroom and use of aversive behavioral interventions that compromise student health and safety.

Conclusion

In the first two years of existence, the council and center established the framework for school climate improvement in Minnesota. Council members and center staff developed tools, training and resources that helped school districts and schools improve the educational environment for students and meet the expectations of the Safe and Supportive Minnesota Schools Act.

With the creation of each tool, each resource and the delivery of each training, the council and center continues to build and expand the capacity of educators to implement school climate improvements that will bolster students' ability to learn and lead to increased academic achievement.