



School Safety Technical Assistance Council and Center 2018 Annual Report

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 for Minnesota students. Council and center work focuses on bullying prevention and intervention set forth in the Safe and Supportive Minnesota Schools Act, Minnesota Statutes, section 121A.031. This report highlights work completed by the council and the center from Oct. 15, 2017, to Oct. 15, 2018.

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 the last year, the council met Nov. 15, April 24, and Sept. 18. Some 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.

School Safety Technical Assistance Center Work

Bullying prevention and intervention in schools is at the heart of the center’s work. Research confirms that school climate improvement is the optimal foundation for the prevention of bullying and harassment-related behaviors and is the most effective basis from which to foster student engagement and learning. School climate is how it feels to be in school. It refers to the quality and character of the school. It is based on people’s experience of school 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 school administrators, teachers and school personnel; providing technical assistance to districts, schools, parents, students 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.

Under the Minnesota Department of Education's (MDE's) Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan, center staff play an important role in supporting implementation of ESSA. A provision in ESSA asks how states will support school districts in improving school conditions for student learning, including reducing bullying and harassment incidences, limiting discipline practices that remove students from the classroom, and addressing behavioral interventions that compromise student health and safety.

With expertise in bullying prevention and intervention, school climate and student health, center staff will provide valuable support to the department's and schools' work to implement and sustain school climate improvement efforts. This includes using specific strategies to reduce bullying and harassment and helping schools implement preventative and positive approaches to discipline.

Center Provides Technical Assistance

The center provides parents, families, 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. Center staff have provided an estimated 1,600 hours of technical assistance during the last year.

Center staff members also provide parents and families with resources to help them 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.

Center staff members connect with people who contact the center for assistance. From Oct. 15, 2017, to Oct. 15, 2018, about 325 people contacted the center seeking technical assistance. Many of the calls and emails come from parents/families. Many people who contact the center are parents whose child or teen has experienced bullying.

Once learning details of bullying incidences, 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/families to address bullying. In most cases, the technical assistance the center provides helps parents and families resolve the problems. Some parents have sought further help in addressing bullying issues or concerns. In some instances, families have indicated that they believe a school district or school is not complying with the school's bullying prohibition policy. A process is in place that gives students, parents and educators the option of filing a complaint with the education commissioner if they believe the school is not complying.

During the 2017-18 school year, five formal complaints were filed by families of students. The center director investigated the complaints and determined that one school district was in compliance with the law and three school districts were not in full compliance with the law. One complaint investigation is still open.

Center Provides Training and Tools Schools Need

The center provides training and professional development that help educators and schools move forward in creating positive climates and improving conditions for learning. The center delivers training and professional development through videos, webinars, institutes, conferences, workshops and presentations. Many presentations and trainings are given at conferences for professional education associations, including the Minnesota Social Workers Association, the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP), the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs, School Law Conference, the Minnesota Elementary School Principal's Association (MESPA), and the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA). 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 Oct. 15, 2017, and Oct. 15, 2018, the center has provided an estimated 900 hours of training and presentations attended by nearly 4,000 people. Center staff provide trainings in the Twin Cities metro area and in areas throughout the state, including Cass Lake-Bena Schools, St. James Public Schools, Red Lake School District, Red Wing Public Schools, St. Cloud, Fergus Falls, Bemidji, Princeton and Blue Earth. Center staff have conducted trainings on a wide range of topics. Examples of the trainings include:

- School Climate 101 – Center staff provide a foundational overview of school climate.
- Bullying and Harassment Trainings: 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.
- Achievement and Integration School Climate Session – Center staff help achievement and integration-funded districts think about school climate improvement as a strategy to address academic disparities.
- 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 children.

Social and Emotional Learning

Intentional Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skill development is a central strategy for bullying prevention and school climate improvement. SEL is the process of developing the skills, attitudes, behavior and knowledge that help youth and adults identify and regulate their emotions, develop positive relationships and make responsible decisions.

SEL skills are for everyone and can be applied in places other than school. SEL helps build the foundation for students and adults to succeed in school and develop the skills needed later in life.

Center Releases Social and Emotional Learning Tools to Help Schools Improve Climate

The center developed and released a toolkit of resources to help Minnesota schools better support students' mental and emotional health, prevent bullying, and improve school climate. The Social and Emotional Learning Implementation Guidance and resources released this year will help schools put in place proven strategies to

develop students' social and emotional skills, which improve students' capacity to learn and boost student academic achievement.

When schools use social and emotional learning, students learn essential life skills, including understanding and managing emotions, setting and achieving goals, feeling and showing empathy, building positive relationships, and making responsible decisions. Research shows that social and emotional learning in school improves students' mental health, social skills and academic performance. It also reduces students' conduct problems and emotional distress.

"More and more educators are working to support the whole student and realizing that addressing the social and emotional needs they bring into the classroom is critical to meeting students' academic goals," said Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius in an April news release. "These resources will help improve school environments, increase student connectedness and ultimately help students to succeed in school and life."

School districts had been asking for guidance on social and emotional learning and the Safe and Supportive Minnesota Schools Act explicitly calls for school districts and schools to use evidence-based social emotional learning practices to prevent and reduce bullying, discrimination and harassment. The School Safety Technical Assistance Council formed work groups in 2015 focused on social and emotional learning. Since then, center staff worked with a cross-sector mix of educators, researchers, parents, students, non-profit representatives and national experts to develop the resources. In 2016, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) selected Minnesota as one of the original eight states to participate in an initiative to share social and emotional learning best practices with other states. Through the initiative, which now involves 25 states, the center received expert consultation and resources. Center staff have also received ongoing support from the Midwest Comprehensive Center to develop SEL resources.

"The comprehensive social and emotional learning resources developed by Minnesota will support educators in districts across the state, build students up and fully equip them for academic and life success," said Roger P. Weissberg, Chief Knowledge Officer for CASEL in April. "Not only that, but the guidance developed in Minnesota will serve as an important example to other states across the country. Minnesota has emerged as an important leader to other states and I'm excited to see the impact of their work."

Restorative Practices

Use of restorative practices is one approach to bullying prevention and creating and sustaining positive school climates. Restorative practices also provide schools with an alternative approach to suspension and expulsion—exclusionary discipline practices—that do not work and disproportionately affect minorities and students receiving special education services.

To help school districts and schools use restorative practices, the center is developing implementation guidance, creating best practice resources, providing training and technical assistance and building the state's capacity to support schools with implementation by increasing Minnesota's train-the-trainer network.

Restorative Practices in Schools Training Draws More Than 750 People

More than 750 people participated in the center’s Restorative Practices in Schools Trainings in June. This year the center expanded its trainings from one week of workshops in one location to three week-long trainings in three different locations—the Twin Cities metro area (Crystal), Bemidji and Cloquet. Fifty-six trainers provided 32 training sessions.

Demand for the center’s trainings continue to grow as more school leaders and school staff learn how using restorative practices can create and sustain a positive school climate, prevent bullying and provide schools with an alternative approach to suspension and expulsion.

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 build relationships or conferences to repair harm help 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.

School Climate Improvement Pilot Project Begins

The center is leading five Minnesota school districts through a comprehensive school climate improvement pilot project. Red Lake School District, Cass Lake-Bena Schools, Blackduck School District, Bemidji Area Schools and Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig School have joined in the pilot.

School climate improvement is an evidence-based practice that fosters student engagement and school connectedness. When schools take specific action to create positive school climate, the experience of everyone in the school community improves, leading to better student engagement and connectedness to school. Research has shown that, intentional school climate improvement:

- Improves attendance
- Improves academic achievement
- Improves student and staff retention
- Increases graduation rates
- Reduces discipline disparities

Through this pilot project, center staff are taking school district teams through a school climate improvement process to assess safety, relationships, teaching and learning practices and environment-related school climate dimensions. Center staff will give input as school leaders take steps to adopt policies and practices that promote positive school climate. Examples of school climate improvement practices include restorative practices and SEL.

School building teams will begin to implement either restorative practices or SEL. Pilot schools will use guidance and resources developed by the by the center to begin implementing their improvement process. Center staff will use lessons learned from the pilot program to revise and improve guidance and resources for use in districts and schools.

During the pilot, schools and districts will engage in a cycle of continuous improvement. The pilot project's objectives include:

- Integrating SEL or restorative practices into daily instruction and practices in schools and districts.
- Improving school climate practices that support student social, personal and academic development.
- Creating a systematic districtwide school climate improvement effort.
- Gathering feedback on the center's school climate tools and resources from pilot participants. Center staff will use the feedback provided to revise and improve guidance and resources.

School Climate Transformation Grant

The center has been awarded a \$2.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education to increase the center's capacity to support Minnesota schools' efforts to improve school climate and improve conditions for learning for students throughout the state. During the first year of the five-year School Climate Transformation Grant, the center will receive \$586,432. Grant funds will help MDE and the center enhance and expand the support and technical assistance they provide to schools.

Center Launches School Climate Webinar Series

The center launched a new School Climate Improvement Webinar Series this fall. The webinars focus on practices to improve school climate. The first webinar, *An Overview of School Climate Best Practices*, was held in late September and the second webinar, *Schoolwide Restorative Practices*, was held in late October. Upcoming webinars include:

- *Integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into Academics*, Wednesday, Nov. 28, 11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.
- *Classroom Practices to Improve School Climate*, Wednesday, Dec. 5, 11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Webinar participants learn how school climate improvement fosters student engagement and school connectedness and how it is also the most effective way to support student learning by preventing disruptive behaviors such as bullying and harassment. During the school climate improvement webinars, the center staff and partners will provide superintendents, district and school leaders with information on how they can best lead and support school climate improvement efforts. The webinars also highlight effective practices that work to improve school climate outcomes.

Conclusion

In the past four years, 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 and 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.