

Resisting Violence & Raising Grades:

Creating Safe and Supportive Schools in Arizona

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April 2013

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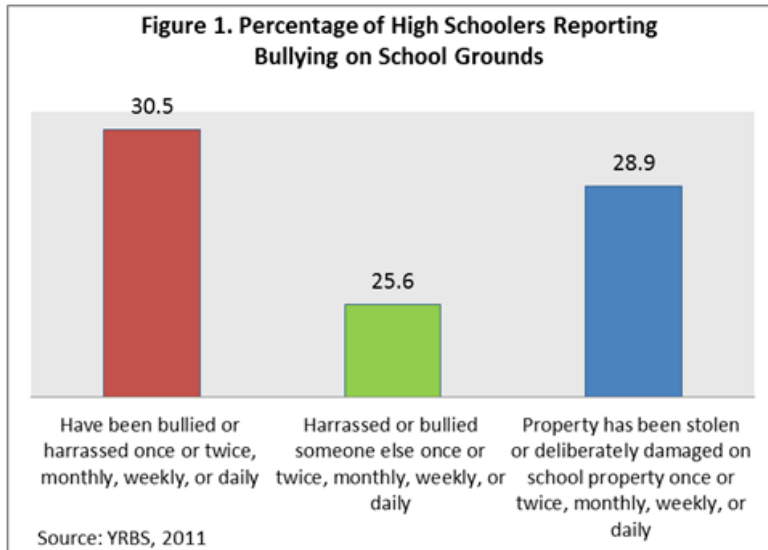
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High Levels of Bullying and Violence in Arizona Schools

Bullying and violence in K-12 schools have been in the policy spotlight in Arizona for almost a decade. Indeed, current indicators, as well as recent traumatic events, show that a range

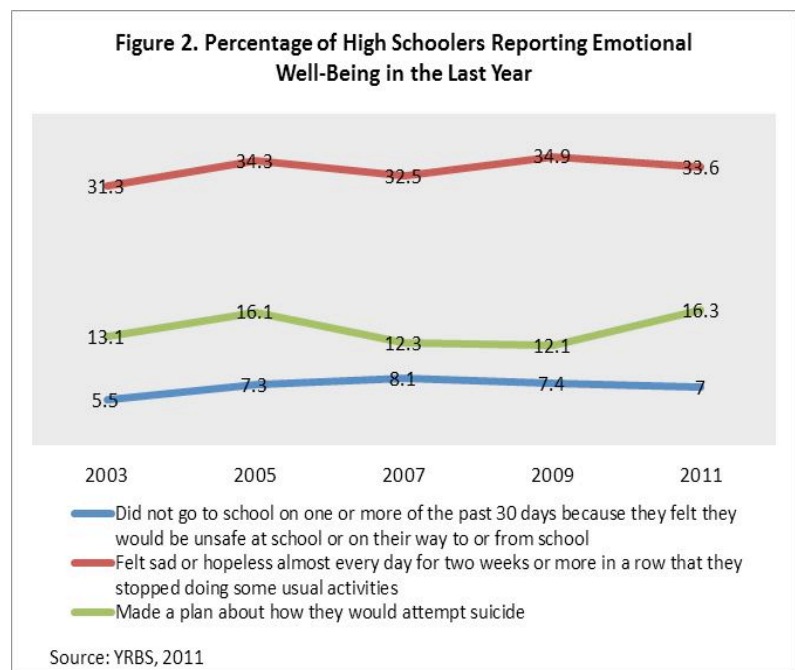


of anti-social behaviors on school campuses remain a major threat to student well-being and learning.

The 2012 Arizona Youth Survey (AYS)¹ reported a significant level of bullying incidents among 8th graders, with 40 percent of students reporting of being picked on or bullied at least once in the past year; 8.5 percent reported being bullied at least 12 or more times.

Arizona's 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)² found similar results among high school students, as show in *Figure 1*. The YRBS also reported that 10.4 percent of its 9th through 12th graders reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property in the past year. That number has remained high;³ in fact, Arizona's record has been one of the worst in the country for almost a decade.⁴

Figure 2 highlights three key areas of emotional well-being that show no positive progress over the past eight years. In 2011, approximately one-third of high school students experienced sustained sadness or hopelessness, with a notable increase since 2009 in the percentage of youth (16 percent) reporting they had a plan to attempt suicide. These percentages are at least double, if not triple, among those who have been bullied or harassed.



Of those who had been bullied at least monthly in 2011, 61 percent felt sadness or hopelessness, and 45 percent contemplated suicide. While 7 percent of all students said they missed school because they felt unsafe, almost three times as many students (20 percent) who were bullied or harassed at least monthly missed school. Not surprisingly, students who feel unsafe at school have decreased levels of emotional well-being, and lower academic performance.

Explaining Arizona's Academic *Underperformance*

At the same time it grapples with high levels of bullying and violence, Arizona faces serious academic performance issues. Forty-three percent of 8th-, 10th- and 12th-graders reported a risk of academic failure and low commitment to school in 2012.⁵ Additionally, Arizona students continue to test lower than the national average in math, science, reading and writing NAEP scores.⁶ In short, Arizona faces two related, serious problems:

- high levels of bullying, harassment and violence in its schools
- significant academic underperformance.

Research has identified clear links between academic performance and such issues as school commitment, bullying and crime, and social and emotional well-being.⁷ A substantial body of evidence demonstrates that school violence and disorder interfere with students' normal psychosocial development and academic learning,⁸ while improved outcomes are associated with an overall sense of safety and belonging.

School safety is related to higher student attendance.⁹ Students who feel safe at school perform better academically than students who do not feel safe.¹⁰ A caring school community, which includes connections with adults in the school and school bonding, helps reduce anti-social behaviors that interfere with learning.¹¹ However, relying on a severe school disciplinary approach to bullying and violence may not only push students out of school, and increase the school-to-prison pipeline,¹² it may also impede efforts to create a comprehensive approach to "school climate."

Arizona School Climate Model Producing Successful Outcomes

School climate refers to the everyday atmosphere of the learning environment: what it feels like to be a member of the school community. A positive school climate helps students feel socially, emotionally and physically safe.¹³ In such a climate, educators model and nurture behavior that emphasizes the benefits of and satisfaction from learning within a school community where everyone is engaged, respected and connected through positive interpersonal relationships and care for the physical environment.¹⁴ A positive school climate fosters healthy youth development and learning necessary for a productive and satisfying life.¹⁵

In order for Arizona to address bullying and violence, and promote enhanced academic performance, school climate must be addressed comprehensively. The Arizona Department of Education is leading the way with their recently awarded four-year Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) grant. The grant supports improved conditions for learning by focusing on positive student-teacher relationships, school connectedness, academic support, order and discipline, and the school physical environment – all measures of school climate.

Data collected from 22 of the 28 participating schools in the 2011/12 school year demonstrate that after the first year, school climate interventions may be contributing to students' perception of safety and academic performance:¹⁶

- 68 percent of the participating schools showed a decrease in bullying and harassment as reported by students
- 55 percent of the participating schools showed an increase in school safety score
- 50 percent of the participating schools showed a decrease in students receiving or selling drugs on campus as reported by students.

Additional research has shown that students who perceived themselves as having more positive student-teacher relationships, academic support, and order and discipline in their schools were less likely to report carrying a weapon at school, threatening or injuring someone with a weapon, being bullied or bullying someone else at school, stealing or damaging property, and/or reporting low grades.¹⁷

Such findings are encouraging. They indicate that addressing school climate measures in a holistic approach may not only reduce bullying and promote school safety for Arizona students, but can also improve academic performance in ways that will strengthen Arizona's education system and promote the well-being of all of our students.

As Arizona schools struggle with decades-long safety issues, now is the time for the discussion to move beyond overly narrow approaches and explore more holistic strategies. And while the strategies used in the S3 schools are not the cure-all that will end all forms of school violence, they are components of a systemic and comprehensive school-wide approach that –driven by a dedicated staff – can shift the culture of a school where every student feels safe and supported and is therefore much more likely to succeed.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The Arizona Youth Survey (AYS), conducted biennially by the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission, surveys 8th-, 10th- and 12th-grade youth throughout Arizona to monitor underage drinking, drug use and juvenile delinquency.
- ² The Arizona Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), administered biennially by the Arizona Department of Education, surveys 9th – 12th-grade youth in high school and charter schools to monitor violence, suicide, alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, sexual risks, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, body image, diet and physical activity.
- ³ Arizona Department of Education, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2011.
- ⁴ Robers, S., Zhang, J., and Truman, J. 2012. *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2011* (NCES 2012-002/NCJ 236021). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, DC.
- ⁵ AYS, 2012.
- ⁶ National Center for Education Statistics. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/statecomparisons/>
- ⁷ Adelman, H. and Taylor. L. 2010. *Mental Health in Schools: Engaging Learners, Preventing Problems, and Improving Schools*. Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Corwin/Sage.
- ⁸ Mayer, Matthew J & Cornell, Dewey G, New Perspectives on School Safety and Violence Prevention. *Educational Researcher*, 2010, 39(1), 5-6.
- ⁹ Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2009. *Organizing Schools for Improvement Lessons from Chicago*.
- ¹⁰ Symons, Cinelli, Janes, & Goff 1997; Marx, Wooley & Nothrup 1998; Mitchell 2000; Allensworth, Lawson, Nicholson, & Wyche 1997 as paraphrased in the California Department of Education, Safe and Healthy Kids Program Office, Getting Results: Update 5, Student Health, Supportive Schools, and Academic Success, 2005.
- ¹¹ Resnick, Harris, & Blum. 1993. *The Impact of Caring and Connectedness on Adolescent Health and Well-Being*. Journal of Paediatrics and Children Health, 29, 1, suppl S3-9; Sprott, J., Jenkins, J.M. and Doob, A. (2005). *The Importance of School. Protecting At-Risk Youth from Offending*. Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 3, 59-77.
- ¹² Jacobson, M. December 12, 2012. Written testimony submitted by the Vera Institute of Justice to Hearing before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary Sub-Committee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights. "Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline." <http://www.vera.org/pubs/michael-jacobson-testimony-ending-school-prison-pipeline-us-senate-committee-judiciary>; <http://www.vera.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/michael-jacobson-testimony-school-to-prison-pipeline.pdf>
- ¹³ Definition of school climate derived from the Center for Social and Emotional Education.
- ¹⁴ Orpinas, P. and Horne, A. 2010. Creating a positive school climate and developing school competence. Pp. 49-59. In Shane Emerson, Susan Swearer and Dorothy Lynn Espelage, Eds., *Handbook of Bullying in Schools*. Taylor and Francis.
- ¹⁵ Zullig, K., Collins, R., Ghani, N., Patton, J., Huebner, E., & Ajamie, J. Psychometric Support of the School Climate Measure in a Large, Diverse Sample of Adolescents: A Replication and Extension, 2012.
- ¹⁶ Arizona Department of Education, School Safety and Prevention (2012). *S3 Arizona School Climate Data 2012*. [CD-ROM: data file and codebook].
- ¹⁷ ibid
- ¹⁸ Zullig et al., 2012.

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