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## **Reducing bullying and preventing dropout through student engagement: A prevention-focused lens for School-Based Family Counselors**

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**Bullying and student dropout are prominent social issues in the United States, where the disengagement of students from school has been linked to both. Examining bullying prevention through the lens of student engagement can be validated as a prevention focused strategy that creates an anti-bullying culture and a school climate that protects students from bullying and dropout. The findings from this study indicate three prevalent themes that provide a framework for promising practices that contribute towards an anti-bullying culture in schools: positive school climate, school organization and infrastructure, and student interactions. This study aims to bridge a gap in research on bullying, dropout prevention, and student engagement; and to contribute towards the development of promising practices that have an overall effect on the climate of a school in preventing bullying and student dropout by increasing student engagement. This article provides an application of the findings in this study to the School-Based Family Counseling (SBFC) model and framework. In additional, implications are provided for SBFC professionals.**

**Keywords: Bullying, bullying prevention, student engagement, dropout, dropout prevention, School-Based Family Counseling.**

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### **Introduction**

School-Based Family Counseling (SBFC) is a broad-based systems model that is used for helping children become successful in school, and to overcome personal and interpersonal problems (Gerrard, 2008). For the SBFC professional who works within this broad systems-based model, there is a focus on the child, the school, and the family. One of the main strengths of the SBFC model is working within a systems focus (Soriano & Gerrard, 2013). SBFC emphasizes that

students are a part of a multiple systems network, and the interdependence of these systems has great effects on students. A change within one system has an indirect effect on all other systems. Another major strength of the SBFC model is the promotion of school transformation (Soriano & Gerrard, 2013), where collaboration and school reform place the child and family first, in order to fulfill the school's obligation to promote student success and resilience.

The SBFC model focuses on prevention and intervention for both schools and families (Soriano & Gerrard, 2013). Slee (2013) described the "intervention continuum" that looks at the range of interventions from universal preventative programs to targeted programs for high risk individuals (p. 617). Universal preventative programs target the entire student population, and focus on school and family school-wide interventions, regardless of the level of student risk. The "prevention focus" quadrants of the SBFC model reflect universal prevention programs (see Fig. 1). This article describes a universal, prevention focused, systems-oriented framework that can be applied to the SBFC model for addressing two major problems in schools - bullying and student dropout.

### **Bullying and student dropout**

Bullying and student dropout have both emerged as prominent social issues affecting the nation, and have been of particular interest in the media and in the political, economic, and educational arenas because of their high cost to society. Despite media attention to the dropout crisis and new priorities given to education reform, approximately one-third of all public high school students and one-half of all minority students fail to graduate with their class every year; the United States ranks 18th in high school graduation rates (Balfanz et al., 2010). Dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed and in poor health, to live in poverty, be on public assistance, and become single parents of children who also drop out of school. Dropouts are more than eight times more likely to be in jail or in prison than are high school graduates, four times less likely to volunteer in their communities, half as likely to vote, and represent only three percent of actively engaged citizens in the United States (Balfanz et al., 2010). While these statistics describe the negative consequences of students that drop out of school, it also includes students involved in bullying, either as victims or perpetrators, who are likely to drop out; as bullying has been found to be a contributor to student dropout (Boivin, Hymel & Hodges, 2001; Limber et al., 1998).

Victims of bullying are associated with an increased risk of dropping out of school (Gastic, 2008), and the link between bullying and dropping out requires serious attention (Nansel et al., 2001). Bullying has intensified in the past 12 years, and a national study among 16,000 American school children found that nearly 30% of students reported moderate or frequent involvement in bullying (Nansel et al., 2001). Eleven years later, a national study was conducted and found that 28% of student reported being bullied at school (Zhang et al., 2012). Bullying behavior has been studied for over 30 years, and significant numbers of students continue to report being involved in bullying. Despite the passage of time, both bullying and student dropout continue to be prevalent problems.

Bullying has also been linked to school violence (Ttofi, Farrington & Lösel, 2012). It has gained increased awareness due to media attention on homicide and suicide cases, where bullying has been found to be a precipitating factor. While the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 were the first of many high profile incidents of school violence that implicated bullying as a

possible cause (Greene & Ross, 2005), since then a number of highly visible suicides among school age children and adolescents have been linked to chronic bullying, and brought further national attention to the issue (Marr & Field, 2011). In a report of school shootings, two-thirds of attackers felt “persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others” prior to the incident (Dake, Price & Telljohann, 2003, p. 173). Victims of bullying are at higher risk of engaging in violent behaviors as a result of their victimization. Chronic victims of bullying often admit to both bullying and being bullied (Harris & Petrie, 2002). Victims of bullying can also become perpetrators, perpetuating the cycle of aggression and violence against others (Olweus, 1993). Students who are bullied also exhibit signs of disengagement, which increases their risk of victimization and dropping out of school.

### **Bullying and student engagement**

Victims of bullying report experiencing a range of negative and long-term effects. Bullying victimization has been associated with poor psychosocial adjustment, difficulty making and maintaining friendships, poor relationships with peers, and a sense of loneliness (Nansel et al., 2001). Students who are bullied experience a range of psychological, psychosomatic and behavioral symptoms such as increased anxiety levels, insecurity, low self-esteem and self-worth, eating disorders, and aggressive-impulsive behaviors (Craig, 1998; Forero et al., 1999; Gini, 2008; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000; O’Brennan, Bradshaw & Sawyer, 2009). Bullying victims have high levels of affective symptoms including stress, anxiety, depression, illness, and suicidal tendencies (Morrison, 2002). Both bully victims and perpetrators are at greater risk of developing depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal attempts (Ivarson et al., 2005; Klomek et al., 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Roland, 2002). All three groups, victims, perpetrators and perpetrator/victims are more likely to be depressed than children who have no involvement in bullying (Wang, Iannotti & Nansel, 2009; Wang, Nansel & Iannotti, 2011). Depression is one of the major risk factors for suicide, the third leading cause of death for young people ages 12 to 18 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007).

Involvement in bullying can have long-lasting effects on students that contribute to their level of engagement in school. Dropping out consists of a slow process of disengagement from school, and student engagement has been found to be a central component in this process (Finn, 1989). Student dropout has been linked to bullying and the disengagement of students from school (Gastic, 2008). The negative effects resulting from a student involved in bullying may look similar to that of a student at risk of dropping out of school. Both may be disengaging from the school environment for different reasons, but the behavior may look the same. The effects of bullying and the early warning signs of student dropout are similar: academic failure, disciplinary problems, at risk behaviors, social and psychological issues, poor attendance, and disengagement. Student engagement is perceived to be a potential protective factor for students who may be involved in bullying and at risk of dropping out of school. Examining bullying prevention through the lens of student engagement can be validated as a focused strategy in cultivating an anti-bullying culture, as well as a school climate that protects students from the process of dropout.

### **Bullying and school leadership**

Bullying is an important topic for all school leaders, including counselors. Counselors are student advocates and frequently hold a prominent role within school leadership teams as they work directly with students, families, and the community; they are integral to the daily operations of the

school. Harris and Petrie (2002) found that bullying was a major problem and is a crucial issue for school leaders to consider. In 2006, 43% of middle school administrators and 21% of elementary administrators reported dealing with daily or weekly incidents of bullying in their schools (Nolle et al., 2007). The federal government recognized that there were plenty of bullying and intervention programs, but missing was leadership in raising awareness and describing what to do about bullying (Bryn, 2011). Becoming aware and understanding the phenomenon of bullying is crucial for school leaders and counselors to effectively foster an anti-bullying culture. Failure to do so perpetuates the problem and infringes on a student's basic rights to a free and public education that is safe.

### **Study purpose**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the systems and structures in place in K-12 schools that foster an anti-bullying culture, while utilizing practices that increase student engagement. The disengagement of students from school is common for both students involved in bullying as well as students on the path to dropout, and involvement in bullying places a student at higher risk of dropping out of school due to decreased levels of engagement. Bully victimization begins to manifest itself in the negative behaviors of failing in school, disengagement and behavior problems; frequently, schools respond with punitive measures such as detention, suspensions and school transfers (Gastic, 2008). School responses such as these contribute to the disengagement of students in school. Students who are in the process of dropping out of school may have a history of involvement in bullying of some form, and they deserve some level of intervention and support. In effect, student engagement can be understood as a protective factor for both students involved in bullying as well as students at risk of dropping out, due to the high potential for overlap in this population.

While research identifies the role of student disengagement as a key construct in student dropout, students continue to disengage from school and drop out. While previous research on the topic of bullying has been conducted, research which specifically focuses on the link between bullying, student disengagement, and dropout is limited. Further, research is even more limited on the specific practices utilizing student engagement as a targeted intervention simultaneously for bullying prevention and student dropout. A gap in research exists on the use of student engagement as a promising practice in preventing bullying. This study focuses on this gap and aims to provide a thorough examination of the role of student engagement in school intervention models, identifying the specific systems and structures in place that foster an anti-bullying culture.

### **Theoretical framework**

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory has been widely used to understand bullying and incidents of school violence. Hong et al. (2011) used an ecological framework to study and understand the Columbine High School shootings, and concluded that assessments examining the nature and influences of the various ecological systems, such as family, peer group, school and community, must be used to understand and help school leaders and counselors prevent school violence. Utilizing this model in understanding bullying is important for the implementation of structures and systems that are created by schools. School leaders and counselors will understand bullying to be much more than one isolated behavioral incident, as well as the larger impact and effect of bullying on their campus. Interventions applied, structures utilized, and systems developed using the ecological framework will affect multiple systems. This study uses the

ecological systems theory to provide a framework for understanding the promising practices in preventing bullying.

### **Study methodology**

Bullying affects student engagement, behavior, and academic outcomes. It is also linked to student dropout (Gastic, 2008; Morrison, 2002). This study aims to examine a school that utilized student engagement as a strategy to foster an anti-bullying culture. School outcomes were taken into consideration and the identified school had demonstrated high achievement and a low dropout rate. The site had a strong reputation for having a recent school transformation with increased educational outcomes, a positive school climate, an anti-bullying culture, positive behavior support for students, a reduction in suspensions, and strong interventions and support programs.

The positive school climate and changes were the outcome of a long process of important historical events, which served as an impetus for major change within the school and community. In 2010, the school underwent a district reconstitution because of its chronic limited academic progress and overall problems with negative school culture including a history of violence, gang involvement, fear among students and teachers, bullying, dropout, and discord among stakeholders including parents and community members. As a result, new leadership was put in place and all teachers and staff were required to reapply for their positions to remain at the school. Approximately 50% of the school staff and teachers were retained as a part of the reconstitution. This rich historical school/community context and positive school transformation were the basis for the site's selection for this study.

The present study involves a qualitative case study of one high achieving, secondary public school in an urban region of Southern California. Three types of methods for data collection were utilized: semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis. A total of seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with administrators, teachers, counselors, and community and parent representatives. An interview protocol was utilized with a total of 12 questions asked of each interview participant. For the purposes of this study, students were not interviewed. A total of four different classroom, school and community observation days were undertaken. Observations were conducted using an observation protocol. Data was also collected through the examination of school documents to get an overall portrait of the school. Creswell's (2012) six steps for data analysis were utilized in the data analysis process.

In an effort to gain insight into school practices that have been successful in preventing bullying and increasing student engagement, this study sought to obtain responses to the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived systems and structures that contribute to student engagement and an anti-bullying culture in the school?
2. How are these systems and structures implemented and sustained to support student engagement and an anti-bullying culture in the school?

## Findings

While many effective strategies have been researched and linked to the prevention of bullying, this study focuses specifically on student engagement as a key contributor to student dropout, and as a promising practice in assisting school leaders to prevent bullying in K-12 schools and fostering an anti-bullying culture. Three prevalent themes emerged from the data and clear, observable, concrete strategies were found to be associated with each theme (see Table 1):

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Supporting Strategies</b>		
<i>Positive school climate</i>	Leadership	Whole-school approach involving all stakeholders	
<i>School organization and infrastructure</i>	Student safety and learning	Campus supervision	Student groupings/ cohort model
<i>Student interactions</i>	Cooperative learning model	Character building and social skills	

**Table 1** Emerging themes and supporting strategies

The first theme is positive school climate. There are two main findings related to this theme: leadership which involves collective team-building and use of a whole-school approach involving all stakeholders. The leaders built a school team around shared educational values and belief systems - the shared belief that all students can learn if they feel safe and cared about. This shared belief system fostered a sense of cohesion among educators, staff, and the community. A well-staffed parent center and volunteer program supported teachers and student programs. Stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, staff, and community members) were treated as partners, welcomed, respected, and given the message that they are a necessary component to the school family. Clear visual images and displays around the school further communicated a welcoming message to all stakeholders and set a positive tone with high expectations for all. Teachers at this school were highly regarded, celebrated, respected, and seen as the major change agents by administration, parents, and the community.

The second theme was school organization and infrastructure. There were three findings related to this theme: student safety and learning involving the physical organization and layout of the school, a campus supervision plan, and use of student groupings or a cohort model. A detailed plan for the physical organization and layout of the school was implemented including strategic, but simple, logical solutions to address common problems in the school that affected student safety and learning. These common problems included traffic in hallways, stairwells, lunch areas, entry and exit areas, and the routine trash and cleanliness problems that made the school feel “chaotic”. They created school norms to address these problems and implemented a stairwell system to control flow during transition times, separate entry and exit doors, painted line dividers and

walking paths to control lunch lines, and simple lunch tray norms teaching and reinforcing students to keep their food on their trays while they eat to improve cleanliness of the school. The school was physically renovated and beautification efforts included gathering areas for students, and a large community garden in a historically problematic area of the school. They instituted an organized, structured, goal-directed “active” form of campus supervision that required staff to be visible and regularly provide consistency and opportunities for positive interaction with students. Teachers voluntarily supervised their hallways during transition periods without being asked because they “wanted to do their part” and ensure that the supervision element worked to improve the climate. Lastly, they implemented of a system for grouping students utilizing a cohort model. The grouping system kept students and teachers together in contiguous space areas. This included teacher and counselor teams that followed the same students from year to year. This grouping system of students and teachers created a sense of “smallness” and increased opportunities for the development of relationships with teachers, and friendships which increased the cohesion. It addressed safety in that students travelled together from class to class and did not travel very far as their classes were right next to each other in the same hallway. They also instituted an advisory period that served as a “school family”. This advisory period allowed time for students and teachers to develop relationships together and focus on non-academic content such as life skills, character development and growing together as a class community. Students remained with their advisory teachers and cohort from year to year allowing for strengthened relationships. The grouping system at this school created a sense of safety, community, equity, and access for all students.

The last theme was student interactions. There are two findings related to this theme: use of a cooperative learning model, and teaching character building and social skills. The view taken by the school was that increasing positive interactions and communication among students would increase engagement with the school. They utilized a cooperative learning model in every classroom that allowed for consistent integration of student inquiry, dialogue, and interaction. Classrooms were set up with desks in pods to allow for cooperative learning. The very act of students talking together, discussing, questioning, working out a problem, was the essence of student interaction. Within this, relationships between students were developed that might normally have never flourished had they not been in an organized structure and made to work together. The development and fostering of character-building and social skills were focused on daily through second step curriculum, advisory periods, and daily intercom announcements from the principal and student leaders. They also offered a multitude of clubs, such as the Gay, Straight, Alliance (GSA) which focused on the “respectful treatment of all”, and many after school activities led by teachers.

These emerging themes provide the systems and structures within the school that were implemented and sustained to foster an anti-bullying culture:

1. A positive school climate was fostered through leadership that involved collective team-building and the use of a whole-school approach.
2. The school organization and infrastructure was strengthened by a focus on student safety and learning, an effective campus supervision protocol, and a system for the grouping of students/cohort model.
3. Student interactions were increased through the implementation of a school-wide cooperative learning model with a focus on student relationships, character building, and social skills.

Based on these findings, this model demonstrates that not one single solution alone can determine the academic culture of a school. An infrastructure designed around a collective vision by all stakeholders is the foundation. The principal stated, “it’s all in the details” of what is done daily, consistently, in communicating the message that the most important thing is the safety of students and learning, “in that order.” A concerted, deliberate focus on relationships, and student engagement, is the vehicle to realizing an anti-bullying culture and protecting against the slow process of student dropout, which begins with students not feeling connected to school.

The findings support the guiding theoretical framework used for this study. Social ecological theory has been widely researched and is the best framework for understanding bullying and school violence (Barboza et al., 2009; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). The negative historical context of the school had permeated all levels of the system. It is unlikely that any approach, other than a systems-level one, would have transformed this school environment and community. The three emerging themes and respective findings of positive school climate, school organization and infrastructure, and student interactions, support a social ecological framework. School-based family counselors can apply these findings within their practice to better serve their students and schools.

### **A prevention focus and its relationship with the School-Based Family Counseling model**

These study findings have multiple implications for SBFC professionals. The model studied highlights the six areas of strengths of SBFC. In addition, the main findings can be viewed through a SBFC model and framework. These findings coincide within the school and family prevention quadrants of the SBFC model, and can provide strategies for the SBFC professional to work within a system that is heavily prevention focused.

There are six main areas of strengths in the SBFC model. These include maintaining a systems focus, being strength-based, having partnerships with parents, being multi-culturally sensitive, being advocates for children and families, and actively promoting the transformation of schools (Soriano & Gerrard, 2013). The present study highlights the importance of a systems focused transformation of a school by way of utilization of its strongest assets, its stakeholders - students, families, school staff, and community. A concerted focus on relationships between all stakeholders within the school, and a restructuring of the school organization and infrastructure to focus on relationships and partnerships provided a way for a positive transformation for a school with a historically negative and violent history. Focusing on the strength areas of the SBFC model provides a way for a collaborative and systems oriented approach to prevention and intervention.

The findings of this study can be also aligned with the SBFC model in conceptualizing interventions. The SBFC model, as described by Soriano & Gerrard (2013), illustrates the primary focus of SBFC to be on the school and the family in the area of prevention and intervention. The model consists of four quadrants: school prevention, school intervention, family prevention, and family intervention. It provides a framework to help SBFC professionals stay focused on working systemically within a school structure which is at the heart of the SBFC approach; an integration of the use of interventions that connect students, families and school together (see Figure 1).

The three emerging themes found in this study along with their supporting strategies largely occupy the Prevention Focus quadrants of the SBFC model. The research findings suggest that the school model developed is highly focused on prevention according to the SBFC model. The

specific focus on prevention within a systems perspective reduces the need for intervention-related services. The focus on prevention shifts the balance from a reactive model to a more proactive one. The need for school and family interventions will always exist and is a definite need within school systems. The development of a school system that is heavily prevention focused will allow for more time and use of deliberate and intentional interventions for youth and families by SBFC professionals (see Figure 2).

<b>School Focus</b>		
<b>Prevention Focus</b>	<b><i>School-Prevention</i></b> Guidance groups Classroom management Classroom meetings Stress management	<b><i>School-Intervention</i></b> Teacher consultation Group counseling Crisis intervention Student support groups
	<b><i>Family-Prevention</i></b> Parent education Parent support groups	<b><i>Family-Intervention</i></b> Family counseling Parent consultation Couples counseling
<b>Family Focus</b>		<b>Intervention Focus</b>

**Figure 1** The SBFC model (Soriano & Gerrard, 2013)

<b>School Focus</b>		
<b>Prevention Focus</b>	<u><b>School-Prevention</b></u>  <b><i>Positive school climate:</i></b> Leadership and whole-school approach  <b><i>School organization &amp; infrastructure:</i></b> Student safety and learning, campus supervision, student groupings/cohorts  <b><i>Student interactions:</i></b> cooperative learning model, focus on character building and social skills	<u><b>School-Intervention</b></u>
	<u><b>Family-Prevention</b></u>  <b><i>Positive school climate:</i></b> Leadership and whole-school approach, including all stakeholders	<u><b>Family-Intervention</b></u>
<b>Family Focus</b>		<b>Intervention Focus</b>

**Figure 2** Findings aligned with the SBFC model Prevention Focus quadrants

### **Implications for practice and policy**

The findings of this study have direct implications that may be helpful for districts, schools, educators, and SBFC professionals in improving how schools can effectively develop school-wide, wholistic approaches, specific to their school communities, which foster an anti-bullying culture focused on engaging students. Based on our findings, the following implications for school-based practice may be put forward:

1. A whole-school approach is recommended.
2. Impacting belief systems and creating a shared vision is the main foundation for an integrated whole-school approach.
3. Consider leadership styles that engage all systems-levels when tasked with the complete transformation of an institution.
4. A systems-level approach is needed that includes all stakeholders to effectively create an anti-bullying culture.
5. Consider an infrastructure conducive to a focus on student interactions and relationships, such as a student grouping or cohort model.
6. Consider incorporating a cooperative learning model to increase student engagement, and focus on student interactions within their schools.
7. Consider effective systems and structures to put in place that will aid in creating this sense of safety for students when they are outside the classroom.
8. A detailed protocol for campus supervision is important to maintaining safety.

### **Conclusions**

Implementing the aforementioned prevention-focused systems and structures focusing on student engagement and safety should aid in promoting an anti-bullying culture in schools. A detailed, comprehensive, school-wide plan is required for cultivating a culture that prevents bullying. As school leaders and change agents, School-Based Family Counselors can apply the findings of this study to their practice in the area of school and family prevention that lies within the Prevention quadrants of the SBFC model. As the school principal in this study stated, creating a culture that focuses on student safety and learning is “about every detail... it is in the actual deed of what we do every day.” Focusing every detail, every day, on student safety and learning, while utilizing student engagement as a strategy, in effect will create not only a school culture that prevents bullying, but one that protects against the disengagement of students from school, thus preventing student dropout.

Two provisos need to be raised. Firstly, in accordance with the core tenets of SFBC, a detailed and comprehensive process of preventive family involvement, more than was possible in the present study, should be undertaken and analyzed. This process needs to be carefully integrated with school-based changes, like the ones described above. Secondly, such dual-system changes need to be evaluated comprehensively, using quantitative and qualitative measures as appropriate, in order to test the validity of the conclusions suggested above. Taken together, that will allow a more complete analysis of the dynamics of SBFC as a whole in relation to the reduction of bullying and the prevention of drop-out through student engagement as addressed in this study.

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