



## **Bullying in Minnesota Schools: An analysis of the Minnesota Student Survey, 2010**

### **Executive Summary**

The Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) is administered every three years to students in 6<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. In the 2010 administration, 89 percent of school districts in the state participated in the survey.

Of those students participating, 42.9 percent reported no involvement in bullying. Thirty percent (30.7%) said they had made fun of, teased, or excluded others once or twice in the last month, and 27.2% said they had experienced those things once or twice in the past month, which does not constitute bullying or victimization at this rate.<sup>1</sup> Of those remaining, 12.6 percent were classified as *victims* (were made fun of, teased in a hurtful way, or excluded from friends or activities by others with a frequency of weekly or more), 9.3 percent were classified as *bullies* (engaged in the actions listed above toward victims with a frequency of weekly or more), and 3.1 percent were *bully/victims* (bullied and victimized at least weekly).

Throughout the reports in this series, several findings emerged consistently.

- Students regularly involved in bullying incidents, whether victim, offender or bully/victim (bullying-involved students), have high rates of associated experiences, most of them negative.
- The data in these reports indicate that those classified as bullies have been victims of maltreatment themselves, in many cases.
- Bully/victims stand alone as the most at-risk group in every domain.
- On a positive note, nearly half of all students responding had *no* involvement with bullying as a victim or a bully. This group benefits from not being a target or engaging in bullying activities, but also seems to be supported by assets in home, school, community, and peer contexts. Across analyses, the “never involved” group had the lowest incidence of risk factors and the highest frequency of protective factors.

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<sup>1</sup> Both questions had the response options of “never”, “once or twice”, “about once a week”, “several times a week” or “every day”. A calculated response option for both questions was created that included student responses of “about once a week”, “several times a week”, and “every day”. This category was renamed “weekly or more”. Definitions of bullying vary, but there are common elements, including an imbalance of power, intent to cause harm and repetition. According to the U.S. Department of Education website on bullying prevention, StopBullying.Gov, “incidents of bullying happen to the same the person over and over by the same person or group of people.” For more information, go to <http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/>.

This report is organized into five briefs: family, community, personal characteristics, school experiences, and victimization. Highlights from each brief are described below.

### ***Families***

The majority of students in this survey report living with two parents. Students with bullying experiences are less likely than those never involved in bullying to report this living arrangement. Most family living situations are relatively comparable in terms of the odds of bullying involvement. Students are most at risk when they reported living with no adults or gave no answer to this question. Students with bullying experiences, regardless of the type, are more likely to report coming from an abusive or unsafe home environment. There is a significant association between witnessing or being a victim of violence in the home as well as being a victim of intra-familial sexual abuse and bullying involvement. Bully/victims appear to experience the highest likelihood of victimization or witness violence within the home.

### ***Community***

Victims, offenders, and bully-victims experience fewer of the protective factors that help buffer them against the hardships in life, and experience more risk factors. Those connections that occur within the community context – adult and peer connections, and neighborhood connections – appear to be lacking. Participation in structured activities is fairly similar across groups, but students involved in bullying spend more days per week unsupervised after school. Those who were never involved in bullying spent more time on homework and reading than their bully-involved peers. Bullies and bully/victims spent more time in activities such as watching TV, talking/texting on the phone, going online, and playing video games.

### ***Personal Characteristics***

This brief reviews race, Body Mass Index (BMI), special education placement, physical health, mental health, and alcohol and drug use as they relate to bullying experiences. Results of the MSS indicate that white students are slightly underrepresented in bullies, victims, and bully-victims. Bullies, victims and bully-victims are slightly more likely to be overweight and about twice as likely to be obese as are non-bullying involved students. Chronic physical and mental health problems are more likely to be reported by victims, bullies, or bully/victims than by those not involved in bullying. Especially concerning is the finding that one-quarter to more than one-third of bullying-involved students have thought of suicide in the past year. Those never involved in bullying have low rates of mental health risk factors. Finally, bullies and bully/victims have the highest rates of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs (ATOD) usage compared to their peers.

### ***School***

Students in Minnesota are likely to report similar experiences to those across the country when variables of school-related risks and bullying are concerned. Students involved in bullying, whether victims, bullies or bully/victims are more likely to carry weapons, including guns, to school on a semi-regular basis and are less likely to perceive their schools as safe places to be. Victims, bullies, and bully/victims skip school more often than the average student, both due to fear for their safety and for other reasons. Attitudes toward school and perceptions of care from teachers are more negative for bullying-involved students than for their peers.

Although bullying-involved students did not report supports in a frequency as high as those not involved in bullying, some positive results were found. More than half of victims, bullies, and bully-victims reported that their friends care about them “very much” or “quite a bit”. Similarly, more than half reported that at least some teachers were interested in them as a person, and more than one-third reported that teachers care about them “very much” or “quite a bit”. This is a promising start, but it is important to keep in mind that these are precisely the students who need support more than their peers. Finally,

students who are involved in bullying are less likely than other students to report getting As and Bs on their report cards.

### ***Victimization***

This brief reviews the victimization experiences of students across school, home, peer, and community environments. Most students experience some form of threat or harassment at school at some time or another. However, for students who participate in bullying as bullies and/or victims, the intensity and variety of these experiences increase. Students who are involved in bullying are significantly more likely to report victimization in other contexts as well, including in the home, community, and with partners. This finding of “poly-victim” status among bullies and victims indicates that these students are at higher risk than their school-based bullying experiences alone can explain.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Prevention and Intervention***

Bullying is best prevented by working to reduce its prevalence, increasing the capacity of adults and students to identify and respond, and utilizing formative (non-punitive) discipline. Bullying prevention and intervention initiatives “should include individual, peer, family, school, and community efforts” (Swearer, et al. 2010). “Bullying is a relationship problem that requires relationship solutions” (Morrison, 2011; Craig, 2007). To prevent bullying, school staff need to be intentional and consistent in teaching the skills of respect, responsibility and reparation/restoration (Morrison, 2007).

### ***Tiered levels of support***

Implementing and maintaining a comprehensive, whole-school bullying prevention or positive school climate program using tiered levels of support is necessary to re-affirm, restore and re-build relationships damaged by bullying. In this framework, students and staff participate in universal education regarding bullying, relationship skills and social emotional learning, to build a school ethos of care that *re-affirms* relationships. Targeted interventions intending to *repair* relationships are applied at the earliest possible sign of disconnection or harm. Early interventions can include peer mediation to address conflict, class problem-solving to address behaviors that disrupt the learning environment, and adult-facilitated conversations to repair harm (Hopkins, 2004, Morrison, 2007).

### ***Formative (non-punitive) discipline***

Intensive interventions, designed to *re-build* relationships are offered when on-going harm has occurred. These interventions are facilitated by adults trained in non-punitive processes. Depending upon the severity of the harm, participants include family members and other supportive adults, as well as the people affected by the bullying (Morrison, 2007). Non-punitive interventions include Method of Shared Concern, No-Blame Approach (or Support-Group Approach) and Restorative Justice Approaches (Morrison, 2011, Rigby, 2007).

### ***Increase bystander and adult skills to intervene***

Research indicates that when a student speaks up and tries to stop bullying, the “bullying behavior stops within 10 seconds, 75 percent of the time (Hawkins, Pepler & Craig, 2001). Teach all students how to intervene assertively—walk away, support the child who is the target, report to a responsible adult, or assertively tell the child who is bullying to stop.

Students learn from adult behavior. Adults can treat all students with respect, help all students look valuable in the eyes of their classmates, and learn to intervene in a non-shaming manner to harmful, hurtful behaviors. Debra Pepler recommends teachers use buddies, circles of support, peer mentors and

workgroups to mix students together in the classroom to foster relationships. In addition, adults should monitor their own use of power to ensure positive relationships and healthy role modeling (Pepler, 2007).

### ***Promote students' asset and protective factors***

Young people who are regularly involved in bullying incidents do seem to demonstrate attempts to thrive. Adults should build on this inclination, by providing both students who bully and students who have been bullied opportunities in school and out of school to build social skills, find safe places to contribute to the school or community, and connect with caring adults (Benson, 2008).

### ***Differentiate discipline and expand interventions***

If a student is identified as bullying other students, in addition to any disciplinary intervention sanctioned by the school, the student should be referred to student assistance staff to explore other experiences of victimization in their life, whether in the family, community or in dating relationships. Similar referrals to student assistance staff should be considered for victims of bullying. The UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools notes that student involved in bullying incidents are not the same; their experiences, responses and life circumstances vary, which suggests a "personalized intervention focus" (Adelman and Taylor, 2011). Use formative consequences in lieu of suspension or detention so as to maintain the connection between the student and the school and caring adults.

(See PrevNet, <http://prevnet.ca/Home/tabid/36/Default.aspx> > Downloads > formative consequences.)

Student assistance staff/teams can strategize interventions with these associated behaviors in mind. For instance, there is a high level of association between weapons possession and bullying experiences, especially as student grow older. Consider exploring with a student who brings a weapon to school if they have experienced bullying as a victim, an offender or a bully-victim.

### ***Attend to the needs of the victim***

Students regularly involved in bullying, whether victim or bully, participate at higher rates than their peers in at-risk behaviors that create larger safety concerns in the school and community and that may lead to offending behavior. Districts should establish a policy of attending to the needs of victims of bullying, which may include discussions with student support staff, family members and family health care providers. Interventions such as restorative measures, when applied by a trained, experienced restorative facilitator, can help address the needs of victims, bullies, and other affected parties (Anderson, 1977).

### ***Educate school staff***

Teach principals, deans, assistant principals, behavior specialists and staff about the associated behaviors and experiences of victims, offenders and bully-victims. Because the students regularly involved in bullying experiences may have other forms of victimization or trauma, all staff should be trained in the universal precautions for trauma informed care:

"As part of trauma informed care...each adult working with any child or adolescent *presumes* that the child has been trauma exposed...the use of **universal precautions in support of trauma informed care** involves providing unconditional respect to the child and being careful not to challenge him/her in ways that produce shame and humiliation. Such an approach has no down side, since children who have been exposed to trauma require it, and other, more fortunate children deserve and can also benefit from this fundamentally humanistic commitment" (Hodas, G. Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, February 2006).

***Coordinate policy, curriculum and practice:*** Interconnect bullying data, research, prevention and intervention best practices and that of other victimizations, risk behaviors or perpetration in curriculum, policy and practice. Bullying reduction requires a multifaceted and integrated approach, with interventions embedded in other initiatives. School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports,

Social Emotional Learning, and Student Learning Supports provide a framework for such a comprehensive approach (Adelman and Taylor, 2011). See the Common Principles of Effective Practice regarding “coherent alignment of policies and practices” (implementation teams, continuous feedback loop, shared vision, collaboration, data support, professional development) at: <http://education.state.mn.us> > Implementation of Effective Practice.

### ***Use Common Principles of Effective Practice***

Whole-school bullying prevention or positive school climate programs have many components that need integration into the practices and policy of the school to be effective. This process of building a safe environment takes time and intentional management of the system of program that is being implemented to decrease incidents of bullying. Principles of Effective Practice as outlined by the Minnesota Department of Education include:

- Attention to identifying clear outcomes tied to measureable data.
- Using evidence based practices.
- Ensuring practices are culturally responsive.
- Involving parents and the community.

Equally important is the effective implementation of these programming efforts which require attention to exploration and buy-in from staff, strong leadership, ongoing feedback and communication and measuring indicators to ensure implementation is occurring as intended. For more information, see: <http://education.state.mn.us> > Implementation of Effective Practice.

### ***Additional areas of study***

The Minnesota Student Survey has other questions that invite further study in relationship to the bullying questions, including sexual victimization, sexual orientation, suicidal ideation and attempts, and self-mutilation behaviors. In addition, the questions could be reviewed regarding bias for gender and culture.

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#### Websites

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: <http://www.casel.org/>.

Cyberbullying Research Center–Resources for Cyberbullying <http://www.cyberbullying.us>.

Minnesota Department of Education: <http://education.state.mn.us>.

Implementation of Effective Practice

[http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Academic\\_Excellence/Implement\\_Effect\\_Practic/](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Academic_Excellence/Implement_Effect_Practic/).

Minnesota Student Survey

[http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Learning\\_Support/Safe\\_and\\_Healthy\\_Learners/Minnesota\\_Student\\_Survey](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Learning_Support/Safe_and_Healthy_Learners/Minnesota_Student_Survey).

Safe and Healthy Learners

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Minnesota Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports website, <http://pbismn.org/>.

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