

MI Policy Brief:

‘Sticks and Stones...’ Preventing Bullying in AZ Schools

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A National Spotlight on a Local Issue

Despite an abundance of prevention research and programming, the pervasiveness of bullying and victimization among youth in Arizona and across the nation remains concerning. National estimates continue to demonstrate that bullying is a primary problem for students and school officials. A 2010 survey conducted by the National Education Association found that 62% of teachers and school professionals witnessed two or more bullying incidents at school in the past month, while 41% witnessed bullying at least once a week or more.¹ Alarming, over half of the school personnel observed multiple bullying incidents between students in the span of just a few weeks. This says nothing about the frequency and severity of bullying that goes *unnoticed* by school officials.

In December 2010, Education Secretary Arne Duncan submitted an open letter to state governors and chief state school officers detailing national awareness of the impact of bullying in American schools and calling to action educators, policymakers, parents and communities to effectively address bullying. By outlining federal efforts such as the Bullying Prevention Summit held in August 2010, the online bullying prevention resource center www.stopbullying.gov, the Stop Bullying Now! campaign and the Safe and Supportive Schools initiative, the White House administration has established an ongoing commitment to bullying prevention in order to improve school conditions and foster social and academic success for the country’s youth.

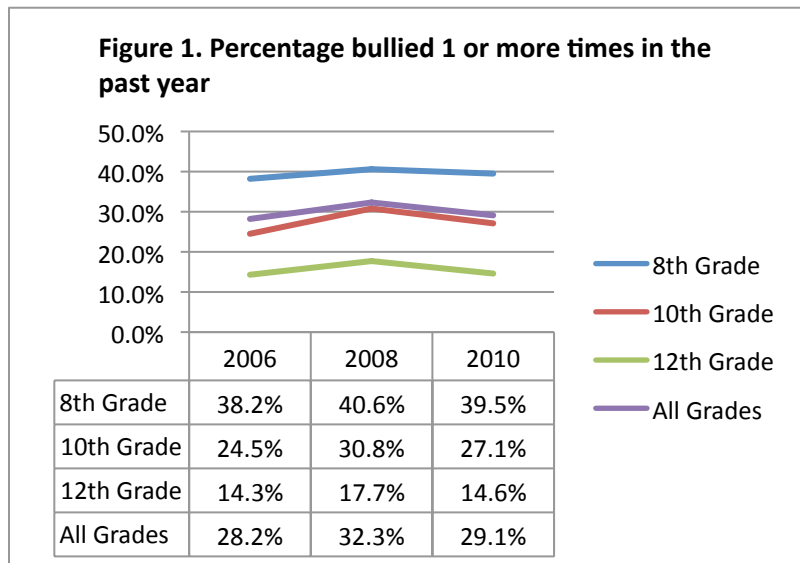
¹ Bradshaw, C.P., Waasdorp, T.E., O’Brennan, L.M., & Gulemetova, M. (2010). *Findings from the National Education Association’s Nationwide Study of Bullying: Teachers’ and education support professionals’ perspectives*. National Education Association.

On March 10, 2011, President and First Lady Obama hosted the first-ever White House Conference on Bullying Prevention, a meeting among families, teachers, policymakers, and prevention experts that was held in the aftermath of recent incidents implicating bullying in the suicides of several youth and young adults, particularly those victimized through electronic media and victims identified as (or assumed to be) lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). The White House’s focus in these areas is astute; a 2009 national survey of 6th through 12th graders by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) revealed that 84.6% of LGBT students were verbally harassed or threatened, 40.1% were pushed or shoved, 18.8% were physically assaulted and 52.9% were harassed via the Internet or other technological platforms due to their sexual orientation.²

At levels not seen since the tragic mass shooting at Columbine High School over a decade ago, bullying has once again received nationwide attention because of its negative impact on youth academic achievement, social development and psychological health, both nationally and in Arizona.

Arizona Schools Tackle an Ongoing Problem

Victimization at school through intimidation, threats or physical and emotional harm often makes youth feel unsafe and more likely to avoid school, thereby impacting their ability to learn and succeed academically.³ The Arizona Youth Survey (AYS) and Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) are two widely used methods relied upon by the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) to track risk factors that affect achievement and student safety. Both the AYS and YRBS data point out that bullying continues to be a problem in schools.



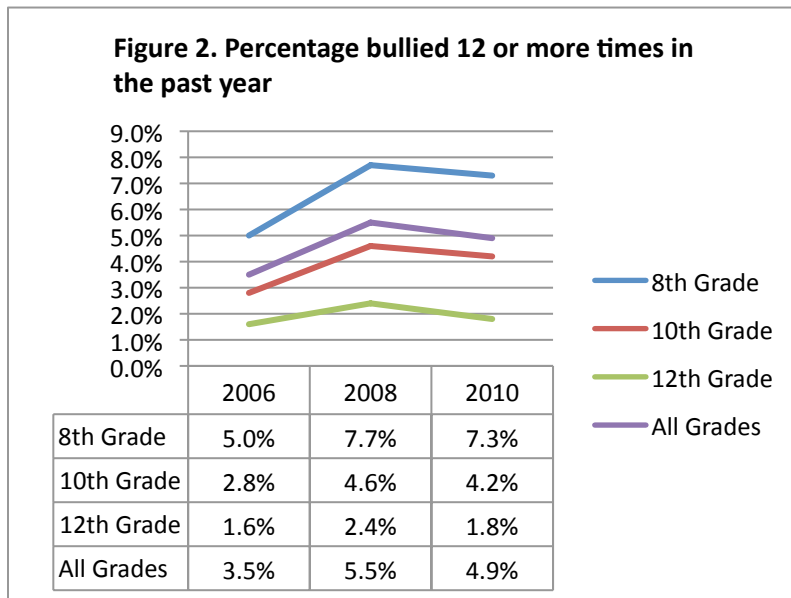
Source: Arizona Youth Survey

² *The 2009 National School Climate Survey*. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). www.glsen.org

³ Totura, C. M. Wienke, & MacKinnon-Lewis, C. (in press). Bullying in middle school: What does it look like, why does it happen, and who does it hurt? In M. Paludi (Ed.). *The psychology of teen violence and victimization*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

In 2005, responses on the YRBS indicated that 25% of 9th through 12th graders were bullied or harassed at school one or more times in the 12 months prior. This percentage rose to 26.7% in 2007 and then leveled off to an average of 26% across all grades surveyed in 2009.⁴ AYS findings collected among 8th, 10th and 12th grade students show that overall rates of bullying have remained relatively stable for all grades from 2006 to 2010, with frequency tending to be greater for 8th graders and lesser for high school students (see Figure 1).⁵

Contrast these numbers with the rates of *frequent* bullying in Arizona schools and a different pattern emerges (see Figure 2). From 2006 to 2008, reports of frequent bullying (more than 12 times in the past year) *increased*, and then leveled off or decreased slightly by 2010. Still, almost one third of students reported having been bullied in the past year, with nearly 5% of those students bullied on average at least once a month. Eighth-graders are particularly impacted.



Source: Arizona Youth Survey

And yet, students aren't the only ones worried about bullying. A 2007 Arizona Department of Education (ADE) School Safety Study reported that bullying, intimidation and harassment were among the most reported incidents of concern by school administrators in K-12th grades between 2004 and 2006 (21.72 per 1,000 students in 2004, 21.22 in 2005 and 21.36 in

2006). The more teachers are concerned with bullying among

students, the less they are able to focus on academics in the classroom.

'So, what are Arizona schools doing about this problem?'

For years, Arizona has had an anti-bullying law on the books (ARS 15-341) that requires school district governing boards to "prescribe and enforce policies and procedures to prohibit pupils from harassing, intimidating and bullying other pupils on school grounds, on school property, school buses, school bus stops and at school-sponsored events and activities." Despite the

⁴ Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results. (2005, 2007, 2009). Arizona Department of Education. www.ade.az.gov.

⁵ 2010 Arizona Youth Survey. Arizona Criminal Justice Commission.

stated policies for documenting and reporting bullying incidents, the law does not stipulate specific prevention programs or efforts to be adopted by individual school districts.

ADE's strategic plan for 2010-2012 intends to clarify the question of which practices to implement. The plan outlines a mission and goals for enhancing learning environments for all youth by providing research-based strategies and resources to ensure student health and safety. This focus on best practices significantly narrows the prevention options available to those that have been tested effective time and again in a variety of school settings.

Even with ADE's stated goals in the 2010-2012 strategic plan to advocate for research-based strategies, a 2010 School Health Profiles Report of principals indicates that only 79.4% of all schools participate in some prevention programming to address school violence and bullying,⁶ with wide diversity in chosen practices from zero tolerance policies to evidence-based curriculum. In light of ADE's stated mission, the widespread use of zero tolerance policies in Arizona may be contraindicated.⁷ Recently, an American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force exploring the effect of zero tolerance policies on school outcomes concluded that after nearly two decades of implementation, there is, in fact, very little evidence that these policies are effective in managing student behavior on the whole.⁸

The APA Task Force recognizes the logic in schools wanting to remove disruptive students in order to better the learning opportunities for those who remain, but caution against the universal application of zero tolerance policies given the lack of evidence to support their overall effectiveness in enhancing school climates. Behavioral infractions can be as varied as the students who commit them and broad disciplinary actions that do not consider the mitigating factors of individual incidents and the nuances of adolescent development can end up doing more harm than good.

Some Arizona schools have benefited from tried and true practices. The Arizona Bullying Prevention Partnership, a collaboration among Arizona State University's Arizona Prevention Resource Center (APRC), the Governor's Office for Children, Youth, and Families/Parents Commission and the Men's Anti-Violence Network (MAN) initiated in 2003, partnered with several Arizona school districts to implement the internationally renowned and research-supported Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. Within its first five years, this model whole-school approach reached over a hundred schools and tens of thousands of students.⁹

⁶ *School Health Profiles Report* (2010). Arizona Department of Education.

⁷ *Safe and Drug Free Schools Summary Analysis*. (2004). Arizona Department of Education.

⁸ American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force. (2008). Are zero tolerance policies effective in schools? *American Psychologist*, 63(9), 852-862.

⁹ ASU center initiates bully prevention efforts. (Dec. 2008). *ASU News*. www.asunews.asu.edu.

Tracking bullying incidents is another challenge Arizona is tackling. ADE is currently designing and testing Arizona Safety Accountability for Education (AzSAFE), a system for collecting and managing school safety incident data. The system is intended to make reporting of school safety violations – including bullying – uniform across schools and collected in a manner that allows for a standardized approach in the evaluation of incidents and the actions taken to address them.

Most recently, Arizona was one of the 11 states awarded a federal Safe and Supportive Schools grant, in partnership with the University of Arizona's College of Education. Arizona was awarded more than \$5 million to fund efforts in 28 high schools across 16 districts intended to improve school climate. The identified intervention will serve as a catalyst to enhance student connectedness with their schools. By advancing this effort, the hope is that youth will become more engaged in schoolwork and less engaged in disruptive behaviors, such as bullying.¹⁰

In the Forefront: LGBT Youth and Cyberbullying

Since its inception in September 2010, the *It Gets Better Project* to empower LGBT youth and stamp out the deleterious effects of harassment and bias based on sexual orientation has gone viral with images such as that of Fort Worth, Texas, City Councilman Joel Burns very publicly illustrating the emotional impact of the victimization he endured throughout childhood. And this impact has been felt closer to home for many Arizonans. Findings from the GLSEN 2007 National School Climate Survey showed upwards of 82% of Arizona's LGBT youth were verbally harassed for their sexual orientation, with 43% experiencing physical harassment and 22% assault in the past year.¹¹ Given such focus on the importance of safe and healthy school environments for all students, these reported levels of bullying remain extremely troublesome.

The Arizona Legislature introduced several bills this past session targeting school violence, and specifically bullying. Taking cues from the national spotlights on severe bullying incidents involving LGBT youth and cyberbullying, along with impassioned stories from Arizona families, new language was proposed to augment the existing Arizona law with explicit behaviors to be governed. SB 1549 and HB 2580 attempted to advance legislation by specifically defining the behaviors that constitute bullying and harassment (in addition to asking school staff to serve as role models for appropriate behavior). This is especially important since research has shown how not having a universal understanding of bullying leaves interpretation of incidents up to

¹⁰ Everett-Haynes, L. (Feb. 2011). UA earns federal dollars to help create safer schools. *UA News*. www.uanews.org.

¹¹ *Inside Arizona Schools: The Experiences of LGBT Students*. (2007). GLSEN National School Climate Survey.

individual discretion¹², thereby varying to great degrees the consequences (if any) schools may dole out for bullying. These bills are currently on hold in the Legislature.

HB 2268 also attempted to take the bullying definition a step further by including prohibitive language on bullying, harassment and intimidation based on perceived or actual sexual orientation and requiring policies and procedures for addressing it. Again, this bill is on hold in the House. One bill that actually did pass this last session, HB 2415, specifically addressed bullying by means of electronic technology and communications, or cyberbullying. Further strengthening the grounding of the legislation, the bill outlined requirements for schools to adequately document and track reports of bullying and a call for disciplinary action for school personnel who do not take appropriate steps to protect youth. In response to recent incidents in Arizona schools, including the physical assault of a teenager in which school officials took no reported action to seek law enforcement or medical intervention on his behalf¹³, HB 2415 has now been signed into Arizona law.

Moving Forward ...

Over the last several years, Arizona's bullying rate has been virtually unchanged. In spite of legislation passed in 2005 mandating schools to take a stand, the incidence of bullying remains disturbingly high, especially for those experiencing chronic and severe bullying. While perhaps disappointing, this finding is not uncommon, even in districts that have made concerted efforts to address the problem.¹⁴

Recent efforts by ADE and the Arizona Legislature are promising, yet without universal focus on environmental evidence-based practices and policies and systems for accountability, preventing bullying will continue to be a challenge for a state as large and diverse as Arizona, especially for often marginalized groups like LGBT youth. Efforts to standardize definitions of bullying, either by legislation or ADE policy, will further enhance prevention efforts. With the passage of HB 2415 and federal support for ADE to develop interventions and monitoring mechanisms to improve school climate, future generations of Arizonans stand a better chance at an education free from threats and harassment. ADE would benefit from investment in research to evaluate the impact of new legislation and implementation of its strategic plan on bullying and school-related outcomes, with particular attention paid to middle-schoolers and more vulnerable, at-risk groups.

¹² Totura, C. M. Wienke, Green, A., Karver, M. S., & Gesten, E. L. (2009). Multiple informants in the assessment of psychological, behavioral, and academic correlates of bullying and victimization. *Journal of Adolescence*, 32, 193-211.

¹³ Salazar, J. (Feb. 2011). House committee OKs bill to force school procedures on bullying. *AZ Capitol Times*. www.AzCapitolTimes.com

¹⁴ Berger, K. S. (2007). Update on bullying at school: Science forgotten? *Developmental Review*, 27, 90-126.

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