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Empowering Students: Using Data to Transform a Bullying Prevention and Intervention Program

This article describes a middle school counseling department's journey and commitment to use data to seek more effective and efficient ways to provide comprehensive school counseling services to its diverse student population. Specifically, the study details the process used to design focused accountability questions that measured the effectiveness of anti-bullying and harassment strategies. As a result, the school counselors began to routinely and systemically track and use data to transform their counseling services. They were able to clearly measure how and if students were different as a result of school counseling services.

Cultivating an environment that encourages school counselors to ground decisions in student-centered outcomes that directly impact academic success, balance emotional stressors, and influence postsecondary decisions for all students requires a systemic approach to the transformation of school counseling services. This article describes a suburban middle school counseling department's journey and commitment to seek more effective and efficient ways to deliver comprehensive school counseling services to its diverse population. The systemic evaluation of personal and social services was at the forefront of its quest to identify factors that prohibited students from succeeding in a learning environment.

The first step was to identify and understand what the school counselors wanted to know about factors and obstacles that prohibit learning (Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, 2007; Brunner & Lewis, 2007; Hoover & Oliver, 1996; Kaffenberger & Young, 2007). Although the journey to identify factors began with collaboration and guidance from the district school counseling specialist and a local university counselor educator, the school counselors were driven by a grounded school counseling mission statement that advocated success and empowerment for all students through collaboration with stakeholders, and a philosophical belief that all students can achieve (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005). Moreover, the school's vision to promote a safe environment that empowered students to seek new challenges in a resourceful and collaborative learning community helped school counselors develop a burning question that, if answered, would empower students to explore new opportunities and foster a safe learning environment (Kaffenberger & Young; Rigby, 2001). The reality at this school was that in spite of mandated lessons on bullying and harassment and a zero-tolerance school district philosophy, the school counselors were aware of a significant amount of bullying going on at the school. The question became, "What are the students' perceptions of bullying at their middle school?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

The prevalence of school bullying resulted in the urgent need to quantify strategies that convey zero tolerance for behaviors that threaten the physical and emotional safety of students (Carney, 2008; Estevez, Musitu, & Herrero, 2005; Lewis, Powers, Kelk, & Newcomber, 2002; Rigby, 2003; Shore, 2005). Children who bully are more likely to get into fights, vandalize property, drop out of school, and engage in criminal activities as young adults (Olweus, 1993). The victims of bullying often show psychological distress, including poor social adjustment and isolation, which affects their ability to learn (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007; Rigby). The collaborative efforts of school counselors, teachers, parents, and community leaders have helped to increase awareness and teach students how to respond to unwanted and unsolicited comments and behaviors. Schoolwide anti-bullying models can detail the harmful effects and reduce incidents of school bullying (Brunner & Lewis, 2007).

School bullying occurs when an individual purposely inflicts or attempts to inflict harm to another student (Olweus, 1993). Categorically, bullying has been classified as physical, verbal, relational, or cyber (Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007; Shore, 2005). Physical

aggression poses an immediate disruption at the site of occurrence. The infraction not only impacts the victim, but also staggers and shifts the mood of bystanders. Attention to deescalate the power of the bully and calm the atmosphere occurs swiftly and gains the direct attention of the school administrator (Brunner & Lewis, 2007; Jacobsen & Bauman; Rigby, 2001). Consequential procedures for physical aggression are often clearly documented in policies and regulations. Conversely, until recently, verbal bullying and relational bullying were accepted as forms of playful and harmless teasing (Carney, 2008; Hoover & Oliver, 1996). Name calling and teasing were considered rites of passage for adolescents. Exclusion in social groups or activities was deemed more prevalent among girls than boys and not clearly defined as relational concerns or intended to inflict harm (Casey-Cannon & Gowen, 2001; Farmer, Farmer, Estell, & Hutchins, 2007). Additionally, the recent emergence of cyberbullying has created a concern and challenge for adults to protect young children and adolescents. Cyberbullying involves sending or posting harmful words or images using the Internet or digital communication devices (Feinberg & Robey, 2008).

The collaborative efforts of school counselors, teachers, parents, and community leaders have led to increased public awareness and the development of structured programs that teach students how to report all forms of bullying and harassment (Garbarino & deLara, 2003; Hoover & Oliver, 1996; Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007; Rigby, 2001). Comprehensive and contextual approaches that do not aim at target populations, but rather center on universal adaptation for all students, appear to strengthen positive and supportive relationships between students and teachers (Farmer et al., 2007; Rigby, 2003; Scarpaci, 2006; Shore, 2005). Many school districts have installed filtering software, published manuals, and formed district-level committees to combat physical, verbal, relational, or cyberbullying and to foster a safe environment for students. School counselors can serve as leaders and advocates to initiate empowerment programs, teach resolution skills, facilitate small groups, and create classroom guidance lessons for students (ASCA, 2005).

Despite school counseling interventions, facilitation of bullying classroom guidance lessons, and county mandates, the school counselors at this school believed, as school counselors often do across the nation, that incidents of bullying were more frequent than reported. There was also insufficient evidence to support that the lessons and curricula were effective. Therefore, this study focused on the efforts of the middle school counselors to understand students' perceptions about bullying and to evaluate the impact of the school's anti-bullying program.

> Children who bully are more likely to get into fights, vandalize property, drop out of school, and engage in criminal activities as young adults.

METHOD

The present study illustrates the steps that four school counselors took to address bullying and harassment from a schoolwide approach. The purpose of their investigation was to determine the effectiveness of the bully and harassment lessons, the extent of bullying at the middle school level, student awareness of strategies to resist bullying, and teacher perception of the extent of bullying at this middle school.

Participants
The participants for this study were seventh- and eighth-grade students enrolled in a large, mid-Atlantic, public school nestled in a diverse, committed, and engaged parent community. The average enrollment was approximately 1,000 students. One hundred percent of the student population participated in one or more aspects of the bullying prevention program. Differentiated teaching strategies to accommodate student learning were used in the following programs: English Speakers of Other Languages and Students with Disabilities.

History of Interventions
This study was conducted by the school counselors over a 3-year period. The four school counselors facilitated large-group and classroom guidance lessons. Teaching strategies aligned with the ASCA National Standards and were incorporated in the lessons. For example, academic standards related to students taking responsibility for their own actions. Personal and social standards integrated into lessons plans and activities involved identifying and expressing feelings, distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate behavior, understanding the need for self-control, respecting alternative points of view, developing effective coping skills, recognizing personal boundaries and rights, and differentiating between situations requiring peer support and situations requiring adult professional help. For the purpose of this study, the school counselors established the following operational definitions and articulated them to the students for clarity:

1. Bullying is when a person or group repeatedly tries to harm someone. Sometimes it involves direct attacks such as hitting, name calling, teasing, or taunting. Sometimes it is indirect, such as spreading rumors or trying to make others reject someone.
2. Cyberbullying occurs when a person is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed, or otherwise targeted by another using the Internet, interactive and digital technologies, or cellular phones.

The school counselors cotaught the bullying lessons to seventh- and eighth-grade students through health and physical education classes on separate days for approximately 40 minutes. Class sizes ranged from 40 (one class) to 110 (three classes) students each class period. A seven-question survey was administered to all students at the conclusion of the bullying lesson. The survey included six questions with responses to a Likert scale and one open-ended response question. The lessons incorporated the district mandated objectives.

During the first year, the school counselors used the district bullying materials as the sole framework for the seventh- and eighth-grade lessons. The second year began with new bullying prevention programs that were developed at the school level addressing the particular needs of the school community. An anonymous bullying-reporting Web site was created for all students to access. An administrator regularly monitored the Web site and addressed student concerns in collaboration with school counselors and other administrators. The Web site was introduced to the student body by the school counselors at each of the seventh- and eighth-grade anti-bullying presentations.

Additionally during the second year, at a fall faculty meeting, the entire teaching staff completed a survey on their perceptions of bullying at the school. The survey included five Likert questions, four questions with *yes* or *no* responses, and one open-ended response question. Also at the faculty meeting, the administration reiterated the practice for teachers to be present in the halls during the change of classes. This was done in an effort to increase teacher presence and reduce incidents of bullying in the halls. The director of student services presented the findings of the student bullying survey that was administered during the previous year to teachers and administrators. The school counselors participated by presenting strategies to identify and address bullying in the school.

In response to the preliminary student survey, school counselors developed a follow-up classroom guidance lesson for both seventh- and eighth-grade students. For both grade levels the lesson focused on the role of the bystander in a bullying situation. The delivery of instruction also changed and mirrored the middle school model by dividing students into academic teams and assigning them to a school counselor. The school counselor for each team used one class period to facilitate the bystander lesson and activity.

During the spring, a post-survey was given to the student body. The survey included nine questions, seven Likert scale questions and two open-ended response questions. The post-survey was given to students through their homeroom class at the end of the day. The counseling department also sponsored

a cybersafety presentation by district specialists for parents. Parents who attended the presentation were asked to complete a survey consisting of three Likert scale questions.

The third year began with the introduction of a Web-based Internet safety program adopted by the district. Teachers were trained using the staff curriculum and students taught the student curriculum during an assembly. Meanwhile, the counselors continued to teach separate bullying lessons to seventh- and eighth-grade students as they were conducted in year one and year two. Seventh-grade students were introduced to the anonymous reporting Web site and the eighth-grade students were given a reminder of the reporting Web site. A parent Internet safety and cyberbullying presentation was taught by a district specialist during the school day when parents were in the school building for teacher conferences.

Measures/Instruments

Data related to bullying at this school were based on the incidents of discipline referrals. School climate, as it related to bullying, was assessed through the use of a survey instrument developed by the school counselors (Kaffenberger & Young, 2007). At the beginning of each year and after classroom guidance presentations, data were collected using surveys. School counselors consistently used pre and post surveys that included Likert scales—*never, sometimes, always*—and open-ended responses. Sample questions are listed in Appendix A.

RESULTS

Data collected during year one (2006-2007), from 86% of all students, indicated that 94% of seventh graders and 48% of eighth graders had been bullied at the middle school. Ninety-five percent of seventh graders and 72% of eighth graders reported that they possessed limited or no strategies to use if bullied. Of even greater concern, 85% of seventh graders and 82% of eighth graders would not tell an adult, including parents, if they were being bullied. Findings from the first year are summarized in Figure 1.

In direct contrast to the student results, data collected from 96% of teachers regarding their perceptions of bullying indicated that 56% of teachers did not think that bullying was a problem and 50% of teachers believed that students felt safe.

Data collected during year two (2007-2008), from 97% of students, indicated that year-one seventh graders, current eighth graders, reported significant decreases in all areas. Figure 2 is a data report that summarizes the data collected during the second year. Specifically, year-two interventions with the eighth graders reported a 43% decrease in bullying incidents from the previous school year. Year-

The victims of bullying often show psychological distress, including poor social adjustment and isolation, which affects their ability to learn.
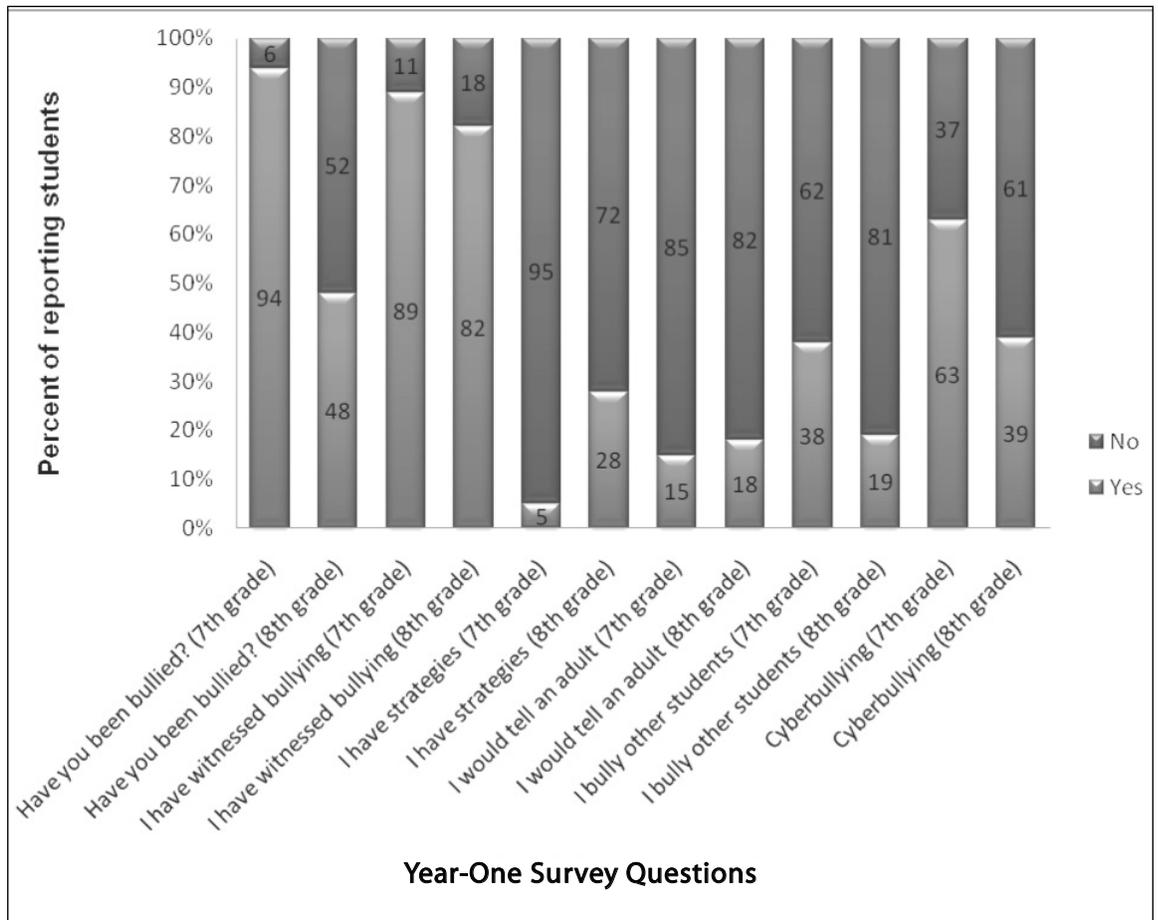
Figure 1. Year-one seventh- and eighth-grade survey results. (Seventh-grade *N* = 555; eighth-grade *N* = 515.)

two seventh graders, former elementary school sixth graders, reported that 47% had never been bullied since entering middle school. Seventy-seven percent of seventh graders and 64% of eighth graders reported that they would tell an adult at the school if they were being bullied.

Data collected during the third year (2008-2009), from 98% of students, indicated that continued schoolwide bullying prevention interventions are working. Eighty-seven percent of seventh graders and 83% of eighth graders had strategies to use if bullied. Eighty percent of seventh graders and 67% of eighth graders would tell an adult if they were bullied. Data concerning the impact of bullying interventions continue to inform practice at this middle school.

DISCUSSION

The results of the bullying survey administered during year one showed that 94% of seventh graders and 48% of eighth graders had been bullied at school. These data results highlighted the students' need to feel safe and prompted school counselors to modify existing bullying lessons to ensure a safe learning environment and promote positive academic and social development for students. Research (Estevez et al., 2005; Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2001; Scarpaci, 2006) suggests that there is a correlation between a safe learning environment and student success. These data results also suggested a demand to empower all students with bullying-proof strategies. To address this need, a bystander lesson was created and implemented during year two. Most significant to this study, the data indicated that bullying was a schoolwide issue and a comprehensive systemic approach would require support from the entire staff. Therefore, the school counselors shared the findings with administrators, department chairs, team leaders, parents, and the remaining staff.

As a result of sharing the findings with faculty and staff, the administrators supported several positive systematic changes. First, specific bullying prevention and intervention goals were created and added to the school improvement plan. Administrators and teachers then could identify specific work plans to address the issue and measure its effectiveness, in-

DESIGN	What are the students' perceptions of bullying at their middle school?
ASK	In year one, a seven-question survey was administered to all students through classroom guidance lessons. In year two, a seven-question pre/post Likert scale pretest was administered to all students through classroom guidance lessons. Posttests were administered through homeroom classes. In year three, a seven-question Likert scale survey was administered to all students through classroom guidance lessons. Surveys and tests used quantitative and qualitative strategies that allowed students to share anonymously specific bullying scenarios/information.
TRACK	**Year-one student responses to open-ended questions:** "Kids bully in the places where no adults are (like in the bathrooms, dark rooms, or hallways)." "I have witnessed someone being cornered by a few people. They were planning on beating him up." "Online people think they can say things since it's not to your face." **Year-two student data:** **Year-three student responses to open-ended questions:** "When teachers are there people don't bully." "At my old school, I got bullied all the time and no one did anything about it. I am happy that there is a Web site and people in the hall to help."
ANNOUNCE	Implications for students: • Anti-bullying Web site created to allow students to report incidents of bullying anonymously. • Fewer incidents of bullying reported by students tyhus creating a safer climate for learning • Fewer conflict mediation referrals, fewer suspensions for fighting, and fewer teacher referrals regarding students' disposition Implications for school counseling department: • Removal of testing responsibilities forthe schoolcounseling department allowing counselors to perform tasks more consistent with the ASCA National Model • Data collection implemented on all department programs to determine effectiveness (transformative tool). • Recognitionat the district, state, andnational levels • Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) school. Continued annual focus on data collection and program reflection is recommended to ensure that a comprehensive guidance program is maintained.

Figure 2. Bullying data report.

cluding noting a reduction in discipline referrals.

The second result was the establishment of an anti-bullying Web site that allowed students to report bullying incidents anonymously. The contents of the Web site were monitored by an administrator and proved extremely valuable.

Furthermore, school counselors surveyed students to determine if the modified bullying lessons were effective. The findings suggested a decrease in the number of students reporting bullying. It was encouraging to note that students became empowered and responded to bullying situations in healthy ways. Anecdotal evidence requested from teachers, assistant principals, and school counselors supported the positive effectiveness of the lessons as reflected in fewer conflict mediation referrals, fewer suspensions for fighting, and fewer teachers' referrals regarding students' dispositions. Based on the information, the school counselors decided to continue with the modified lessons including the bystander unit. In year three, the entire faculty was trained in Internet safety and all students participated in a schoolwide assembly on cyberbullying.

As a result of the impact of school counselor contributions to increasing student safety thereby reducing barriers to student achievement, the principal removed testing responsibilities from the school counseling department and redirected fiscal resources to support a test coordinator position, another positive change. This support allowed the school counselors to perform tasks more consistent with the ASCA National Model (2005).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

School counselors are called to provide effective services for all students by asking the question, "How are students different as a result of school counseling services?" (ASCA, 2005, p. 9). This present study illustrates that students were different as a result of the bullying intervention. While it is not definitive which intervention specifically contributed to the reduction in bullying incidents in the building, data gathered over the 3-year period infer that students feel safe and are more empowered.

A bullying prevention and intervention approach is likely to be effective given the following components:

1. Comprehensive training in bullying prevention and intervention for the faculty and staff
2. Parent awareness workshops on bullying, including cyberbullying
3. Teaching strategies that empower students to use positive strategies in bullying situations
4. A collaborative schoolwide approach to ensure that teachers, administrators, parents, and stu-

dents are committed to addressing the bullying issue
5. Data collection and analysis to determine the effectiveness of school counseling services
6. Data sharing with teachers, administrators, parents, and students.

The transformation occurs in sharing the data (Kaffenberger & Young, 2007). Data can be shared to help transform the delivery of comprehensive services at the district level through teaming and collaboration with other school counselors, and through presentations at the district and state levels.

The school counselors have continued to use data as a transformative tool to understand educational issues that prevent students from being successful, to evaluate and improve programs, to demonstrate the effectiveness of their counseling services, and to ensure that their comprehensive school counseling program is aligned with the counseling program's goals, the school's mission statement, and the ASCA National Model. Additionally, school counselors at the middle school have created a systemic impact both at the middle school and within the county. As a result, data collected by school counselors have successfully changed teacher perceptions. Collecting, analyzing, and sharing data led to increased support from teachers and administrators for the school counseling services. These outcomes prompted school counselors to regularly measure how and if students were different as a result of school counseling services. In June 2008, the counseling department received recognition at the district, state, and national levels, thus recognized as ASCA RAMP award recipients. ∎

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APPENDIX A

Sample Items from Year-One Student Survey

Directions: Please circle the best answers to the following questions. You do not have to put your name on the paper.

1. Have you ever been bullied?

(A) Never   (B) Sometimes   (C) Always

2. I have observed other students being bullied.

(A) Never   (B) Sometimes   (C) Always

3. I have strategies to use if I'm being bullied.

(A) Never   (B) Sometimes   (C) Always

4. I would tell an adult in this school if I was being bullied.

(A) Never   (B) Sometimes   (C) Always

5. I bully other students.

(A) Never   (B) Sometimes   (C) Always

6. I have participated in or seen students bullied by text messaging, instant messaging (IM), or e-mail.

(A) Never   (B) Sometimes   (C) Always

If you have a specific bullying scenario or incident that you would like to share, please do so below.