

Culture and Climate

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Bullying Prevention, Climate and Culture

The purpose of this article is to show how bullying and other antisocial behaviors at school are preventable by looking at school culture and climate.

There are quite a variety of classroom and school-wide "stop bullying" programs and materials. These programs are useful for raising awareness and providing new skills for students, yet many ignore deeper, necessary improvements to actually *prevent* antisocial behaviors at school.

The goal of this article is to go a little deeper and look at some fine tuning of school climate and culture as a means to lasting change

What is School Culture?

School culture is a model or a mindset by which actions are taken in the district, building or classroom. This model of action is based on the past experiences within the district. Thus, new employees or new students become indoctrinated into the culture, learning "how we do things around here." This is the nature of any culture and explains why it is so pervasive, yet hard to see. It just seems like the right way to do things.

Any school's culture can be observed in at least three contexts 1) the design and maintenance of physical spaces, 2) the values expressed (either intentionally or unintentionally) by the adults at school and 3) the beliefs that are taken for granted about human nature.

It's difficult to say any part of the school's culture is good or bad but some elements can contribute to or reinforce antisocial behavior. For example, cramped physical spaces with too many students are ideally designed for bullying behavior. The target can't escape and the bullier can go unnoticed.

Teachers who turn their back on antisocial behavior or simply stay in their rooms while trouble is outside the door express – probably unintentionally – a value about how students should be treated in this school.

Topics

- What is school culture?
- What is school climate?
- Why is this prevention?
- School: A Complex Society
- What can be done?

What is School Climate?

Although there is not a consensus on the meaning of school climate many definitions focus on the “feel” of school and the human/social atmosphere. There are four components commonly discussed in regard to climate: 1) physical environment, 2) social environment, 3) affective environment and 4) academic environment.

Like culture, climate can influence or may actually be the root cause of antisocial behavior, like bullying. Each of the four components below can either hinder or help. Problems that can foster bullying are . . .

- A physical environment that is overcrowded, certain places hidden from view and congregating areas poorly supervised.
- A social environment where interaction is limited, students self-segregate, harassment and other forms of dominance are ignored.
- An affective environment where students are subject to favoritism, most feedback is negative or punitive, and families are excluded from the school community.
- An academic environment where expectations are low, learning styles are not taken into consideration and a sense of community is not part of the learning process.

These components of climate are interconnected. Social interactions are either enhanced or inhibited by environment. The affective environment helps the academic environment because students and families feel more a part of the school.



Like culture, climate may be the actual root cause of antisocial behavior.

Prevention

The concepts of culture and climate are critical to the prevention of antisocial behavior at school. Student-centered activities like posters, slogans and assemblies are useful but won't override the power of school culture and climate. These are forces that will swamp most programs, even those that work on social skills or language.

If bullying is a problem at your school and if you mean to put a stop to it, some changes to school climate or culture must occur. And the tricky part is that it's the adults, not the just kids that need to make some changes.

Changes to Prevent Bullying

Many of the solutions needed to change school climate are known to us. Nevertheless, they seem too big, too expensive or simply hard to believe these types of changes will make much difference (after all our belief system is a major ingredient in school culture).

If we look at a culture and climate as key mechanisms in prevention then there are some clear opportunities for improvement:

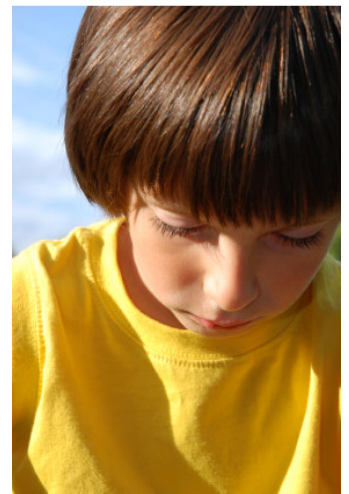
- Leadership from administrators and site based management teams. Culture and climate changes are the work of the collective body of adults in school. Change is most likely to occur when there is a coordinated effort aimed at particular improvements.
- Regain control of student-run areas of school. Schools buses, playgrounds, lunch lines, lunch tables and hallways are just a few spots where kids set the rules. Who goes first, who sits at this table, who gets to play and so on. This is the breeding ground for hierarchy and control. Improvement requires more training and supervision by adults, less standing around and waiting by students and a better appreciation of kid's time and personal space.
- Support student feedback and reporting. Subtle elements in the school culture discourage reporting. Concepts like tattling teach youth that grown-ups don't want to be bothered. Repeated surveys of students show that most kids believe adults won't help with bullying. And over 65% of bullying happens when adults can't see it. Reporting is critical.
- Work to build a community. A community of people is united pulling toward common goals. Too often schools are cliques and subgroups – both adults and kids – vying to move up a hierarchical ladder. People need to see and experience the commonality of the school community. We see this coming together at times around tragedy or sports teams but it needs a more uniform presence.

A Complex Society

School districts and buildings are really complex societies where bullying is one in a set of potential antisocial behaviors. Bullying is about hierarchy and when kids (or adults) assemble hierarchies form. Sometimes these hierarchies are benign or occasionally positive. Unfortunately, too often, the hierarchies within groups of students are negative and damaging to some.

To effect change in these societies we need to operate at a deeper level, at the level of culture and climate. Understanding how bullying operates with concepts like victim, bullying and bystander or helping students be more assertive in the face of this aggression is important but not sufficient. These strategies place the burden of change on the children, when really it is only the adults that have the power to make significant improvements.

Since the Columbine tragedy in 1999 there has been more attention paid to bullying. This attention has heightened awareness but sadly has not reduced the incidence of bullying in schools nor relieved the pain for many US school children.



What can be done?

What can be frustrating about school climate or school culture for any one teacher or parent is they seem too big to influence. Nevertheless, change can happen with your best efforts. Here are some suggestions:

- Do some research, asking students, where bullying usually occurs. The results are always compelling and clearly show that "place" is the key ingredient. Make these places safer.
- Organize other concerned adults to speak with either the principal, site based management team or the school board. Help them understand the role of the climate and culture.
- Make a practice of listening but not necessarily reacting, to all student complaints or concerns. School staff unintentionally creates buffers around themselves because they are often too busy to attend to students' issues. Instead of pushing them away, develop a repertoire of simple responses to minor issues so that the major issues reach your ears.
- Avoid creating dominance hierarchies. This includes public embarrassment, clearly identifying people's skill or intelligence (or lack of) relative to others or simply using belittling language.

Nevertheless, change can happen with your best efforts.

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