

May 23, 2012

Dear Task Force Members:

I am writing on behalf of the Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA). MSSWA is grateful for the work of this task force in creating recommendations for effective bullying prevention policies with the goal of moving towards best practice in promoting a positive, safe school climate for all Minnesota students. Because School Social Workers along with School Psychologists, School Nurses and School Counselors are on the front lines every day providing prevention and evidence-based interventions such as Olweus, Second Step, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, Social Emotional Learning Standards and Mind-Up, we wanted to provide some suggestions to help guide the work of the task force.

First, in order for any policy to be implemented with fidelity, it is essential to collaborate and create a sense of investment from all the involved stakeholders both within and outside of the school setting which includes students, parents, school staff, bus drivers, community members, etc. The team approach is absolutely needed as not one professional alone can resolve bullying and harassment as barriers to learning. Working together to establish healthy, safe, effective classrooms and safe school culture for all students is of the utmost importance. Implementing school wide positive behavioral interventions and supports provides an operational framework for improving student academic and behavior outcomes. Creating this foundation ensures that all students have access to the most effective and accurately implemented instructional and behavioral practices and interventions possible. As members of the educational team, School Social Workers provide a vital link by coordinating the efforts of schools, families, and communities toward helping students improve their academic achievement and social, emotional and behavioral competence. For example, School Social Workers work with school staff and administrators to establish school policies and protocols for addressing bullying situations and to discuss the importance of increased adult supervision throughout the school day. School Social Workers work with parents to make sure they have a voice at the table and to educate them about the early warning signs of changes in behavior or relational dynamics related to bullying behavior. School Social Workers work with people in the community who can help mentor and support young people to become respectful citizens. School Social Workers also utilize school wide assessments to gauge school climate, school connectedness, and school responsiveness with regards to bullying behavior often in collaboration with School Psychologists, School Nurses and School Counselors.

Second, research regarding brain development shows that the pre-frontal cortex which is responsible for problem solving, mediating intense emotional reactions, foreseeing and weighing possible consequences of behavior, shifting and adjusting behavior when a situation changes, etc, does not reach maturity until age 25. Thus, providing social emotional skills training is an essential developmental process that is directly linked to academic success. MSSWA supports the provision of offering Social Emotional Learning evidence-based curricula as a tool for bullying and violence prevention. School Social Workers bring unique knowledge of mental health and skills to the school system and the student support services team. As mental health professionals and practitioners who are dually licensed by the Board of Social Work and the Department of Education, School Social Workers are highly qualified and trained in the emotional and mental

health development of children and young adults as well as the assessment of student needs. As a result, School Social Workers can easily recognize and assess the level of services needed to support students who are bullied and who have bullied. School Social Workers are mental health intervention specialists who provide therapeutic, evidence-based programs and practices to address bullying at a comprehensive systems level. School Social Workers work with individuals and groups of students to intervene in bullying situations using restorative justice practices and principles and to teach positive social skills. School Social Workers also recognize when students need services which may be outside of the School Social Workers scope of practice. Thus, School Social Workers are able to support students and their families because of their knowledge about community resources and ability to link families to agencies to help meet their needs.

Finally, in order for an anti-bullying policy to be truly effective, ongoing staff development and training is necessary. Ensuring that there are adequate resources for staff development to sustain evidence-based intervention programs is vital to their overall effectiveness and promotion of a positive and safe school climate. One solution is through utilizing the highly qualified student support professionals that are within our districts as a cost-effective means to achieving sustainability. Student support professionals which include School Social Workers, School Psychologists, School Nurses and School Counselors are often collaborating across Minnesota school districts to provide training to school staff in implementing evidence-based bullying prevention programs such as Olweus or Second Step. For example in St. Paul and Minneapolis school districts School Social Workers have taken the lead to provide training for school staff to recognize the early warning signs of mental health disorders.

I would like to thank you for your time and consideration of our recommendations for moving policy into best practice. I have also included our National Association of Social Work position paper on anti-bullying policy and best practices for implementation for effective policy. If you have any questions or would like further information, please feel free to contact me at

[tknick@gfw.k12.mn.us](mailto:tknick@gfw.k12.mn.us).

Sincerely,

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