

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

School Climate and Bullying

BY TODD A. SAVAGE

As I mentioned in my October 2015 message, schools can be the places in which students find safety and security or places they want to avoid. Students' perceptions of the overall school climate, or the feel of a building, contribute to how they interpret the emotional safety and physical security of the setting; these perceptions also inform their desire or willingness to be at school. The quality of school climate has been demonstrated to impact student academic performance, social-emotional well-being, and behavioral outcomes, in addition to the morale and self-efficacy of educators. Understanding school climate and fostering the elements that contribute to a positive atmosphere are natural outgrowths of our training as school psychologists and the work we do in the field.

School climate has received much attention by researchers throughout the years. While various definitions of school climate have been offered, the common themes that consistently arise are the quality and nature of school life. These involve the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that characterize a particular building.

The presence of bullying, or the lack thereof, is one indicator of the condition of a school's climate. Not surprisingly, students who have been victimized by peers or adults at school or in cyberspace endorse more negative perceptions of school climate. They report feeling less connected to peers and to adults at school, and they rate the trust and faith they have in teachers less favorably. Conversely, the establishment of community and the absence of bullying contribute to higher motivation to learn, a greater sense of concern and care for one's peers, and elevated beliefs about one's academic potential.

Groups of people who, over time, have been targets of oppression, including persons of color, girls/women, persons of particular faith traditions, persons of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and persons of different ability statuses, among others, are affected by negative school climates and acts of aggression and bullying. (Tip of the day: I invite you to eliminate from your lexicon the throw-away terms, "That's so lame!" and "That's so gay!") Lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, gender diverse, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons comprise one group of students vulnerable to the impact of negative school climates and bullying. Historically, LGBTQ+ students have been the target of verbal, emotional, and physical harassment in schools, as have students who do not identify as LGBTQ+ but are perceived or characterized to be. While schools and the broader culture in the United States seem to be moving in a more positive direction when it comes to LGBTQ+ acceptance, the data continue to indicate the pervasive presence of heterosexism, homophobia, cisgender privilege, and transphobia in schools. And while individual students are often the targets of anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes and bullying, the themes underlying these attitudes and bullying send a message to others in schools whom identify as LGBTQ+ or whom are questioning their sexual and/or gender identities about the true state of the climate toward persons like them; thus, an entire group of people is potentially victimized. The LGBTQ+ school community is not alone when it comes to potential group victimization. We have our work cut out for us when it comes to addressing bullying, regardless of the targeted individual or group of people.

Prevention begins with an accurate assessment of the bullying and victimization that may already be present and the specific nature of these occurrences. Analysis of these data will help inform the development of universal and targeted interventions that are evidence informed and research supported. Dr. Susan Swearer, a professor in the school psychology program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and codirector of the Bullying Research Network, has devoted her career to the issue of bullying in schools, particularly from the perspectives of prevention and intervention; her work also led to her partnership with Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation. Dr. Swearer will deliver the Distinguished Lecture at the NASP convention in New Orleans in February on addressing and ending bullying. Her bullying prevention and intervention program has been shown to be effective in reducing the incidence of bullying and in fostering a more positive school climate. To learn more about the program, check out <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/life-lessons-addressing-school-bullying>.

The theme for School Psychology Awareness Week, set to take place this month (November 9-13, 2015), is *Connect the Dots...and THRIVE!* Establishing and maintaining a positive school climate free of bullying and peer victimization is all about engaging others in a process of connecting dots: creating and maintaining physically and psychologically safe environments; implementing high-quality and rigorous curricula and instruction; communicating a genuine belief that all students can learn; embracing and being responsive to diversity and the value of inclusion; and fostering relationships between people at all levels of the school. Thank you for all you do to help children, youth, educators, and families make these connections and for contributing to their potential to thrive!

School climate matters. Tell us what you do to contribute to a positive school climate and to prevent bullying at #ConnectTheDots and @nasponline ■

TODD A. SAVAGE, PhD, NCSP, is the president of the National Association of School Psychologists.



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Editor's Note

Becoming an Author: Just Do It!

During the past month, three people approached me saying that they had great ideas and wanted to write about them in *Communiqué*. I was enthusiastic in my responses and gave them some direction about how to proceed, but I have not heard from any of them since. I know from experience that there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip when it comes to actually sitting down and translating an idea to paper. We live busy lives, and for many of us, writing an article gets lost somewhere on the priority list among getting breakfast for the kids, working all day, and wrapping up that report before bed. And I wonder: How much valuable experience, knowledge, and skill is out there and never shared with colleagues? Judging just from these three encounters, I would say a lot! That's really too bad.

I've been haunted by the image of unwritten articles floating about in people's minds, never to see the light of day. Are you one of those people? If so, I have figured out that the best advice I can give you to help you get started is to just do it!

I was always a voracious reader, but never a writer. I never had the confidence that I could actually write something for publication. One year, for a now forgotten reason, I decided that I wanted to become more of a producer than a consumer of the written word. I had a full plate of family, work, and social obligations, but I decided to just do it. I started by simply writing anything that came to mind for a fixed half-hour a day, and out of this emerged some pieces for my state newsletter and, later, for *Communiqué*. Writing still does not come easily for me, but I make it a practice—part of my daily routine.

To help you get going, I wrote the piece in this issue entitled, "How to Write for *Communiqué*." Please take a look at it and see the opportunities that are available for all kinds of writing in *Communiqué*. Share what you know with your colleagues. Not only will you be helping to advance our field, but you will also learn a lot in the process.

Your colleagues have been writing. I am delighted with the front-page articles on IEP meetings, a social justice perspective on assessment, and the APA/NASP resolution on gender and sexual orientation diversity. Rivka Olley's article on building district-wide capacity in school psychology is particularly inspiring because it is written by a practicing school psychologist who wants to share her experience with her colleagues about an important area of practice. Students, professors, and practitioners are all writing this month on topics of interest to all of us. I encourage you to join them; I'll be checking my inbox!

—JOHN E. DESROCHERS