

# Publisher's Report

By Annie Galvin Teich



## Creating a safe and positive learning environment

*Schools address bullying with a systematic program that involves the entire community*

Is it possible to identify and address bullying and other negative behavior at schools before it erupts into violence?

School bullying is now at crisis levels in the U.S., and it's one of the primary challenges that school leaders face in managing the learning environment and ensuring that students feel safe and ready to learn. As school leaders look for ways to deal with this problem, some are turning to a promising new technology platform for help.

Before high-quality curriculum or pedagogy can foster student achievement, schools must establish a positive climate where staff, students, and parents all feel accepted and respected and where learning—not safety—is the main focus, experts say. Feeling safe and respected can be

critical to students' motivation to learn. It's not hard to imagine how a student's academic goals would come second to making it through the day without being bullied.

Bullying has risen to national attention as an early indicator of violent crimes and suicide among adolescents. Although bullying occurs at all age levels, it is most pervasive during the adolescent and teen years, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Forty-nine states plus the District of Columbia have passed legislation defining and outlawing bullying. State legislatures have mandated that school districts identify methods to document and decrease bullying and to find and implement non-violent conflict resolution methods.

**Environment, page 18**

[www.hmheducation.com/learningenvironment](http://www.hmheducation.com/learningenvironment)

# Publisher's Report

## Environment...

continued from page 17

"The call to action for districts is the growing number of incidents of school violence and their potential liability if bullying is not identified and reported," said Laura Murray Parker, senior director of solution strategy for Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH). "A positive school climate that is conducive to learning affects everyone associated with the school, including students, staff, parents, and the outer community."

In the age of school accountability and data-driven decision-making, district leaders have focused on using data to improve academic performance. Now, HMH aims to help educators apply this approach to creating an environment that positions students and teachers for success outside the curriculum.

District leaders have been searching for a way to assess their schools' climate according to three parameters, the company says: (1) safety and security, (2) teacher effectiveness and classroom management, and (3) character education and emotional learning.

Until now, schools and districts have not had a comprehensive tool that would allow for anonymous reporting of bullying incidents; data collection to identify and track the kinds of gateway behaviors that might lead to violence; and the ability to study positive behaviors and interventions, too, to see what kind of effect these have had on school climate and give a more holistic view of student learning.

Creating a positive learning environment depends on the participation of all stakeholders, HMH says, including students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the community at large—and the company says it has developed a web-based data platform to track all of this information, with input from all stakeholders, in a practical, actionable way. (See <http://www.hmheducation.com/learningenvironment/>.)

"Bullying is an overwhelming issue, and in our district we believe that one bully is one too many," says Debra Mercora, chief school officer for the Neptune City School District in New Jersey, which is pilot-testing the new HMH application.

"The HMH solution's trend data allow us to review all relevant information to determine what form of intervention is best for an individual student in a particular situation. We can intervene with curriculum resources, additional supervision, or even personal mentors for students."

The initiative grew from HMH's commitment to helping students live, learn, and thrive, Parker said, adding: "We decided that we can do this by helping them feel safe. By feeling safe, they can then concentrate on learning—and through learning they can thrive."

### A growing problem

In 2009, NCES released some startling facts about bullying in schools that reveal the severity of the problem:

- A child is bullied every seven minutes.
- One out of every 20 students has seen a student with a gun at school.
- 56 percent of students have witnessed a bullying crime at school.
- There is more bullying in middle and junior high than high school.
- Emotional bullying is the most prominent type of bullying.
- Physical bullying includes tripping, spitting, shoving, and pushing.



Stakeholders can use HMH's platform to report incidents anonymously from wherever they are.

- Nearly one out of three students ages 12-18 reported being bullied at school.

"Although districts have security systems in place for weapons and crisis situations, they have not had a comprehensive tool to identify and record bullying incidents that would prompt an intervention before the behavior escalated to violence," says Parker.

Many schools and districts have invested in safety measures to address physical safety concerns. For example, many schools have purchased surveillance cameras or metal detectors and have developed crisis plans. For the most part, however, teachers have not been trained on how to identify potential victims or how to respond to bullying incidents, so intervention has been inconsistent in practice.

Much of the bullying occurs in under-supervised areas like the cafeteria, hallways, the outside grounds, or the bus. Primarily, support staff supervise these areas. But many of these support positions have been cut as a result of declining school budgets. According to the National Education Association (NEA), some schools have seen an increase in bullying incidents when school staff have been let go. And while some instances of physical bullying might appear on camera, emotional bullying and harassment are not usually captured in surveillance videos.

Experts agree that more incidents are reported when reporters can remain anonymous. This is particularly true when members of the community witness incidents outside the school walls and can report them anonymously. Most districts now have established codes of conduct, and providing anonymous reporting is a way to enforce these codes.

The School Safety Advocacy Council works with schools and districts to develop systematic programs that result in a more secure school climate. "The biggest mistake districts can make is trying to ignore the problem," says Sean Burke, president of the council. "This new solution from HMH fills a void in the market by

linking incident reporting, tracking, and data collection. It is practical and focused on documentation of incidents and follow-up activities that lead to a more positive learning environment."

### Identifying the different types of bullying

One of the challenges facing prevention initiatives is creating awareness of the various types of bullying and determining whether a child is being victimized. Bullying can be physical or emotional or both. Most situations are one-to-one bullying, although there are also instances of group or "pack" bullying. Emotional bullying can include insults, derogatory remarks, name-calling, and teasing. Physical bullying includes pushing, shoving, hitting, fighting, spitting, or tripping. Social bullying occurs when a victim is ignored or ostracized.

Cyber bullying through computers, cell phones, and other devices has created an environment of constant attack for some students. This type of bullying is most common with adolescents and teens who are on the receiving end of harassing, obscene, or slanderous eMail messages, texts, pictures, and/or videos. More than one in three young people has received a cyber threat, and more than half of these students do not report the incidents to their parents, according to statistics from the Cyber Bullying Research Center. This reluctance to tell others that they are being victimized is why the frequency of bullying remains hidden.

Bullying victims exhibit a range of responses even years later, such as low self-esteem, difficulty trusting others, difficulty controlling anger, and isolation. The bullies themselves often go on to have criminal records as adults. According to a report from the federal Education Department (ED), recent research indicates that many perpetrators of school shootings reported being bullied prior to their attacks.

*Environment, page 19*

# Publisher's Report

## Environment...

continued from page 18

There is a debate over whether schools should be liable in severe bullying cases that result in violence and suicide. However, ED has warned school leaders that even if they are unaware of bullying, they are facing potential legal action if they don't address the issue.

"New Jersey mandates reporting and resolution procedures," Mercora states. "The new HMH solution helps us efficiently pull in all relevant information about a student. For example, in addition to the bullying incidents, we can review [the student's] academic performance, truancy, visits to the school nurse, et cetera, to tie together all relevant data to develop an appropriate and individual intervention program."

One of the primary difficulties for schools and districts in addressing bullying has been a lack of systems to identify, report, and manage the resolution of incidents. The need for a comprehensive solution became evident to HMH executives as they worked with districts on their student assessment systems and saw there was no comparable solution for managing student behavior and the school climate as a whole.

In creating its solution, HMH turned to the corporate world, where policies and systems protect employees from harassment. There, the development team found programs with case management processes and built-in accountability measures with specific protocols for tracking and resolving the outcomes of different situations. HMH incorporated similar accountability features into its new solution for managing the learning environment at schools.

### How the application works

Using the new cloud-based HMH platform, schools can post a public web page for stakeholders to report incidents. The page features an easy-to-use checklist of both positive and negative behaviors. Once an incident is recorded, the reporter is directed to a questionnaire about the incident that allows the reporter to identify himself or remain anonymous. Districts have found that incident reporting increases when reporters can remain anonymous.

The HMH solution connects the reporting of behaviors—including "gateway" behaviors that could lead to more serious issues down the road—to specific interventions or campaigns, so school leaders can track the resolution of incidents as well as the effectiveness of their character education programs or service learning initiatives. Teachers also can see which behavioral interventions are most effective with particular students as they manage student performance outcomes.

The standard protocol for each reported incident proceeds logically through a process that focuses on three areas: (1) receipt and review of the case, (2) investigation of the incident, and (3) case resolution. The case history detail includes documentation of all steps, which are customizable by district. This allows districts to determine specific deadlines for each step of the process, and it ensures that processes and outcomes are consistent with district policies.

The system has built-in accountability, as it requires a series of follow-up steps before a case is considered resolved. It automatically searches the archived data to look for correlations by person, type of allegation, and location of incident, as well as certain keywords (such as "Facebook"). The product also offers trend reporting at the student level to identify gateway behaviors such as growing isolation and alienation from peers, so school leaders can intervene before student behavior de-

teriorates to the point of violence or disruption.

The NEA conducted a study on bullying in 2010. In this study, 43 percent of NEA members said bullying was a moderate or major problem at their school. The study also revealed a gap between the existence of policies and the training to manage the policies. Ninety-eight percent of NEA members felt it was part of their job to prevent and stop bullying, but only 40 percent reported being involved in a formal prevention program. Professional development for teachers and staff is a critical success factor in creating a positive school climate.

"We know that a positive school climate creates many positive effects for students, including fewer disciplinary incidents, more successful prevention of risky behavior, and improved academic performance," says Parker. "A positive school climate and culture also enhances staff satisfaction and teacher retention; both of these are important outcomes as districts struggle to manage their limited resources."

Most districts now review school climate data on a regular basis to measure support for the learning environment and where to make adjustments or investments. Many districts also have implemented character education programs as they teach students self-respect and respect for others. The back-end data collection of the HMH solution allows school leaders to monitor the efficacy of their character education initiatives and whether they actually change student behavior. This information can be used to promote meaningful engagement for students, families, and staff. When staff feel connected to the learning environment, they're more likely to report bullying or to intervene.

"Addressing bullying and making students feel safe is the No. 1 thing that affects school climate," says Burke. "Schools that take safety and security seriously, take learning seriously."

An iPhone and iPad app is available to supplement the HMH platform. Because these devices have a user-friendly operating system, users of the app can easily capture images and geo-location tags, including longitude and latitude coordinates, when reporting an incident. The app will make it easier for people to report bullying and other incidents, giving the larger school

community—including parents—a simple way to report incidents on buses, field trips, athletic events, or other areas where bullying or bad behavior might occur.

### School climate and connectedness

A positive school environment is recognized as one of the hallmarks of successful schools. The NEA study noted that for faculty and staff, feeling connected to the success of the school plays a role in increased behavior intervention and prevention. For students, the more connected they feel to the school environment, the more likely they are to stay engaged academically—and the less likely they are to engage in cruel or risky behavior. Research has shown that students need to feel connected to thrive in the learning environment; there is a strong link between school connectedness and positive educational outcomes like staying in school longer and higher test scores.

Schools can use climate data to measure how well they are supporting the learning environment and where to shore up or invest more resources to improve student success. Facilitating engagement among all stakeholders enhances the social, emotional, civic, and intellectual skills that contribute to success in school and beyond.

To take on bullying in a systematic way, most researchers suggest a multi-component program in which schools collect and use their own data to develop a school-wide prevention program. The NEA report suggests that data can inform the decision-making process about which program to use, the training that needs to take place, and how to identify hot spots in the school where bullying occurs.

"It is our hope that the HMH solution will help schools solve this problem so that teachers and students can focus on learning," Parker stated. "We want to help create an environment where students feel safe and perceive school as a nurturing place, and where teachers and staff have access to good data to benchmark the effectiveness of their behavior interventions and character education initiatives."

*Annie Galvin Teich is an education writer with more than 25 years experience in K-12 publishing.*

## Resources

### StopBullying.gov

<http://www.stopbullying.gov>

This is a federal website for parents, educators, other caring adults, and kids themselves, created by the U.S. Department of Education. Here, you can find information about how to identify, prevent, respond to, and report bullying.

### School Safety Advocacy Council

<http://www.schoolsafety911.org>

The School Safety Advocacy Council, based in Lawrence, Mass., is made up of some of the leading experts in the field of school and child safety. Its staff and nationally certified instructors have trained more than 100,000 police, college, and school officials from the United States and abroad. On the group's website, you can get the results of the 2012 National Bullying Survey and information about its next national school safety conference.

### Cyberbullying Research Center

<http://www.cyberbullying.us>

Directed by Sameer Hinduja of Florida Atlantic University and Justin Patchin of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, the Cyber Bullying Research Center is an information clearinghouse for all aspects of cyber bullying among adolescents.



160,000 students miss school every day for fear of being bullied or harassed. It's virtually impossible for kids to focus on learning when they are concerned for their safety.

We will partner with you to create a safer, more productive learning environment for your students. By designing and implementing a comprehensive solution that includes awareness programs, training, and an innovative online tool that allows for the anonymous reporting, tracking and trend analysis of all types of incidents, we can start to make a positive impact today.

Together, we can make a difference.

To learn more and to contact us, visit  
[www.hmheducation.com/learningenvironment](http://www.hmheducation.com/learningenvironment)



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT