

Preventing school bullying behavior

September 1 2011, By Richard Veilleux

As sure as school bells begin to ring after Labor Day, so too do news stories appear of students in elementary, middle, and high school being bullied. This fall, some school districts have a new state “cyberbullying” law that allows administrators to punish students for what they say online.

With one out of every three online teens reportedly victimized by potentially menacing activities on line, and recent national news stories about cyberbullying leading some teens to commit suicide, seven states – including Connecticut – have enacted laws that allow [school](#) officials to intervene in online student speech.

University of Connecticut educational psychology professor George Sugai is one of the world’s preeminent experts on behavior management and school discipline. Earlier this year, he was invited to a White House summit to testify on practices that focus on preventing and reducing the effectiveness of bullying behavior, including a prevention approach called Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports.

PBIS has been supported in more than 16,000 schools nationwide by the National Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the PBIS Center is co-directed by Sugai in the Center for Behavioral Education and Research in the Neag School of Education at UConn.

Sugai reports that PBIS researchers have documented when PBIS is implemented accurately, schools experience reductions in office

discipline referrals, improvement in test scores, decreases in suspension rates, enhancements of reported school organizational health and safety, and most recently, decreases in teacher-reported incidents of [bullying](#) behavior and peer victimization.

“PBIS provides [students](#) and teachers with a multi-tiered continuum of interventions aligned with student needs,” says Sugai. “What this means is that every student experiences prevention-based and school-wide social skills instruction. For example, a school might adopt three core social skills, such as respect, responsibility, and safety, which would be taught and encouraged throughout the school year with behavioral examples that are culturally, developmentally, and contextually relevant to students and family and staff members.”

Sugai says that contextually relevant means the social skills and behavioral expectations would be taught and applied in real school settings, like the playground in elementary grades, hallways and eating areas in middle schools, and sporting events and dances in high schools.

“If done well, about 80 percent of the students will get it, and contribute toward a positive school climate,” Sugai says. “Some students, however, may need more behavior support to be successful, which might be provided in small groups or to individual students by teachers, counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and others with more specialized training.”

Sugai emphasizes that “by implementing a continuum of behavior support that is based on the behavior needs of all students, we improve our ability to deliver specialized help to those who really don’t benefit from the school-wide experience.”

“School-wide discipline systems that focus on catching kids when they violate a school rule generally inhibit the problem behaviors of students

who are basically socially competent,” Sugai suggests. “Students with chronic problem [behavior](#) tend to be the least responsive to punishment, and our tendency is to give them more punishment. When giving more doesn’t work, we get tougher, and the problem tends to get worse.”

Sugai suggests that a better approach is to “develop a school-wide approach that teaches and encourages what we want to all students, and then develop more specialized and preventive interventions for those students who need more supports.”

Provided by University of Connecticut

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