

## **Evaluation Report**

# **The Safe School Ambassadors<sup>®</sup> Program: A Student Led Approach to Reducing Mistreatment and Bullying in Schools**

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## **Executive Summary**

Safe School Ambassadors (SSA) is a student-centered bystander education program developed by Community Matters to reduce bullying/mistreatment and enhance school climate. A two-part program evaluation was designed to assess the efficacy of the program's logic model, and its impact on school-level discipline indicators; several statistically significant outcomes ( $p < 0.05$ ) were obtained.

For the first part, a two-year evaluation was conducted in five middle schools in Texas using a quasi-experimental pre-post-post design. After two years, rates of helpful intervention were higher for male Ambassadors than for their controls. Ambassadors' Friends noticed more helpful interventions and reported observing less mistreatment than Friends of Key Students at the control schools. Process data indicated positive effects on discipline and overall climate.

For the second part, suspension and other discipline data was gathered from nineteen schools that implemented the SSA program with a high degree of fidelity to internal benchmarks, and from demographically matched non-SSA schools that served as controls. Analysis of suspensions and other discipline indicators at SSA schools showed reductions averaging 33%, while indicators at matched control schools rose 10% during the same years.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Overview of the Field**

An extensive body of literature has established that the rate of mistreatment – including verbal and physical bullying, relational and electronic aggression (cyber-bullying) – that students experience in connection with school is unacceptably high. Approximately 30% of U.S. students in grades 6-10 report being involved in moderate or frequent bullying (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, et al., 2001). A survey commissioned by the National Crime Prevention Council (2007) found that 43% of youth ages 13-17 report experiencing some form of cyberbullying in the prior year. These behaviors are harmful – to the aggressor, the target, and others in the school environment – and they are also costly, in terms of resources spent on discipline and physical security, as well as hours of lost learning time due to distraction, absenteeism, and dropout rates.

Over the past decade, more than \$10 billion has been invested to reduce violence and improve safety in schools (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003. Packaged Facts, 2000). The vast majority of those dollars have underwritten an “outside-in” approach, i.e., one that has focused on physical safety and security, including fences, locks, cameras, tough rules and zero-tolerance policies, and additional staff to monitor student behavior (Knickerbocker, 2004). That approach has not yet produced the desired results, which suggests the need to explore the reasons for this lack of success, as well as alternative and/or complementary approaches.

A social-ecological theory has been used to describe the development of aggressive behavior in school children. The theory posits that the interaction of individual, family, peer, and community level factors influence an individual’s propensity to engage in or refrain from aggressive behaviors (Espelage, 2004). Experts have identified characteristics at the school level that protect against (protective factors) or contribute to (risk factors) youth violence in schools. These characteristics relate to relationships within a school (e.g., student-teacher, student-student), school policies and regulations (e.g., rules against bullying), and the physical school building and grounds (e.g., supervised areas). Many prevention programs aimed at addressing school violence have focused on improving these aspects of the school environment, although many utilize an adult-centered approach.

Several studies have described the ways that social influence impacts bullying behavior. A study by Cairns, Leung, and Cairns (1995) indicated that students tend to bully about as much as their friends and that students whose friends bully tend to increase their levels of bullying throughout the school year. This result indicates that children form social groups with others who possess similar norms and behaviors, and that these behaviors can spread throughout the group.

Researchers have further underscored that bullying is a context-specific occurrence, i.e., the occurrence, type, and severity of bullying behavior may depend on characteristics of the environment, including the absence or presence of a crowd of witnesses. Researchers have found that at any given time, 70-85% of students at a

school are neither aggressors nor targets of mistreatment; instead, they are bystanders who witness the aggression (Hazler, 1996. Craig & Pepler, 1995). Researchers have articulated several bystander roles that students may play when bullying is occurring. Salmivalli, et al. defined the roles of assistant of the bully, reinforcer of the bully, defender of the victim, and outsider (1996). Bystanders can either *encourage the bullying to continue* by supporting the bully or ignoring the bullying, or they can *contribute to reducing bullying* by supporting the victim or expressing disapproval of the bully's actions. Slaby (2005) corroborates the key role of student bystanders in determining whether bullying will escalate, be stopped, or be prevented. This and other research, together with field experience (Vossekuil, et al, 2004), indicate the value of incorporating "inside-out," student-centered approaches to violence prevention efforts as well.

## **1.2 Description of the Safe School Ambassadors Program**

Beginning in 2000, the Safe School Ambassadors (SSA) program has been developed by Community Matters, a 501(c)3 education and youth development non-profit based in northern California. It has been implemented in approximately 900 elementary, middle and high schools in 28 US states and 2 Canadian provinces. The program incorporates established principles of youth development and prevention, as well as emerging research and field experience. In 2005, the organization commissioned Denver-based Omni Research and Training to conduct a review of the literature, which provided evidence for the soundness of the underlying logic model (see Appendix I).

In the Safe School Ambassadors program, the socially influential opinion leaders of the diverse cliques and interest groups on a school campus are identified, recruited, and selected via a precise process involving staff and student input. It is expected that through their collective social networks, they will have a large sphere of influence on the student population's behaviors, and thus on the climate of the school.

Through a 2-day, highly experiential training process, these student Ambassadors are equipped to identify, prevent, and respond to student aggression and mistreatment, i.e., to act as proactive and helpful bystanders by:

- interrupting mistreatment as it occurs
- preventing mistreatment from happening by discouraging peers from committing hurtful or violent acts
- supporting students who have been mistreated, and
- obtaining adult help when situations are too complex or dangerous for them to handle by themselves.

Competence in these skills allows Ambassadors to wield their social influence to reduce bullying and promote a healthy school environment.

After the training, ongoing support, supervision, and skill development are provided throughout the year via regularly scheduled "Family Group" meetings of 7-10 Ambassadors facilitated by 1-2 specially trained adults who use a curriculum provided by the program. Ambassadors periodically document the nature and frequency of their interventions on Action Logs, which are analyzed by program adults.

### **1.3 Design of the Evaluation**

To assess the quality of the SSA program's logic model in practice, and to determine the impact of the program on school discipline indicators (e.g. suspension rates), a two-part evaluation was designed.

- Part I: in-place SSA programs were studied using a quasi-experimental pre-post-post design that included surveys of students and adults, as well as an examination of process data.
- Part II: schools with high-fidelity implementation of the SSA program were identified and matched to demographically similar controls, and school discipline data and surveys were used to assess program impact.

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) Exemption was granted by Texas State University, San Marcos.

## **2. Part I**

### **2.1 Methods**

The primary research questions of Part I centered around potential changes in the attitudes, behaviors, and school connectedness of Ambassadors and their closest friends. We also sought to determine whether there were perceptible changes in school climate and school discipline indicators.

Five middle schools in single school district in an urban/suburban area of central Texas participated in this two-year evaluation. Three schools elected to receive the SSA program and two control schools were selected to match these intervention schools with regard to school size, student demographics (% receiving free/reduced lunch, ethnicity), and prevalence of discipline incidents. Interventions took place over two years. Participants were identified as described below and in Table 1.

In year 1, in each of the three treatment schools, staff and students identified 60-80 students in grades 6-8 as being the socially influential leaders of their school's diverse cliques, i.e. the affinity groups that naturally form around common interests and beliefs, such as football players, cheerleaders, band members, skaters, etc. Selection criteria included high verbal skills, loyalty to peer group, and ability to discern right from wrong even if they sometimes got into trouble. These prospective Ambassadors attended an orientation to the SSA program and were invited to participate. Of those that chose to participate, the adult Program Advisor (coordinator of the SSA program, typically a school counselor, dean, assistant principal, or influential teacher) selected 40 to represent the diversity of the school. The two day Ambassador training session focused on the following objectives: (a) discovering commonalities and building bridges of understanding across diverse groups; (b) becoming more aware of the problem and the costs of mistreatment and violence on campus; (c) acquiring and sharpening skills for preventing and responding to mistreatment and violence; (d) and developing motivation to actually use those skills.

Treatment schools also chose six to eight adults to receive training, administer the program, and conduct follow-up meetings with Ambassadors at two-week intervals throughout the year. Small "Family Groups" of seven to ten Ambassadors met with one to two of these Program Adults to discuss their successes and challenges, receive suggestions and support, and to develop additional prevention/intervention skills. Several meetings of all the Ambassadors at a school were also held each year.

In control schools, an administrator selected Key Students to match Ambassadors from the treatment schools with regard to gender, grade, ethnicity, academic performance, and socio-economic status. Key Students received no intervention (no training, meetings, etc.) but participated in surveys and focus groups.

In year 2, returning Ambassadors, Program Advisors and Family Group Facilitators were invited to continue; Key Students retained that designation. Another 30-40 influential students were selected to replace non-returning Ambassadors and increase the "reach" of the program within the school; control schools also chose a matching cohort of new Key Students. In treatment schools, the initial training and Ambassadors meetings were replicated.

### **2.2 Data Sources**

The following data sources were used in Part I of this program evaluation. Table 2 provides a description and  $\alpha$  values for the student survey scales.

School Climate Survey: This confidential survey includes 109 items about perceived level of bullying/mistreatment both as a target and as an aggressor (observed and personally experienced) as well as school norms regarding mistreatment, school climate, and school connectedness. It also included internal reliability measures (e.g., pairs of opposite questions). The format of each item was Likert-type or ordered category; most items had five response categories. Demographic information (sex, grade, race/ethnicity) and identifying information for linking surveys across time were collected. In year 1, the School Climate Survey was completed by all students in grades 6-7, plus any eighth graders who were named by Ambassadors/Key students as "Friends" (see below). In year 2, all students in grades 7-8 completed it.

Ambassador/Key Student Survey: This survey is composed of 94 items designed to measure Ambassador/Key Student perceptions of bullying and mistreatment, school connectedness, climate, and norms regarding mistreatment. It too included internal reliability measures. Ambassadors also responded to a mix of ordered category and open-ended questions measuring aspects of the Ambassador program, such as perceived helpfulness of the trainings/meetings, and perceived changes in school climate/student norms as a result of the Ambassador program.

Friends: Each Ambassador and Key Student also identified as many as 10 students who are their close friends. The School Climate Surveys of these "friends" were flagged for further analysis, because it was hypothesized that these students would show the earliest changes as the Ambassadors began to use their skills.

Key Adult Survey: This survey is composed of 42 items (ordered-response and open-ended) designed to measure adults' perceptions of the frequency of student mistreatment, school safety, connectedness and climate, and the effectiveness of other bullying prevention programs implemented in the school.

School records data: discipline records were collected and analyzed for trends over time.

Process data sources: To augment the statistical data collected, the following information was also obtained and reviewed: a) questionnaires and interviews with school principals and/or disciplinarians, b) Action Log Snapshots (i.e., records of Ambassador interventions), c) Ambassador attendance at Family Group meetings, d) reports from Program Advisors and Family Group Facilitators, and e) Year-End Surveys of Program Advisors and Family Group Facilitators.

Focus Groups Sessions with small groups of students in control and treatment schools were recorded. Students were asked about the surveys, the overall school climate and where appropriate about the perceived success of the program.

Four waves of data collection occurred: a pre-test in October of Year 1, a post-test in May of Year 1, a second pre-test of newly identified Ambassadors and Key Students in October of Year 2, and a second post-test in May of Year 2. At each wave except Pre 2, three types of surveys were collected: (a) School Climate Survey, (b) Ambassador/Key Student Survey, and (c) Key Adult Survey. At Pre 2, only the Ambassador/Key Student surveys were administered.

## **2.3 Results**

The research design includes three nested groups: 1) Ambassadors and Key Students, 2) friends of Ambassadors and Key Students, and 3) the school population at large. Differences were evaluated in each of these groups across intervention condition.

### **2.3.1. Ambassadors and Key Students**

The Ambassadors from the treatment schools and the Key Students from the control schools form the smallest group of interest, approximately 80 at each school or 400 students in total. Because the program deals directly with Ambassadors, we expected to see the largest impact in this group as measured by their survey responses.

Ambassadors and Key Students took two surveys in each data collection wave: the Ambassador/Key Student survey and the School Climate survey. For each scale described in Table 2, the difference between Ambassadors and Key Students were examined using Pre 1, Post 1, Pre 2, and Post 2 data from these surveys. The data from the Climate survey were analyzed using separate ANCOVA models with an additional factor Program Participant (0 = not an Ambassador nor Key Student, 1 = first year Ambassador or Key Student, 2 = second year Ambassador or Key Student) and one covariate Friends Index (a weighted count of the number of times a student was mentioned as a friend of an Ambassador/Key Student).

### 2.3.2. Ambassador/Key Student Survey

The data from the Ambassador/Key Student surveys were analyzed using separate ANOVA models with three fixed factors: SSA (1 = treatment school, 0 = control school), Gender (1 = male, 2 = female), and Grade (sixth, seventh and eighth). For Pre 1, Post 1, and Pre 2, there were no significant differences between Ambassadors and Key students with regard to any of the scales listed in Table 2. However, at Post 2, male Ambassadors reported significantly higher frequency of Active Intervention with Others (students who were not amongst their closest friends) than male Key Students. On a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always; one or more times a day) the average frequency reported for male Ambassador was 3.18 vs. 2.45 for male Key students ( $p = .007$ ). Figure 1 shows the estimated marginal means by gender and intervention condition. Similarly, male Ambassadors reported higher frequency of Active Intervention with Friends than male Key Students, but the difference was not statistically significant.

### 2.3.3. Climate Survey

The data from the Climate survey were analyzed using separate ANCOVA models adding an additional factor Year of Participation (0 = not an Ambassador nor Key Student, 1 = first year Ambassador or Key Student, 2 = second year) to the ones used above, and one covariate Friends Index that represented the student's social proximity to Ambassadors/Key Students. The factor Year of Participation in conjunction with SSA was analyzed to determine what, if any, effect of the program on the Ambassadors themselves was evident in the climate survey. It was expected to see the difference between the responses of Ambassadors and Key students change over time. However, there were no significant differences between Ambassadors and Key students with regard to the scales listed in Table 2 for the Pre 1, Post 1 or Post 2

### 2.3.4. Friends of Ambassadors and Key Students

The second group of interest is comprised of approximately 900 Friends identified by Ambassadors and Key Students. Based on the theoretical design of the Safe School Ambassadors program, we anticipated that the Friends would be the first students from the general school population impacted by the program.

The slope of the covariate Friends Index and its interaction with SSA in the ANCOVA models described above was used to assess this impact. The index gave higher weight to students who were named as Friends on the post-intervention surveys and to students who were named as a friend by the same Ambassador/Key Student more than once. Table 3 describes the Friends Index data. The estimated values for the slopes across the intervention condition for each of the subscales from the climate survey is listed in the first two columns of Table 4. The final two columns represent the  $p$ -values for testing the significance of the overall slope and the interaction of the slope with the intervention indicator SSA.

Examining Table 4, we see that for the School Climate scale, on the Pre 1 assessment, the slope was negative in the treatment schools and positive in the control schools. This

indicates that, at the beginning of the study, the Friends of the Ambassadors reported a significantly worse climate than their fellow students, while in the control schools the Friends of the Key Students reported a better climate than their peers. At Post 1 and Post 2, the slope for both groups was positive, indicating that the climate around the Ambassadors had improved significantly from its pre-SSA-program condition.

Similarly, on the scale for Observed Active Intervention by peers to prevent/stop mistreatment, the slope in the Ambassador schools is negative on Pre 1, positive but not significantly different from 0 on Post 1, and small but significantly greater than 0 on Post 2. This indicates that, over the two years of the study, as the program was “rolled out” in treatment schools, the students closer to the Ambassadors reported seeing more active interventions by peers than did the students who were *not* close to the Ambassadors.

At Pre 1, for the scales for Mid-level Mistreatment, Passive Bystander Behavior, and Active Bystander Behavior, the slope in the treatment schools was positive, indicating the Friends of the Ambassadors reported higher levels of these negative behaviors than their peers did. At Post 1 and Post 2, the slopes were not significantly different from 0, which indicates that situation improved and the Friends of Ambassadors no longer reported higher levels of these negative behaviors than their peers did.

### 2.3.5. School population

The largest group is the school population at large (6th and 7th grade students in year one and 7th and 8th grade students in year two). For each observation on the climate survey (Pre 1, Post 1 and Post 2), the data were analyzed using the ANCOVA models described in the previous section. Overall, reported levels of mistreatment were higher on Post 1 than at Pre 1 in both types of schools (e.g., for mid-level mistreatment, the overall mean increased from 2.05 to 2.36).

Students at SSA schools reported significantly higher rates of mid-level mistreatment at Post 1 (2.52 vs. 2.24,  $p = .086$ ) and at Post 2 (2.68 vs. 2.07,  $p = .000$ ), but not at Pre 1 (1.99 vs. 2.12,  $p = .40$ ). Also, students at SSA schools reported significantly higher rates of low-level mistreatment at Post 2 than students at control schools reported (2.70 vs. 2.22 on a five point scale,  $p = .003$ ), but not at Pre 1 (2.15 vs. 2.14,  $p = .94$ ) nor at Post 1 (2.47 vs. 2.40,  $p = .29$ ). No other significant differences between treatment and control schools were found with regard to the other subscales listed in Table 2.

In our preliminary analysis of the school discipline data, the annual rate of referral to an Alternative Education setting (i.e. the number of students with at least one referral divided by the total student population) was examined. Comparing the baseline of the year prior to intervention (2006 - 2007) to the final year of the program (2008-2009), the referral rate increased from 7.3% to 8.0% in the treatment schools and from 3.3% to 5.0% in the control schools. This represents a 9.6% increase in the treatment schools as compared to a 51.5% increase in the control schools. In particular, the referral rate at one of the three treatment schools decreased from 10.6% to 9.2%.

## **2.4 Discussion**

### **2.4.1. Learnings about Ambassadors**

We anticipated that Ambassadors would show the greatest amount of change, but the survey data did not reveal significant differences between Ambassadors and Key Students in their attitudes about human relations (e.g., diversity) as measured by the Attitude scale, or in their school connectedness. However, at Post 2, male Ambassadors did report significantly higher rates of active intervention than male Key Students did. Since there was no difference between Ambassadors and Key Students on this variable at Pre 1, this result indicates that these Ambassadors were implementing the positive intervening behaviors that were taught in the SSA program. Observations of the trainers and comments made during the focus groups suggest that the intervention behaviors taught in the SSA program are more familiar and culturally acceptable to the females than the males, so the change in the males was more noticeable and is a result that warrants further investigation.

This finding is reinforced by a similar pattern noted in the Friends data: while Friends of Ambassadors initially reported witnessing significantly less active intervention than Friends of Key Students, after the program was implemented, Friends of Ambassadors reported witnessing significantly more active intervening than their counterparts at control schools.

This result was further replicated in Key Adult surveys, which underwent analyses similar to the Ambassador and Climate surveys. The most interesting results are depicted in Figure 2, which shows that on average, Key Adults in SSA schools reported an increase in witnessing helpful student behaviors (e.g., speaking up for students who were being put down) from Pre 1 to Post 1 and Post 2. In control schools, the rates of these behaviors as observed by key adults decreased slightly over time.

The process data suggests that the surveys may not have detected all the changes that happened with Ambassadors. One principal relayed an Ambassador's comment: "I used to be the one picking on other kids and starting fights, but now I am the one out there protecting the kids from guys that are like I used to be." Additionally, the Program Adults reported via Year-End Surveys that Ambassadors had shown improvements in self-confidence, leadership, communication, empathy, tolerance and willingness to intervene when they noticed mistreatment (mean = 2.17 on a 3-point scale ranging from 1 = "have not changed" to 3 = "improved a lot"). These same adults also reported that Ambassadors had become more willing to report to adults information about potential problems or dangerous situations (mean = 2.30), an observation corroborated by principals and other administrators at the treatment schools, one of whom noted, "My administrative staff and I can confirm the flow of information from Ambassadors to our offices was ongoing throughout the year."

### **2.4.2. Learnings about Friends**

Additional positive results were also found in the Friends data. Although Friends of Ambassadors initially reported significantly worse school climate than Friends of the

Key Students in control schools, after the implementation of SSA this pattern had reversed; Friends in intervention schools rated school climate significantly better than Friends in control schools. Furthermore, at Pre 1, Friends of Ambassadors reported observing some types of mistreatment (e.g., mid-level mistreatment, passive bystander behavior, active bystander behavior) more frequently than their counterparts in control schools, but after the implementation of the SSA program, these differences were no longer seen (i.e. the environment around the Friends of Ambassadors appears to have improved). These changes suggest that the Ambassadors are actually using the intervention skills they have learned through the program, which suggests that the logic model at the core of the SSA program (socially influential students can use their influence in positive ways to improve the behavior of peers) is working and deserves further study.

#### 2.4.3. Learnings about Overall Climate

Although the changes seen amongst the Ambassadors' Friends were promising, similar results were not found in the school population at large. Overall climate at all schools appears to have deteriorated over time, and this may be due in part to a feature of the study design. The Pre-Post 1 group included 6th graders but no 8th graders. The 6th graders reported less mistreatment than older students: a lot less on the Pre and not as much less on the Post 1. This change matches the perception by adults that over the course of their first year in middle school, 6th graders lose their "innocence" and come to act out more like stereotypical middle school students. When the 6th graders became 7th graders and were measured at Post 2, the difference between grade levels had disappeared.

There were also no clear trends that distinguished the SSA from the control schools. Notably, the results of the entire school assessment did not replicate the positive results from Ambassador, Friends, and Key Adult surveys regarding witnessing increased rates of intervention at SSA schools. Though the differences reported in the climate survey at Pre 1 were not significant, in each scale the difference favored the control school (lower mistreatment, better climate). In some cases these differences were magnified at Post 1 and Post 2. In particular, students at SSA schools reported significantly higher rates of mid-level mistreatment at Post 1, and significantly higher rates of low-level mistreatment at Post 2, than students at control schools reported. The higher rates of lower-level mistreatment may reflect an increased sophistication in students' mistreatment as they age: subtly snubbing rather than plainly pushing.

Regardless, this overall deterioration indicates that while teachers and friends of Ambassadors noticed differences, the changes were not so great as to produce measurable differences at the school-wide level. We anticipate that school-wide effects for the SSA program would take longer to take hold, given the "ripple effect" logic model of this program.

## **2.5 Challenges and Limitations**

The nature of the preceding results appears to be due, at least in part, to some of the complexities and challenges of conducting this type of research in schools. The research design included many practices designed to increase the rigor of this evaluation. However, some of these safeguards were implemented in a way that reduced their intended benefits. For example, the original design of the study called for one-to-one matching of Ambassadors and Key Students. In order to preserve confidentiality, students were asked to write only their date of birth and the first three letters of their last name on the survey booklet; however, a sizable minority of entries were illegible or did not correspond to earlier data.

Treatment and control schools also appeared to differ initially on potentially important characteristics. Although schools within the same school district were matched on commonly used factors, this method of matching did not completely account for school climate. In particular, discipline records, climate surveys, key adult surveys and school walk-throughs by project staff indicated that control schools started off with more a positive school climate than their matched treatment schools. Although we are able to statistically adjust for initial differences on measured variables, these schools may be different in other unmeasured ways, which may lead to skewed overall comparisons. The withdrawal of a third control school additionally complicated comparisons.

This study also highlights the difficulty in quantitatively measuring mistreatment in middle school students. First, when asking students to remember what happened to them within a particular time frame (e.g., past two weeks), their recollection may be inaccurate. Additionally, students may not know what to count as mistreatment, or may need guidance regarding examples of mistreatment to assist in their recollection. We also struggled with interpreting the result that some Ambassadors reported witnessing more mistreatment after the intervention took place. It seems impossible to untangle whether incidents of mistreatment actually increased, or whether Ambassadors were simply noticing more mistreatment than before given that the intervention is designed to sensitize Ambassadors to this behavior.

This project also underscored the complexity of collecting records from schools and the importance of collecting information from multiple perspectives within the school. For example, during the course of the project, district policies and school practices regarding discipline changed, which influenced discipline statistics. Our conversations with school administrators helped us understand how this change was implemented within the school so discipline data collected for the evaluation could be interpreted appropriately.

Furthermore, at some schools, staff were assigned responsibility for SSA activities without additional time or resources to carry out these tasks adequately. Therefore the quality of program implementation, even within a school, may have varied, and impacted Ambassadors.

## **2.6 Implications for Future Research**

One exciting line of inquiry for future research involves the linking of Ambassadors and their friends. Using social networking software, it may be possible and informative to examine the differential impact of individual Ambassadors (or other peer leaders) on their social networks across time, and correlate that impact to predictor variables.

## **3. Part II**

### **3.1 Methods**

Since it was impossible to predict in advance the fidelity of program implementation at the three intervention schools discussed above, Part II of this evaluation was designed to assess program impact under conditions of high fidelity to internal program benchmarks. The primary research questions focused on the presence of changes in discipline indicators over time, and whether those were correlated to fidelity of program implementation.

To identify high-fidelity implementations, the pool of more than 600 program launch sites was scanned for schools that were in at least their third year of implementation (suggesting sustained commitment and successful integration into school policy and practice), had at least 2 documented trainings conducted by certified trainers (suggesting sufficient numbers of students and adults with adequate knowledge and skills), and had completed Year-End Surveys at least once (preliminary indicator of fidelity). The 59 schools identified were surveyed to gather information about their implementation; 31 schools responded and were scored according to the Program Implementation Index developed from program benchmarks and described in Table 5.

Of these schools, 19 scored above the median (50) and indicated ability to provide data. This group included elementary, middle and high schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas of New York, Texas, Colorado and California. For each of these schools, potential control (non-SSA) schools were identified from the applicable state Education Agency's list of similar schools based on state testing. A matching control school for each treatment school was then chosen based on the following criteria: same grade levels, overall school size (student population), racial/ethnic composition, percent of students eligible for free/reduced price meals (a commonly used measure of socioeconomic factors), and geographic proximity (with preference for schools in the same school district, county, or region). Discipline and other data was then collected from the 19 treatment schools and 18 control schools, for a total N = 37 schools. For analyses done by school year, the treatment schools represented N = 84 years of implementation of the SSA program (average of 4.4 years at each school).

### **3.2 Data Sources**

Implementation Data was collected using a 10-item survey developed from program benchmarks. Items included total number of active Ambassadors, frequency of Family Group Meetings and attendance of Ambassadors (over two years), frequency of planning meetings and attendance of adults (over two years), degree of principal's support for the program, nature and frequency of communication with staff about the

program (as an indicator of staff support), and the methods used by Ambassadors to document their interventions (as an indicator of Ambassador accountability and follow-through).

The Impact Survey included sections on demographic, enrollment, attendance and discipline data (e.g. office referrals, detentions, and suspensions), along with other information about the school's bullying prevention and climate improvement efforts. Knowing that many factors influence discipline data, respondents at the treatment schools were also asked about their perceived impact of the SSA program itself. When schools were non-responsive, impact data about each matched pair was obtained via state databases.

### **3.3 Results**

To determine whether there are significant differences in school discipline before and after implementation of the SSA program, discipline indicators from 84 different years of SSA program implementation at the 19 treatment schools were analyzed. A paired *t*-test was performed on a variable representing the average of pre-post change in the school's rate of suspension or other discipline indicator(s) during all years of SSA program implementation, normalized by school population. Pre-SSA rates ranged from 0.076 to 3.3 incidents per student per year, and analysis showed an average change of -0.203 after SSA program implementation, a statistically significant result ( $p = 0.045$ ).

Office referral and detention data were then omitted and suspension rates were analyzed at both treatment and control schools independently, using a paired *t*-test. The data is described in Table 6 and Table 7. Across all years of SSA program implementation, the mean change in suspension rate in treatment schools is -0.135 (an average decrease of 33.1%), which is statistically significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ). The same analysis was performed for control schools, and the mean change in suspension rate for control schools is 0.004 (an average increase of 10.4%), which is not statistically significant. As shown in Figure 3, the treatment schools had higher baseline suspension rates than the controls, and those rates decreased significantly after high-quality implementation of the SSA program, while suspension rates at the controls remained relatively unchanged during the same years.

The change in suspension rate from the baseline was calculated for treatment and control schools for each year of implementation. An independent *t*-test showed that the mean difference between treatment and control schools is -0.140, indicating that the treatment schools have lower suspension rates than the matched set of control schools after implementation of the SSA program. The result is statistically significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

The relationship between fidelity of program implementation and change in discipline incidents was explored using correlational analysis of a school's Implementation Index score (higher score = higher fidelity implementation) and the average change in discipline indicator (the larger the number, the greater the increase in discipline incidents). A one-directional correlation test for these 19 schools found a Pearson

Correlation of -0.318 ( $p = 0.092$ ), suggesting a medium correlation between fidelity of implementation of the SSA program and a decrease in discipline incidents.

### **3.4 Discussion**

We hypothesized that there would be decreases in the rates of suspensions and other types of discipline at the treatment schools after implementation of the SSA program. We also anticipated that the SSA schools would over time have lower suspension rates than the control group. The analysis confirmed both of these hypotheses.

The challenge in any program evaluation is attributing effect to the range of potential contributing factors, including the program being studied. The Impact Survey used in this evaluation included questions about the impact of the Safe School Ambassadors program on school discipline, school climate, staff morale, finances and learning/achievement; for example: What if any impact has the Safe School Ambassadors program had on school discipline data (e.g. office referrals, detentions, suspensions)? The 5-item response scale ranged from 1 = Very Negative to 5 = Very Positive. As shown in Table 8, the 14 respondents (principals, deans, counselors, teachers) from treatment schools reported an average impact of 4.26, indicating a relatively strong perception that the SSA program has had a positive impact on these aspects of their schools.

The impact survey also asked respondents to identify and rate the effectiveness of any (non-SSA) curricula, extra-curricular programs or clubs, one-time events or activities, rules and policies, and any other initiatives designed to reduce bullying and help students get along. Respondents listed a range of 0-7 such items, with the average number being 3.14. The average reported effectiveness of these other programs and activities was 3.94, slightly lower than that reported for the SSA program. Further analysis of these potentially confounding variables is beyond the scope of this evaluation.

### **3.5 Implications for Future Research**

An intriguing avenue to explore in future research would be an analysis of discipline data that is more sensitive to Ambassadors' influence (e.g. office referrals rather than overall suspensions). It would also be helpful to study school climate at matched pairs of treatment and control schools over time, using regular & standardized instruments like the California Healthy Kids Survey, and to correlate that data to annual SSA Implementation Index numbers as well as annual information about other (non-SSA) programs and activities.

## **4. Conclusion**

The underlying model of the Safe School Ambassadors program is consistent with the findings of DeFur and Korinek (2010) and others before them – that students are a valuable resource for resolving seemingly intractable school problems. The SSA program is a departure from the more traditional outside-in, adult-driven approaches that are based on rules and consequences, and from approaches that focus on the students directly involved in the bully-victim dyad. It represents an innovative approach

more consistent with the ecological perspective on bullying discussed by Espelage (2004) who noted that effective bullying interventions need to change the conditions in the social environment that permit bullying to occur. Specifically, the Safe School Ambassadors program seeks to improve that environment by harnessing the social power of certain students to influence their peers to stop or refrain from engaging in hurtful or violent behaviors, thereby over time shifting the underlying social norms that govern those behaviors.

As noted by Smith et al. (2004), few studies evaluating whole school anti-bullying programs have yielded unequivocal and sustained positive outcomes. This result is unsurprising given the complexity of implementing, monitoring and measuring such programs. However, several promising results from this evaluation of the Safe School Ambassadors program indicate that it increases the frequency of student intervention to stop mistreatment, which is corroborated by Ambassadors' reports of interventions. The statistically significant reductions in discipline indicators seen at schools where the program was implemented with high fidelity, augmented by school administrators' reports, indicate that the program can have a significant positive impact on discipline incidents and overall school climate. Taken together, these findings suggest that an inside-out, student-centered approach may be an effective and more inclusive method for reducing bullying/mistreatment and enhancing school climate.

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## 6. Tables and Figures

**Table 1: Summary of participants and roles in the SSA program and evaluation**

	Program	Definition	Evaluation		
	SSA Role		Treatment (SSA school)	Control (Non-SSA School)	Instrumentation and Data Collection
Students	Ambassador	Students trained to stop mistreatment	Ambassador	Key Student	Ambassador or Key Student Survey. Climate Surveys flagged for analysis as a group
	N/A	Students named by Ambassadors or Key Students (via their respective surveys) as being one of the 10 people they “hang out” with the most.	Friends	Friends	Climate Surveys flagged for analysis as a group
	N/A		All Students*	All Students*	Climate Surveys
Adults	Family Group Facilitator	Adults trained to provide support, supervision, and skill development to Ambassadors via small-group meetings throughout the year.	Family Group Facilitator	N/A	Year-End Survey for FGFs
	Program Advisor	Adult who provides overall leadership, supervision, and planning.	Program Advisor	N/A	Year-End Survey for PAs
	N/A	Cross-section of adults who have insights or knowledge of student climate b/c of their position (e.g. Assistant Principal in charge of Discipline, Campus Supervisor or Yard Duty personnel) OR because of their relationship / personality (i.e. students are naturally drawn to this individual).	Key Adults	Key Adults	Key Adult Survey

\* In year 1, the Climate Survey was completed by all students in grades 6-7, plus any 8th graders who were named by Ambassadors or Key Students as "Friends". In year 2, all students in grades 7-8 completed it.

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**Table 2: Summary of scales/items included in student self-report surveys**

Name of scale	Description of scale	Included in surveys
School Climate	11-item scale measuring caring social atmosphere at school. Items are Likert-type with 4 response categories. Higher values indicate better school climate. $\alpha = .776$ .	School Climate
Connectedness	Multi-item measure of Blum's concept of connectedness. Items are ordered response type with 5 response categories. Higher values indicate more connection to school. Climate: 5 item scale with $\alpha = .834$ , Amb/Key: 4-item scale with $\alpha = .646$ .	Ambassador/Key Student School Climate
Low Level Mistreatment Observed	Multi-item scale measuring frequency of observing low-level forms of mistreatment such as leaving someone out of a group. Items are ordered response type with 5 response categories. Higher values indicate more mistreatment observed. Climate: 5 item scale with $\alpha = .774$ , Amb/Key: 2-item scale with $\alpha = .734$ .	Ambassador/Key Student School Climate
Mid Level Mistreatment Observed	Multi-item scale measuring frequency of observing mid-level forms of mistreatment such as hitting or pushing. Items are ordered response type with 5 response categories. Higher values indicate more mistreatment observed. Climate: 3 item scale with $\alpha = .805$ , Amb/Key: 2-item scale with $\alpha = .849$ .	Ambassador/Key Student School Climate
High Level Mistreatment Observed	1 item measuring frequency of observing weapon-carrying at school. Item is ordered response type with 5 response categories. Higher values indicate more observed weapon-carrying.	School Climate
Passive Bystander Behavior Observed	3-item scale measuring frequency of observing peers being passive bystanders and not intervening to stop mistreatment, such as by watching a fight. Items are ordered response type with 5 response categories. Higher values indicate more passive bystander behavior observed. $\alpha = .785$ .	School Climate
Active Bystander Behavior Observed	2-item scale measuring frequency of observing peers being active bystanders and encouraging mistreatment, such as by encouraging a fight. Items are ordered response type with 5 response categories. Higher values indicate more active bystander behavior. $\alpha = .654$ .	School Climate
Active Intervention Observed	6-item scale measuring frequency of observing another student actively intervening to stop mistreatment. Items are ordered response type with 5 response categories. Higher values indicate more active intervention observed. $\alpha = .899$ .	School Climate
Attitude	7-item scale measuring the self reported attitude toward diversity and mistreatment. Items are ordered response type with 5 response categories. Higher values indicate a more positive and tolerant attitude. $\alpha = .611$ .	Ambassador/Key Student
Active Intervention with Friends	7-item scale measuring the self reported frequency of actively intervening to stop mistreatment among friends. Items are ordered response type with 5 response categories. Higher values indicate more active intervention reported. $\alpha = .793$ .	Ambassador/Key Student
Active Intervention with Others	7-item scale measuring the self reported frequency of actively intervening to stop mistreatment among students who are not friends. Items are ordered response type with 5 response categories. Higher values indicate more active intervention reported. $\alpha = .871$ .	Ambassador/Key Student

**Table 3: Summary of Friends Index**

School Type	Number	Mean	St. Dev.	Maximum
SSA	204	1.61	1.24	7
Control	206	1.92	1.56	11.5

*A student's Friends Index = .5\*Number of times s/he was named by an Ambassador or Key Student as one of her/his friends on Pre 1 + Number of mentions on Post 1 and Post 2 + number of times mentioned by same Ambassador on two surveys + number of times mentioned by same Ambassador on three surveys*

**Table 4: Slope Coefficients and p-values from the Friends analysis**

Scale	Time of Measurement	Slope SSA	Slope Control	p-values Friends Index	p-values Friends Index*SSA
School Climate	Pre1	-0.02	0.02	0.96	<b>0.05</b>
	Post1	0.02	0.01	0.29	0.75
	Post2	0.05	0.04	<b>0.00</b>	0.60
Connectedness	Pre1	0.04	0.07	<b>0.01</b>	0.55
	Post1	0.11	0.04	<b>0.00</b>	0.27
	Post2	0.09	0.09	<b>0.00</b>	0.95
Low Level Mistreatment (e.g. exclusion, insult)	Pre1	0.03	0.03	0.13	1.00
	Post1	0.06	0.02	0.09	0.36
	Post2	0.02	-0.04	0.74	0.12
Mid Level Mistreatment (e.g. threaten, push, fight)	Pre1	0.07	0.01	<b>0.04</b>	0.09
	Post1	0.03	-0.01	0.62	0.35
	Post2	0.00	-0.03	0.42	0.55
High Level Mistreatment (e.g. weapon)	Pre1	-0.01	0.01	0.44	0.89
	Post1	-0.07	-0.02	<b>0.02</b>	0.27
	Post2	0.01	0.00	0.76	0.80
Passive Bystander Behavior (e.g. watch argument / fight)	Pre1	0.09	0.01	<b>0.02</b>	<b>0.03</b>
	Post1	0.00	-0.01	0.77	0.88
	Post2	0.04	-0.05	0.94	<b>0.04</b>
Active Bystander Behavior (e.g. encourage argument / fight)	Pre1	0.07	0.02	<b>0.02</b>	0.14
	Post1	-0.02	-0.01	0.64	0.82
	Post2	0.03	-0.02	0.77	0.33
Observing Active Intervention (e.g. saw students speak up to prevent/stop mistreatment)	Pre1	-0.04	0.06	0.63	<b>0.03</b>
	Post1	0.02	0.06	0.11	0.50
	Post2	0.06	0.04	<b>0.03</b>	0.57

**Table 5: SSA Program Implementation Index**

Component and Definition	Maximum Points
Ambassador Saturation: Ratio of Ambassadors to overall school population	25
Family Group Meetings: Regular meetings of 7-10 Ambassadors with 1-2 Program Adults	25
Program Management Team (adults) Meetings: Regular meetings or communication to assess and plan	15
Principal Supports Program	10
Staff Communication: written and face-to-face communication about SSA program activities, concerns, results, etc.	10
Ambassador Intervention: which methods are used by Ambassadors document their interventions	15
<b>Total possible points</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 6: Descriptive Statistics on Post-SSA Suspension Rate**

Group	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Control	56	0.210	0.176	0.000	0.743
Treatment	66	0.175	0.187	0.019	0.816

**Table 7: Descriptive Statistics on the Difference in Suspension Rate**

Group	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Control	56	0.004	0.078	-0.182	0.240
Treatment	66	-0.135	0.209	-0.895	0.068

*This variable was calculated for each year of implementation, by subtracting the baseline (pre-SSA) suspension rate from the suspension rate for that year.*

**Table 8: Administrators' Reports of SSA Program Impact**

Indicator	Average Score
a. School discipline data (Ex: office referrals, detentions, suspensions)	4.31
b. Overall social-emotional climate (Ex: feeling in halls, lunch, other common areas; tension between cliques)	4.54
c. Staff Morale (Ex: fewer classroom discipline incidents allows teachers to focus on teaching, teacher retention)	4.08
d. School Budget / Finances (Ex: costs for vandalism, suspension processing)	4.23
e. Learning and achievement (Ex: grades, test scores, student interest in learning)	4.15
<b>Average Impact</b>	<b>4.26</b>

*Scale: 1 = Very Negative Impact, 3 = No Impact, 5 = Very Positive Impact*

Figure 1: Estimated Marginal Means of Active Intervention with Non-Friend

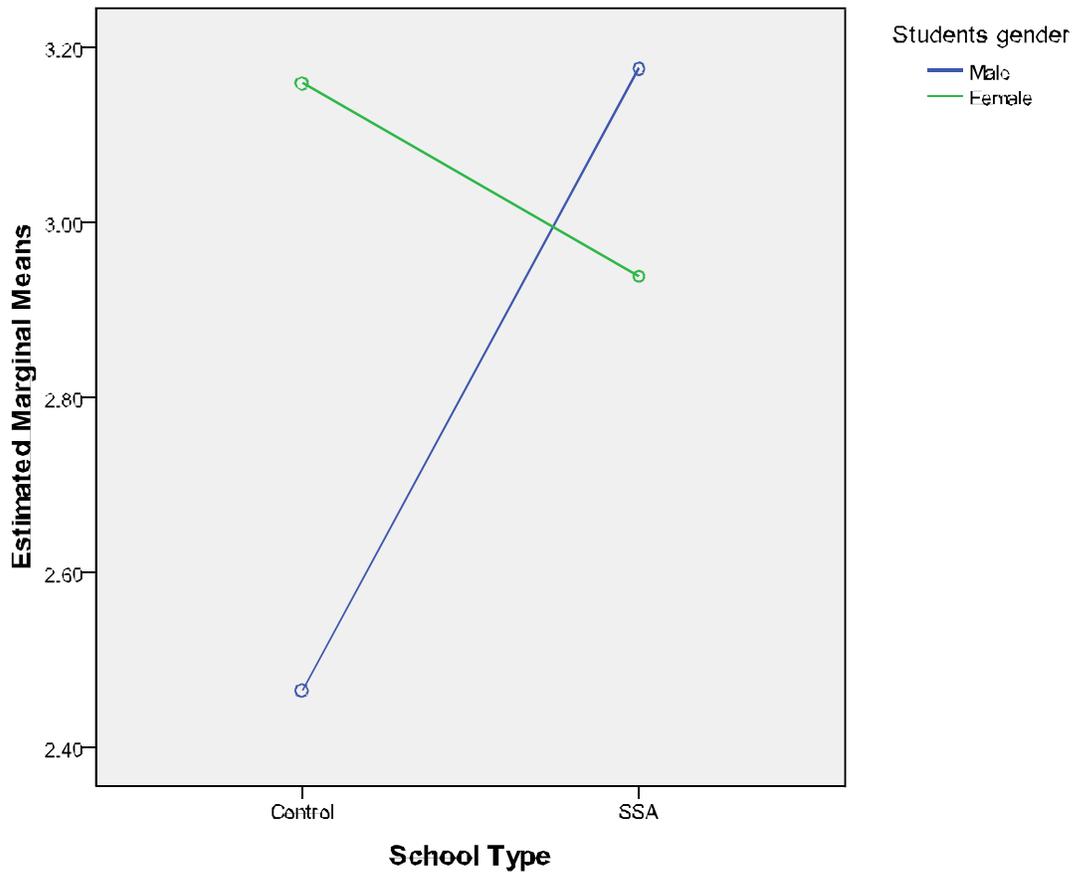
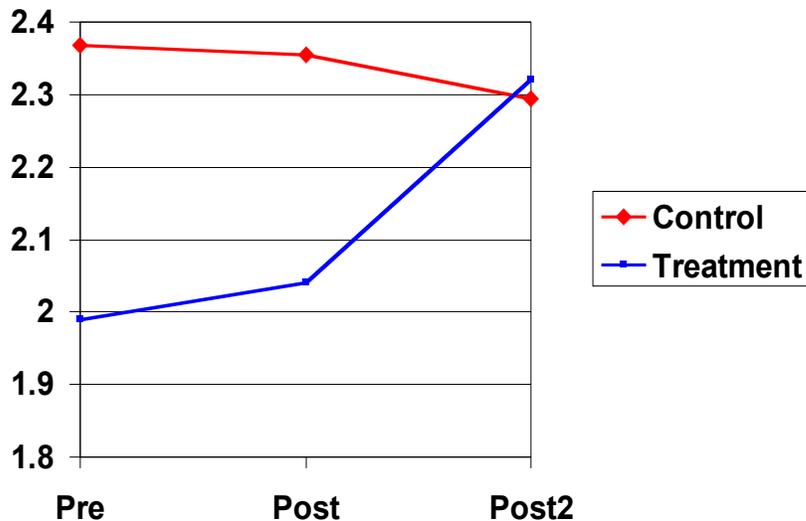
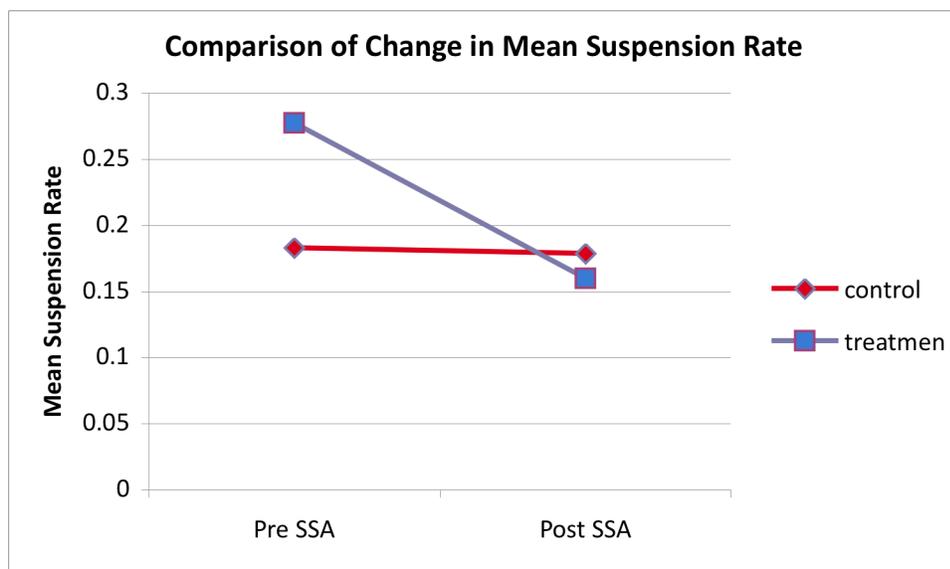


Figure 2: Key Adults' Observations of Active Interventions to Stop Mistreatment.



Key Adults were asked about how often in the previous month they noticed students intervening to prevent or stop mistreatment. Y-axis is frequency of response; scale ranges from 1 = never to 5 = always.

Figure 3: Change in Suspension Rate after SSA Program Implementation.



The decrease of 0.1174 at treatment schools was significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

## **7. Appendix I: The Logic Model of the Safe School Ambassadors program.**

### **Literature Review on Bullying and Its Prevention: Implications for the Safe Schools Ambassadors® Program**

**Prepared by OMNI Research and Training, Inc for Community-Matters**

**November 10, 2004**

This document serves to assess the literature in relation to the core components of the Safe Schools Ambassador® (SSA) program. The SSA program is a variant of a student watch program (Ross, 1996) that recruits and trains socially influential youth from the different social groups that exist in schools to note and report instances of bullying and other antisocial behavior (Community Matters, 2003). However, SSA is considered a second generation student watch program because a much greater emphasis is placed on training youth bystanders on methods to intervene as warranted by the situation rather than simply noticing and reporting bullying to school staff. The overall goal of the SSA program is to improve the school climate by empowering students who are neither bullies nor victims of bullies, but have a good probability of being a bystander, to play a clear role in preventing episodes of bullying and related activities.

The aims of this preliminary review of the literature are to:

- Provide a brief overview of the bullying problem,
- Establish the importance of utilizing bystanders in the prevention of bullying,
- Discuss core factors in effective bystander interventions, and
- Assess the literature for outcomes of bullying prevention programs and bystander interventions.

### **General Overview of the Bullying Problem**

Violence as well as the *fear* of violence is prevalent in U.S. society. Although overall rates of violent crime have declined from their peak in the 1980s, intentional violence still accounts for one-third of all injury deaths (Hamburg, 1998), and violent injury and death continues to disproportionately affect children, adolescents and young adults (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Over the last several decades, violence has come to be defined as a public health issue and greater public attention has been paid to its prevention, not simply its deterrence and control (Elliot, 1998).

During the 1980s and increasingly throughout the 1990s, major national initiatives to address youth violence were mounted, including the passage of the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act of 1994. Violence also became an established field of research study. Over

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time, these prevention and research efforts helped define *bullying* prevention as an important area of violence prevention by drawing attention to the:

- Cycle of violence in which victimization begets future perpetration
- Violence prevention needs in the school environment
- Establishment of a bully prevention program as one of the ten Blueprints for Violence Prevention (Elliot, 2000).

Today, bullying is considered to be one of the most common and pervasive forms of school violence (Swearer & Doll, 2001). Much of what has been learned to date comes from studies conducted in Scandinavian countries, Great Britain, Ireland, Spain, Australia, the Netherlands, and Japan (Banks, 1997; Olweus, 1993). An important conclusion drawn from this research is the universality of bullying behaviors (Macklem, 2003). Bullying is a problem in all schools and countries around the world.

Throughout the 1990s, a number of studies were conducted to understand the prevalence and incidence of bullying. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2004) reported that approximately 50% of all children had been bullied while in school and that 10% of those that had been bullied were victimized on a regular basis. A subsequent study, representing the first nationwide research on bullying in the U.S., was conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Development. This study found that in grades sixth through tenth, 16% of students indicated that others had bullied them during the current term. Almost 30% reported that they had been involved as a bully, a victim, or both (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, and Scheidt, 2001). Ericson (2001) used these data to estimate that 1.6 million students in these grades were bullied at least once a week. Moreover, based on the original study, the National Institute of Child Health and Development found that bullying behaviors were a marker for involvement in future violence-related behaviors. In fact, it reported that children and youth that engaged in bullying behaviors were the group most at risk for engaging in violent behaviors over time (Nansel, T.R., Overpeck, M.,D., Haynie, D.L., Ruan, W.J., & Scheidt , 2003).

### **Importance of Utilizing Bystanders for Bullying Prevention**

Peers are present in 85% of bullying episodes in school settings (Bonds & Stoker, 2003, Craig & Pepler, 1995) and up to 92% of elementary school students have observed instances of bullying in their schools (Henderson & Hymel, 2002, as cited in Macklem, 2003). Because bystanders are almost always present whereas adults rarely witness bullying, their participation in school-based bullying programs is considered instrumental. Researchers using a variety of data collection methods, including unobtrusive observation, describe various roles that bystanders may take in a bullying episode (Craig & Pepler, 2000; Cowie & Wallace, 2000; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig 1999; Salmivalli, 1999). These include:

- Becoming an assistant of the bully,
- Defending the victim, or
- Remaining an outsider.

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Bystanders can reinforce the bully by laughing or cheering on behavior. They can also pretend not to notice what is going on but often are described by the victim as cooperating with the bully because of their nonverbal behavior (Macklem, 2003).

While over half of surveyed children reported that they would intervene in a hypothetical bullying situation, their reports do not match with observed playground behavior (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). Actual intervention occurred by bystanders on average in about 11% of the bullying episodes (Craig & Pepler, 1997). In a study conducted by O'Connell, Pepler, and Craig (1999) 54% of the time children (ages 5-12) passively watched a bullying dynamic, 21% of the time joined in on bullying, and 25% of the time intervened on behalf of the victim. Older children are less likely to report intervening and more likely to report encouraging a bully than younger children (Jeffrey, Miller, & Linn, 2001; Rigby & Slee, 1992).

According to Lazarus (2001), bystanders may not report abuse because they:

- Do not recognize behavior as bullying
- Fear getting a friend in trouble
- Fear alienation
- Fear retaliation
- Believe that adults will not help

Moreover, Khosropour and Walsh (2000) found that bystanders prioritized the intentions of the bully over the victim's feelings even after a bully prevention program that taught the opposing lesson. Over 50% of sixth and seventh graders felt that the victim could control the reason for being mistreated and many bystanders believed that the victim would learn something from the encounter. In addition to blaming the victim, Sutton and Keogh (2000) showed that students who seek to be accepted by a social group that supports bullying are less willing to become involved or take action.

Prevention of bullying is further undermined by the fact that there is a strong taboo among students against informing school staff when episodes of bullying occur (Crary, 2001 as cited in Macklem 2003). Many students report concerns that they would not be protected in unsupervised areas of the school (Suderman, Jaffe, & Schiek, 1996 as cited in Macklem 2003). Some bystanders also feel relieved when they are not a target and often distance themselves from the victim, reducing empathy and making it easier to walk away from the situation.

As bullying-prevention in schools begin to place greater emphasis on encouraging bystanders during episodes of bullying to intervene rather than simply report, empowering students to act becomes an important focal point. In addition to addressing the barriers described above, giving youth the knowledge and skills for effective behaviors to engage in as well as providing a network of support from peers and school staff is critical (Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, Short-Camilli, 1994).

### **Core Factors in Effective Bystander Interventions**

#### *Group Processes that Facilitate Bullying*

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Children are highly motivated by the need to belong. Social groups start forming as early as the preschool years. During this period, children may be excluded from groups because often the inclusion of a new member causes deterioration in play. For example, two children who are playing a make-believe setting and are interrupted by a third 'outsider' may lose focus of what they were doing and that particular play activity may come to an end. According to Macklem (2003), children learn early on that they can exclude others and use the concept of 'friend' to control play activity.

By elementary school children are still largely motivated by wanting to belong, and many peer groups become established by third grade. Children are now forced to find their place using social power. Social groups have established rules of how children are supposed to act to be accepted by a particular group. This includes how aggression is expressed, which accounts for the finding that aggressive children hang out and play with other aggressive children (Cairns & Cairns, 1991). These norms are often established by the most popular child in the group; the child with the most social power. However, being popular is not the same as having many friends. While having the ability to establish and maintain friendships is associated with social competence and prosocial behaviors, popularity tends to be associated with dominance, aggression, and power (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). By fifth grade, both boys and girls will choose popularity over friendship and will reject a 'friend' to be accepted by a group (Macklem, 2003).

Because social groups have a hierarchy, the child with the most social power has tremendous influence on the behavior of the other members and determines the status of others in the group. Macklem (2003) describes these group dynamics as follows:

“The leader or leaders of cliques use their popularity to control the group. Clique leaders may manipulate and rearrange the hierarchy by extending favor on a particular child who is lower in the hierarchy. Leaders hang on to their power by manipulating the feelings and status of other children. Leaders also manipulate clique members into bullying others, and then withdraw themselves so that others take the blame” (pp. 110-111).

Macklem (2003) further describes that by fourth or fifth grade, students in schools with greater than 80 individuals per grade are often split into four groups. The popular group makes up approximately one third of all students in any given grade level. This group drives the school climate, and is motivated to protect their power. There may be a select group of leaders within the popular circle that determine the ever-changing status of the followers. The next group, the 'wannabes', makes up about 10% of students in a grade level. These are students who have their own small group of friends, but would prefer to be in the popular group. The third group includes about 50% of the students of a class that is made up of a middle group of students who mostly operate on their own. These students are generally accepting of others, but do not wish to be a part of the popular clique, and are also critical of the wannabes. The remaining 10% of the class is made up of isolated children. These children lack support, and even tend to reject one another.

Based on research conducted by Adler and Adler (1998), by late elementary school, students have a strong sense of:

- Social status based on power and popularity,

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- Pressures to conform to group norms, and
- Consequences that result from going against group norms.

During middle school, the social hierarchy is still rooted in popularity. Although popular peers may not necessarily be well-liked, their influence on members within the group remains. They effectively use both positive and negative behaviors to achieve their desired goals and often are controlling and manipulate others. According to Macklem (2003):

“Social groups among adolescents have gate-keeping regulations which assure that new members are selected because they are similar to others who already belong to the group. The group helps the individual student establish identity and helps meet the individual’s need to belong, but at the same time the group controls the student’s behavior, particularly the expression of aggression... Students move up and down in status within the larger group, but do not change from one large group to another. Once a new member of the group is allowed to participate, further socialization takes place. Students learn the values of the group and take on the social problems of the group.” (p. 113).

Since peers reinforce the harmful group dynamic of antisocial perpetration, intervention must incorporate the youth network (Macklem, 2003). For this reason, effective bystander intervention programs must focus recruitment strategies to select influential members that cut across the social groups and cliques that exist in school settings. However, the difference between ‘tattle telling’ and prosocial behavior must be taught and reinforced by peer networks. Since social pressures dictate a tacit response, student participants need regular and ongoing support.

### *Involvement of Influential Youth*

Social groups in middle and high schools commonly referred to as cliques, have sophisticated hierarchies. According to Greener (2000), popular children are more prosocial than other children. Leader(s) of cliques use their popularity, often maintained by prosocial behavior, to control the social group. Popular students may also manipulate others to bully particular students. The dynamics and hierarchies of these cliques are fluid; social status can be manipulated by leaders who work hard to maintain their heightened social status. Students who are eager for acceptance do not stand up to bullies. If a group does not support intervening in a bullying situation, these students hesitate to aid bully victims (Sutton & Keogh, 2000).

According to a study by Ginsburg and Miller (1981), the small number of boys who intervened in playground fights were children who held high social status among their peers. Similarly, studies have found that group leaders or children well-liked by their classmates were more likely to self-report intervening in a potential bullying episode (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiannien, 1996). Research on modeling and social influence shows that greater impact is achieved by individuals that are well-liked and who have high social status (Bandura, 1977; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). These studies suggest that children with social influence are more likely to intervene on behalf of a victim. These influential children, already more prosocial than other children, are an untapped resource for modeling appropriate bystander intervention. These leaders may influence their peers who are seeking acceptance to stand up bullies or include marginalized youth. Therefore training students who have been identified as leaders to intervene may be the most efficient and successful means to increase bystander intervention.

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Because modeling prosocial behavior is a major function of bystander intervention programs, the characteristics of individual members and the groups that they represent are quite important.

The relationship between prosocial youth and popularity may also encourage students to become involved in programs such as the SSA programs. In other words, youth may be motivated to enhance their prosocial skills and help bullying victims if they felt these skills might maintain or enhance their popularity.

### *Empathy-building*

To mobilize bystanders to intervene on behalf of a victim, youth must feel empathy toward victims and guilt for not intervening (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Can prosocial behavior be trained? Hoffman (1984) reports that there is modest evidence that practice in role taking in a noncompetitive context can teach prosocial behavior. Similar studies found that empathy trained children displayed more prosocial behaviors than that of the control group (Feshbach, 1982). However, the literature concludes that children respond more empathetically to children of the same race (Hoffman 1982, 1984). Moreover, empathy is mediated by gender. Boys are more likely to feel sympathy for females than males (Pellegrini & Long, 2002).

Empathy is undermined by strong social and cultural norms concerning the attribution of blame to victims in social situations (Brigham, 1991). If a bystander believes the victim caused the perpetration, then empathetic discomfort is reduced and often replaced by anger. Victims with bad reputations (immoral, deceitful, etc.) are often seen as deserving maltreatment. The most compassionate student may not feel empathy, and therefore intervene, if the victim can be blamed.

While students may benefit from empathy training, they also need to be taught to recognize bullying, feel concerned about this behavior, and avoid blaming the victim. According to a U.K. study, 50% of students reported sympathy for victims, 25% were neutral, and 25% reported no sympathy (Macklem, 2003; Smith & Sharp, 1994). Jeffrey, Miller, and Linn (2001) reported that 9% of students did not care about the victim and 36% did not care about bullying episodes. Apathy appears to increase with age, especially among boys, as myths about victims are perpetuated and maintained. By grade eight, two times as many boys as girls reported victims deserved being bullied. Over 50% of sixth and seventh graders felt that the victim could control the reason for being mistreated. Bystanders who blame the victim can also feel anger toward the victim.

### *School-wide Intervention*

In addition to educating students, teachers need to be aware of their own misconceptions and reinforcing behaviors. One study of elementary school students found that adults ignored 71% of bullying episodes (Froschl & Gropper 1999). Ignoring adults believed that children should learn to handle their problems when in reality bullying involves an imbalance and abuse of power that cannot be solved by the victim alone (Garrity et al., 1994). When asked why victims and bystanders do not report the maltreatment, victims reported fearing that school personnel will not handle the event appropriately (Macklem, 2003) while bystanders believed that the adults would not help (Lazarus, 2001).

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In addition to peer support, strong relationships with trusted adults are important for empowering bystanders to report bullying. School personnel must be trained and made available for support. It is essential that students know and feel that this support is available. If students feel that teachers don't care about maltreatment (even if teachers have been trained to avoid reinforcing bullying behavior), then even prosocial students may feel uncomfortable enlisting help from adults in more serious bullying episodes. Students cannot and should not handle all bullying episodes alone. Positive rapport and relationships between teachers and students must be established for bystander intervention participants to successfully intervene on behalf of victims. Concern about student's welfare and the danger of antisocial behaviors must be palpable in the school climate. Dedicated and trained peers will fail without adequate support from school personnel, ongoing support from peers, and an overall change of the school climate.

School-wide interventions that are designed to change school climate are needed to change normative responses to bullying behaviors. According to Macklem (2003), prevention efforts should incorporate the following elements:

- Provide accurate information regarding bullying and the attitudes of peers about bullying to dispel myths and minimize misconceptions about bullying behavior, victims, and tacit compliance
- Re-sensitize peers to bullying behavior. This includes learning to recognize bullying and differentiating bullying behavior from innocuous banter.
- Promote empathy and healthy guilt.
- Reinforce helping behavior and distinguish between reporting behavior as opposed "tattle telling".

### **Outcomes of Bullying Prevention Programs and Bystander Interventions**

Prompted by three suicides attributed to bullying, the National Campaign Against Bullying headed by Dan Olweus and Erling Roland was implemented in Norway in 1983 and resulted in a 50% reduction in bullying episodes and fewer new victims in Bergen schools at one year follow up (Ross, 1996). In addition to a reduction in episodes of bullying, there was a change in the school climate and a reduction of bullying in the greater community. Subsequent evaluations of the Olweus program in other countries have also found positive results, but to a much lesser degree than the original 50% reduction (Elliot, 2000).

Two other major bully prevention programs that used core components of the Olweus Bully Prevention Program, known as the Sheffield and Safe Cities projects, found positive results with an average reduction of about 15% (Macklem, 2003). Although Olweus original evaluation results pointed to a dramatic reduction in bullying, others have had much less success, with some programs reporting negative results (Macklem, 2003; Ross, 1996). However, Olweus and other researchers have concluded that these wide differences in outcomes are largely due to poor program planning and implementation of individual programs (Macklem, 2003). For example, Olweus provided a high level of support to the Bergen schools, which increased program implementation fidelity that resulted in greater reduction in bullying (Smith et al., 1999). Moreover, the evaluation results as a whole emphasize the importance of utilizing a multi-pronged in bullying prevention (Macklem, 2003; Olweus, 1991).

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While traditional programs that target instances of bullying tended to only focus on the bully-victim dyad and not the social process of bullying, most researchers conclude that the effectiveness of programs can be greatly enhanced using a whole school approach (Macklem, 2003; Olweus, 1994). These researchers argue that approaches that focus only on identified victims and bullies underestimate the incidence of bullying, place undue pressure on the victim to solve the problem, and perpetuate myths about bullying and negative attitudes concerning victims. An approach that includes all students and incorporates adults increases the likelihood that an enduring change in overall school climate will occur over time. To improve bully reduction rates from the average 15% reported in work conducted since Olweus original evaluation work, researchers need more innovative strategies. One such innovation is incorporating an understanding of group dynamics into program development. Currently, researchers are encouraging the mobilization of bystanders to reduce school bullying (Macklem, 2003; Smith, Twemlow & Hoover 1999; Salmivalli, 1999).

Macklem (2003) concludes that most researchers feel that soliciting help from bystanders is the *key* variable in decreasing bullying. For example, Dr. Ronald Slaby has demonstrated that bystanders can be effective agents for resolving conflicts and preventing future cruelty and violence in school settings (Slaby & Roedell, 1982; Slaby & Guerra, 1988). However, much less is known about the individual- and school-level outcomes that are realized from bystander intervention programs such as SSA. Although peer interventions in general have been established as effective in many domains (Deck & Einspruch, 1999), little empirical evidence has linked bystander intervention programs to specific bullying-related outcomes. At the same time, a meta-analysis of 143 drug prevention programs conducted by Tobler (1986) showed that school-based bystander interventions can be quite effective in reducing substance use and abuse among youth. Because there are a number of similarities between many of these drug prevention programs and bystander intervention programs, these results are encouraging.

The SafePlace: Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Survival Center that developed the *Expect Respect* school-based program to address sexual and domestic violence state in their handbook that “of greatest significance was the impact of the project on increasing students’ willingness to intervene to help a target of bullying and to seek help from an adult on campus”. According to Macklem (2003), evaluation of the *Expect Respect* Program found an increase of awareness about bullying, knowledge of sexual harassment, and positive attitudes toward helping peers. The change of bystander behavior appears vital to program developers from diverse disciplines in changing school climate and reducing a variety of antisocial behaviors.

Within the field of school-based bully prevention, Maher (1987) provides a good example of the effective use of a student watch program in a New York high school and reported that antisocial behavior had decreased and overall school climate increased as a result of the program. Specifically, Maher (1987) and others argue that these programs help to break down the code of silence that protects the antisocial, by presenting “telling on” as positive manner. Equally important, though one might feel that the potential for negative stigmatization for student members is high, Maher (1987) showed that because membership was presented as a high status activity, this did not occur. Additionally, to the extent that these programs effectively recruit socially influential youth from a broad section of the student body, the possibility of retributions or reprisals are greatly diminished.

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Similar to Maher's student watch program, peer support programs have recently been developed to include students in monitoring peer behavior. In addition to monitoring, these programs also encourage and teach students to play an active role in changing relationships and group dynamics. Cowie (2000) and colleagues have found that programs that focus on students' social interactions through encouraging peers to befriend others, teaching conflict resolution skills, and supporting informal counseling-based approaches, help protect victims and increase prosocial attitudes and behaviors.

Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli and Cowie (2003) recently published a study that tested the peer support model and reported promising results in two Italian middle schools. The curriculum for this program included promoting awareness in bullies of their and others' behavior(s), enhancing the ability to support victims (befriending by peers), encouraging responsibility and involvement of bystanders, and improving the quality of interpersonal relationships. This peer support model resulted in negative attitudes and behaviors to remain stable in students who received the intervention while these factors increased in a control group. Moreover, feelings of support for the victim decreased in the control group and remained stable in the experimental group. The preliminary findings of this research suggests that the implementation of a peer support and intervention model in the middle schools years, when rates of bullying have been shown to increase, is an effective bullying prevention strategy. Since a number of components of the Italian intervention are similar to the SSA program, the results provide good support for the underlying model upon which SSA is based. The authors in the Italian study believed that their short-term intervention broke the code of silence, enhanced responsibility, and promoted empathy among students at an age with a heightened risk for bullying behaviors.

Because the idea of empowering bystanders to *intervene* rather than monitor and report is relatively new, the outcomes associated with this approach is quite limited. However, much more is known about the deleterious effects of bullying on both victims as well as bystanders. For victims of bullying, fear can become so ingrained that they adopt fugitive-like routines to avoid places likely to be frequented by the bully (Macklem, 2003). This avoidance deprives the target of essential formal and informal social experiences that are important for social development (Ross, 1996). Victims also can experience active rejection (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988) by peers who formerly were friends or at least friendly toward them. This climate of fear from chronic bullying coupled with peer rejection leads to poor school performance among victims (Turkel & Eth, 1997). For example, Hazler, Hoover, & Oliver (1993) reported a significant drop in grades for 90% of the victims of bullying in their study. Overall, victims can be caught in downward spiral leading to:

- Low morale and acute despair manifested in truancy (Reid, 1990).
- Chronic illness such as recurrent abdominal pain of unknown origin (Ross & Ross, 1988).
- Running away, and in extreme cases, suicide (Beck, 1986; Besag, 1989; Elliot, 1991).

Equally important is research that shows that bystanders, who are neither bullies, nor target of bullies, are negatively impacted by witnessing episodes of bullying (Ross, 1996). Ross (1996) reports that bystanders can be affected by bullying in the following ways:

- Anger and feeling helpless at not knowing how to help victim.
- Guilt for not intervening.
- Worry that they might be the next target.

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Furthermore, Ross (1996) argues that when bullying is witnessed by others and goes unpunished, it can create a climate of fear with widespread effects that:

- Inhibits learning and is a major distraction
- Undermines enjoyment of free-time periods.
- Creates fear of certain areas of school such as lunchroom.
- Elevates the sense of vulnerability on the way to and from school.

Because school environments that are characterized by a high incidence of episodes of bullying clearly undermine the learning process for all students, improved academic achievement is an important medium-term outcome to expect from implementation of an effective prevention program.

### **Conclusion**

The SSA bystander intervention program includes many core components that are thought to be effective in promoting a positive school climate and reducing individual incidents of bullying. Specifically, the use of bystanders and the guidance provided on recruitment strategies are consistent with recent discussions on effective bullying interventions provided in the literature.

One challenge of implementing and evaluating bully prevention programs is the finding that bullying is not evenly distributed over schools (Ross, 1996). Some schools have higher or lower rates of bullying; therefore a program with one narrow focus will not be effective for every school. The need for a multi-faceted approach is supported by the work of Olweus (Macklem, 2003). Comprehensive programs that intervene on different levels and can be adapted to the needs of the individual school may be more successful in reducing antisocial behaviors and victimization. This applies to the Safe School Ambassador program in that the program includes several opportunities of prevention and intervention. During a bullying episode, the leader may intervene as a bystander by defending the victim, distracting member(s) of dyads, or diffusing the situation through other social techniques. This immediate response may reduce escalation of a teasing or bullying episode to something more violent. The immediate response may also model prosocial behavior for other bystanders, diffuse the power of the bully, and support the victim. In this way, the effect of the leader can transcend beyond the immediate episode to influencing other peers, changing the classroom, and hopefully the overall school climate. Building trust with teachers and staff personnel allows students leaders to solicit support from teachers when they do not feel safe handling situations alone and introduces another opportunity to impact the school environment. The literature on successful outcomes of comprehensive programs supports the multidimensional approach of the Safe School Ambassador program.

While the SSA program addresses a number of important antecedents and outcomes associated with bullying, its overall effectiveness is somewhat dependent on the extent to which a participating school is part of a more comprehensive and district-wide bullying prevention strategy in place. The literature underscores the fact that the social dynamics that lead to bullying need to be addressed very early on in the developmental process (Boxer & Dubow). Because SSA is designed for middle and high school youth, the effectiveness of the SSA program will be greatly improved by districts and communities that have early education and

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elementary school bullying prevention programs in place. Additionally, complementing the SSA program with programs and activities that impact other aspects of the school environment should result in stronger outcomes. Examples include school staff awareness training and school-wide student sensitization to the problem of bullying.

Because empowering students to intervene *during* episodes of bullying is a relatively new approach, there is currently a lack of empirical evidence linking positive outcomes to these types of interventions. However, the experts in the field appear to be encouraging the use of these bystander interventions and preliminary evaluation results are encouraging. Ongoing comprehensive evaluation is needed for all violence prevention programs to determine the best practices for keeping children safe and facilitating the learning process.

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