

Safe and Supportive Environments for All Students and Staff (SSE)

Rationale:

Adolescents spend a large proportion of their day in school or involved in school-related activities. Although the main purpose of school is to help students develop academically, the school environment influences students' social, emotional, and ethical development as well as their physical and mental health and safety. For students at heightened risk of HIV/STD, such as young men who have sex with men (YMSM), the school environment is an especially important factor in keeping them healthy and engaged. The school environment is shaped by district and school policies and practices; school structure and decision-making processes; and classroom factors, such as teachers' classroom management methods, curricular tasks, and peer-peer/teacher-student relationships.¹

Promoting and providing a learning environment in which all students and staff can expect to feel safe and supported is an essential function of schools.² Research shows that safe and supportive school environments are associated with improved education and health outcomes, including sexual health outcomes, for all students³, and are especially important for those students at disproportionate risk of HIV/STD, such as YMSM, who often experience increased victimizations.^{5,6} Several approaches to promoting a safe and supportive school environment include a) enhancing safety by preventing bullying and sexual harassment; b) promoting school connectedness; and c) promoting parent engagement.

Research on prevention of school-based bullying and harassment has identified promising practices such as implementing and enforcing a school-wide anti-bullying and harassment policy; improving the supervision of students; and using school rules and behavior management techniques in the classroom as ways to keep students safe.⁷ Research shows that supportive schools foster positive attitudes, prosocial attitudes and behaviors, and positive health behaviors and outcomes by promoting parent engagement in schools and students' sense of connectedness during the school day.⁸⁻¹⁰

School connectedness and parent engagement in schools have been identified as promising protective factors for adolescent sexual and reproductive health risk behaviors and outcomes, including ever had sex, early sexual debut, frequency of sex, and pregnancy/birth.^{4,9,10} In addition, when students find their school environment to be supportive and caring and their parents engaged in their school lives, they are less likely to become involved in substance abuse, violence, and other problem behaviors^{3,10,11} that are associated with HIV and STD risk.^{12,13}

Definitions:

School Environment: The overall school climate (including educational, cultural, social, professional, and physical circumstances or conditions; staffing attributes; and school-community programs) that can affect student and staff safety and health.¹⁴

School Safety: Refers to the security of the school setting and school-related activities as perceived and experienced by all stakeholders, including families, caregivers, students, school staff, and the community. School safety encompasses both emotional and physical safety, and is influenced by positive and negative behaviors of students and staff as well as the presence of substance use in the school setting and during school-related activities.¹⁵

School Engagement: A process of events and opportunities that lead to students gaining the skills and confidence to cope and feel safe in the school environment. These events and opportunities include relationships, respect for diversity, and school participation.¹⁶

Bullying: "Attack or intimidation with the intention to cause fear, distress, or harm; a real or perceived imbalance of power between the bully and the victim; and repeated attacks or intimidation between the same children over time. Bullying can include aggression that is physical (hitting, tripping), verbal (name calling, teasing), or psychological/social (spreading rumors, leaving out of group)."¹⁷

Electronic aggression: "Bullying that occurs through e-mail, a chat room, instant messaging, a Web site, text messaging, or videos or pictures posted on websites or sent through cell phones."¹⁸

Harassment: Threatening, harmful, or humiliating conduct based on race, color, national origin, sex, religion, or disability. Harassment may result in a hostile environment that interferes or limits a student's ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or opportunities offered by a school. Harassment, unlike bullying, does not have to include intent by the perpetrator to harm, be directed at a specific person, or involve repeated incidents.¹⁹

Sexual harassment: "Unwanted and unwelcome advances of a sexual nature. It could be a touch, written note, joke, picture, etc. It can be intentional or unintentional."²⁰

School connectedness: "The belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals."²¹

Parent engagement in schools: "Parents and school staff working together to support and improve the learning, development, and health of children and adolescents."²²

Prosocial behaviors: Positive actions that benefit others, prompted by empathy, moral values, and a sense of personal responsibility rather than a desire for personal gain.²³

Mentoring: "Matches youth or "mentees" with responsible, caring "mentors," usually adults... Components of a mentoring relationship include creating caring, empathetic, consistent, and long-lasting relationships, often with some combination of role modeling, teaching, and advising."²⁴

Service learning: "Strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and self-reflection to support academic learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities."²⁵

Resources:

Safety

- Understanding Bullying
<http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/BullyingFactsheet2012-a.pdf>
- Electronic Media and Youth Violence: A CDC Issue Brief for Educators and Caregivers
<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/EA-brief-a.pdf>
- Technology and Youth: Protecting your Child from Electronic Aggression
<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/EA-TipSheet-a.pdf>
- Protecting Students from Harassment and Hate Crime
<http://www2.ed.gov/offices/OCR/archives/Harassment/harassment.pdf>
- Sexual Harassment: It's Not Academic <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/ocrshpam.pdf>

School Connectedness

- School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/adolescenthealth/pdf/connectedness.pdf>
- Fostering School Connectedness Staff Development Program
http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/adolescenthealth/pdf/connectedness_facilitator_guide.pdf

Parent Engagement

- Parent Engagement: Strategies for Involving Parents in School Health
http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/adolescenthealth/pdf/parent_engagement_strategies.pdf
- Facilitator's Guide for Staff Development on Promoting Parent Engagement in School Health
http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/adolescenthealth/pdf/parentengagement_facilitator_guide.pdf

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