Understanding Bullying Prevention Implementation

Why do some school interventions succeed while others fail? The answers to this question often lie in whether the intervention was implemented properly (Patton, 2008) and the level of sustained effort and commitment of program staff.

The Center for Safe Schools (CSS), a division of the Center for Schools and Communities (CSC), coordinates a statewide implementation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) in over 80 schools in two cohorts (a third cohort will begin in 2009–2010 school year). All schools submit regular implementation (fidelity) data at the teacher and school levels, constituting one of the broadest and deepest fidelity datasets about how the OBPP works in U.S. schools. These data link to longitudinal bullying data among participating schools, inform technical assistance and contribute to violence prevention research within the Commonwealth.

This Research Brief makes a preliminary examination of the fidelity data that teachers submitted as part of their participation in the program. CSS evaluators solicited fidelity data from 42 schools in Cohort 1 at two points in time: from over 600 teachers in January (roughly 3 to 4 months after the beginning of the program) and nearly 700 teachers in May. The teachers anonymously self-assessed their readiness and knowledge to implement OBPP after an average of 4.7 months between measurement periods. They also provided brief narratives to describe their experiences with OBPP, which will be described in a forthcoming CSC Research Brief.

What did teachers say about implementing OBPP?

Table 1 examines responses to a set of survey questions that measured teachers' reactions to OBPP in January and May 2009. On both occasions, teachers rated four items on a 6-point scale from Strongly Disagree (coded 1) to Strongly Agree (coded 6). The table shows the number of responses to each item, the percent that "Strongly Agree" or "Agree," the mean, and the standard deviation (SD) of scores. These data inform us about teachers' reactions to OBPP.

• In January, about three-quarters of teachers either "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that they knew the different components of OBPP and just under 70 percent of teachers indicated that they had received adequate training.

• Just under three-quarters of teachers indicated they either "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" they had adequate support to implement OBPP.

• Eighty-three percent of teachers indicated they either "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that OBPP is important for their school. Teachers rated "importance" at the highest level relative to the other measures.

Another view of teachers' reactions to OBPP includes how they prioritized it relative to other responsibilities. Figure 1 shows January and May results for teachers' prioritization of OBPP. In January, teachers' prioritization of bullying prevention appears split (overall), despite the fact that the overwhelming majority appear knowledgeable and supported to implement the program. While over a third of teachers ranked OBPP as their first or second priority, about 20 percent ranked it as their fifth or lower priority. These pretest results suggest there is considerable agreement among teachers that OBPP training and support components are sufficient, yet there is a limit to what direct program support can do to affect their priorities.

Table 1: Teachers' Ratings of Knowledge, Training, Support and Importance

	January				May				Change	
	n	% Strongly Agree or Agree	Mean	SD	n	% Strongly Agree or Agree	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	Z(sig)
I know what the different components of the OBPP are.	611	75.3	4.85	1.06	681	80.0	5.03	0.83	0.18	-2.3(.021)
I received adequate training to implement the OBPP.	612	69.1	4.67	1.24	683	68.2	4.75	1.11	0.08	-.41(.684)
I have adequate support to implement the OBPP.	606	73.3	4.88	1.14	682	69.1	4.76	1.12	-0.12	-2.4(.016)
I think the OBPP is important for this school.	621	83.3	5.22	0.94	682	79.0	5.07	1.00	-0.15	-3.0(.002)

Source: PA CARES 2009 Teacher Fidelity Survey, Center for Schools and Communities. Item non-response reduces some subtotals. Readers are advised that the means shown are more sensitive to the entire distribution of scores whereas the percentages reflect responses in only two categories of responses.

How did teachers' views about the program change over time?

CSC evaluators next examined how teachers' agreement ratings changed over time to gain insight into program implementation. Table 1 (far right "change" panel) presents the mean difference for each item.[1]
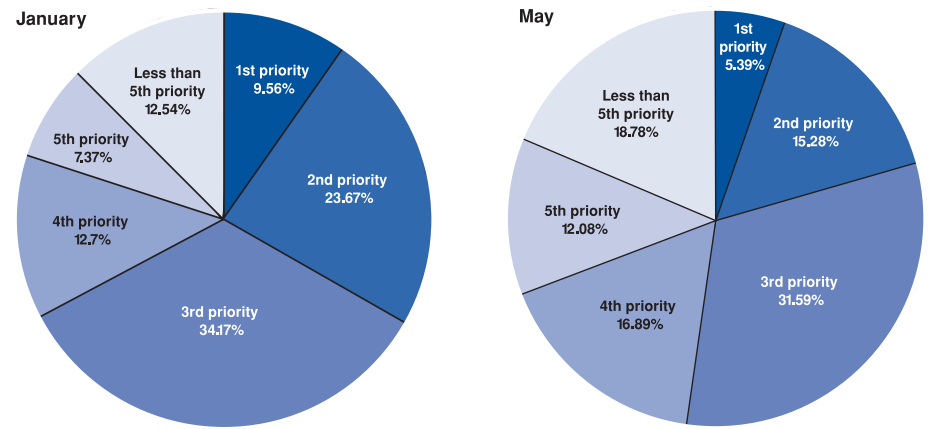
- Teachers' rated that their knowledge of components improved slightly (ES=.19), although their views of OBPP training had no statistically significant change. Teachers also agreed slightly less over time that they had adequate support to implement the OBPP (ES=.11).
- The importance rating teachers gave to the Olweus program in January declined slightly by May. While the mean importance rating was 5.2 in January, it had fallen to 5.1 by May, a statistically significant change (ES=.15). Correspondingly, the priority rating teachers gave to the Olweus program in January declined by May. Figure 1 illustrates how priorities shifted, constituting a statistically significant change in the mean priority rating (ES=.33).

What do these data suggest?

These trends present a mixed picture of implementation. One measure shows a small improvement while the remainder are unchanged or declined. Perhaps, and importantly, teachers' priority ratings may represent a decline in teachers' commitment to bullying prevention efforts or an inadequate focus on OBPP efforts. Alternatively, the declines could reflect the role of teachers' demanding working conditions, which require them to split their time and attention among competing demands and which may serve as a threat to school improvement efforts that require a sustained focus (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992).

Although literature on school improvement suggests that addressing students' safety needs can ameliorate some of the problems that undermine teachers' focus on educational goals (Gronna and Chin-Chance, 1999), it is often difficult for educators to maintain focus on school climate and related factors (such

Figure 1: Teachers' January and May 2009 Prioritization of OBPP

January
- 1st priority 9.56%
- 2nd priority 23.67%
- 3rd priority 34.17%
- 4th priority 12.7%
- 5th priority 7.37%
- Less than 5th priority 12.54%

May
- 1st priority 5.39%
- 2nd priority 15.28%
- 3rd priority 31.59%
- 4th priority 16.89%
- 5th priority 12.08%
- Less than 5th priority 18.78%

as bullying prevention) if these efforts are not understood as a shared part of the school's educational vision (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989). Teachers' qualitative responses to PA CARES surveys and reports from field staff correspond with these earlier studies, including comments from teachers that described insufficient levels of administrative support and communication in their schools.

How can PA CARES data improve implementation?

The present findings suggest that schools engaged in OBPP implementation would benefit from strategies to promote teachers' continued focus on bullying prevention efforts, beyond the first year of implementation. Among the strategies that Olweus and Limber (2007) recommend, cultural and organizational shifts may be necessary to sustain teacher commitment that is fundamental to implementation.

Future research briefs will use qualitative data to better understand the results presented here regarding teachers' views of program importance and priority. These analyses will provide educators and administrators with insight into program threats and help to identify other actions that can be taken to promote OBPP fidelity and sustainability. PA CARES and the CSS plan to use these and other analyses to improve the quality of support provided to Pennsylvania schools

through the Center's Bullying Prevention Network, while also contributing to literature on evidence-based practices. ■

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Authors:

Benjamin A. Cohen, Ph.D.
Stacie Molnar-Main, MSEd.