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The Team Approach to Safe Schools

Throughout this book I refer to a school-based Safe Schools Team. This committee, legally required in Ontario, goes beyond the traditional anti-bullying committees that exist in some form or another in many schools. A Safe Schools Team is not required in order to implement any or all of the ideas in this book, but this evolved team format does have advantages.

You will also notice that in each chapter I refer to the Safe Schools Team as coordinating "action" activities, including being responsible for follow-up to the activities. This serves two purposes: (1) having someone or some group responsible for follow-up ensures that some follow-through occurs, and (2) having the team oversee follow-up ensures that the responsibility for keeping the school safe is diffused and does not rest solely on the principal's shoulders.

In this chapter I outline a very brief history of the evolution of the Safe Schools legislation in Ontario and discuss how to create a Safe Schools Team.

WHAT IS A SAFE SCHOOLS TEAM?

In November 2005 the Ontario government, after extensive consultation, put forward a comprehensive list of recommendations, one of which was to establish a Safe Schools Team. It was suggested that the team meet at least three times per year and that the team include teachers, staff members, parents, administrators, community members, and students. This was the first time such a team would include parents, community members,

and students, and this inclusion of so many different shareholders was the first step in the evolution of the antibullying committees present in most schools today. It was also the first time that a committee would exist for the purpose of monitoring effectiveness rather than to organize special events. New laws and amendments, which were more detailed and explicit, were enacted in 2009 when the Education Act was amended to be Education Amendment Act (Keeping Our Kids Safe at School). The Safe Schools Team under the Ontario Ministry of Education's Policy/Program Memorandum No. 144 (PPM 144) was then reviewed, and small wording changes specified the inclusion of one nonteaching staff member and "at least" one student (where appropriate).

CREATING A SAFE SCHOOLS TEAM IN YOUR SCHOOL

Creating an effective and active Safe Schools Team is challenging and requires planning. One of the most important aspects of forming such a group of is the development of a "team" concept. The team is not simply a committee chaired by the principal; rather it is a diverse team of shareholders, all of whom need to have a voice in the process. This team is heterogeneous by definition, as the members have been included because of their diverse backgrounds and perspectives. This type of team has the potential for great synergism as it develops ideas and actions, but it also has the potential for conflict and unbalance. It is important as the principal that you establish clear norms for the group and that you have a clear understanding of the life cycle of teams first established by Tuckman (1965), which includes forming, storming, norming, and performing. While the principal has an essential and guiding role in the formation and monitoring of this group, it is preferable for another staff member to act as the chair, thus sharing the responsibility.

The thinking behind whom should be included as a member of the Safe Schools Team is a multistep process.

- **Step 1.** Examine a process for determining readiness for being a team member. It is essential that the team members are open to addressing all types of bullying and discrimination, including areas such as age, race, sexual orientation, gender, faith, disability, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Depending on people's experiences and perceptions, they may be at varying levels of readiness to address issues fairly. It is important that no members are volunteering to be part of this team because of personal agendas involving their child or targeting another child. You may wish to survey potential team members to determine their readiness

and ensure that everyone is dedicated to building a safe, equitable, and inclusive learning environment.

- **Step 2.** Consider using some external training, either through your school board or with an external facilitator, to help with the team building and goal setting. Having external support helps place all the team members on an equal level rather than maintaining the hierarchy of principal, teaching staff, nonteaching staff, community member, and student, which can be counterproductive to the team's functioning. This external facilitator may be needed for only one or two meetings to help establish the team, or the facilitator may assist at various points throughout the life of the team.

- **Step 3.** Examine the logistics of the team and what types of infrastructure supports are required. This step is essential to ensure that the team is active and not simply a committee on paper only. In this step a plan of when, where, and for how long you will meet must be clearly delineated. Such a plan creates a committed schedule for the meetings and allows team members to prioritize them.

- **Step 4.** Establish shared and diffused responsibility. This team represents the larger school community; therefore, each team member needs a forum or format in which to consult with and inform those whom they represent. Open and consistent two-way communication between the team members and their constituents will increase the effectiveness of the team and thereby decrease bullying and other negative behaviors.

- **Step 5.** Begin with learning, not action. The team needs to begin with learning as much as it can about bullying in general but also about the climate of its own school. Just as with good teaching, diagnostic assessments are important. New legislation in Ontario requires that a climate survey take place every two years. This diagnostic assessment of staff, students, and parents is needed to ensure that the team is addressing site-specific needs and focusing its actions in a targeted manner to improve the school climate.

The five steps of thinking that need to occur before the first meeting are crucial to start off the Safe Schools Team in the right direction. The principal or school leadership team needs to give deep consideration to choosing the right staff members, both teaching and nonteaching, and the right community members and students. Once the best people are chosen to be part of the team, infrastructure is needed to optimize their effectiveness, and different team members will need different levels of support to work within the established structures. For example, student representatives, depending on their age, may need substantial guidance to be successful team members.

CASE STUDY: WHO'S ON YOUR TEAM?

Read the brief biographies of the potential team members below and try to determine whom you would want on your Safe Schools Team. Remember, you need a teaching and a nonteaching staff member, as well as a community representative and a student representative.

You are the principal of a junior kindergarten (JK) to Grade 8 dual-track (French immersion and English) school with a student population of approximately 450 students. You began in January by tracking the incidents that come to the office, and it is now March. You have had over 120 incidents for which you could have considered suspension, but you have issued suspensions in only 10 percent of the cases. Of those 12 suspensions, 10 were for one day, 1 was for three days, and 1 is currently in an expulsion process. You know that bullying is a problem in your school, and you are selecting members for your Safe School Team.

Case Study Team Table

Name	Role	Experience	Other
Mr. Blue	Teacher	35 years—Grade 2	2 grown children—divorced 3 times—Caucasian
Mr. Brown	Teacher	10 years—Grade 7	No kids—married—Caucasian
Ms. Red	Teacher	10 years—Grade 3	2 young children—married—Caucasian
Ms. Pink	Teacher	25 years—Kindergarten	2 grown children—1 grandchild—married—mixed Caucasian and Chinese American
Ms. Orange	Teacher	4 years—Grade 6	No children—unmarried—Jewish
Mr. Grey	Teacher	6 months—Grade 8	No children—unmarried—gay
Ms. Purple	Office professional	30 years	3 teenagers—married—African American

Name	Role	Experience	Other
Mr. Black	Custodian	33 years	2 adopted children—widowed—mixed Caucasian and African American
Mr. Green	Educational assistant	10 years	1 grown child—divorced—Caucasian
Ms. White	Educational assistant	7 years	2 grown children—married—Baptist
Ms. Stripes	Parent	3 children—2 at school	Parent Council chair and weekly school volunteer—Caucasian
Ms. Dots	Parent	1 child and 2 stepchildren—all at school	New to your school—Caucasian
Ms. Checks	Parent	2 grandchildren at school	Children attended and grandchildren now attend your school—Caucasian
Mr. Pattern	Parent	2 stepchildren at school	Minister at local Anglican church—Caucasian
John	Student	Grade 6	Caucasian
Jane	Student	Grade 7	Caucasian
Tevon	Student	Grade 8	African American

Pick your team:

Teaching staff: _____

Nonteaching staff: _____

Community representative: _____

Student representative: _____

There is no right or wrong selection in this case study. There are simply choices and reflection. Reflect on how you made your choices. Did you have enough information to make an informed choice? If not, what other information would you like to have had?

SELF-REFLECTION

Ask yourself the following: What type of information do you need about the people you are considering for the team? Does their gender matter? Does their ethnicity matter? Does their marital status or sexual orientation matter? Do their religious affiliations or beliefs matter? Other?

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ACTION: MAKING THE CUT—PICK YOUR SAFE SCHOOLS TEAM

Warm-Up Activity:

Start by creating a list of all of the possible team members. Develop brief biographies for each person to start to see what benefits and views each can offer to the team. Think back to what information you wished you had when you made your choices in the case study for this chapter and determine if you have enough information about your potential team members. If you don't, start to think about how you are going to find out the information you need to make good decisions.

Main Activity:

Now you begin the vetting process to narrow down the list of potential team candidates. You will need to start talking to your potential candidates to be sure that they have an honest interest in being an active team member. You can use the quick survey below or use a more informal process.

Potential Safe Schools Team Member Survey:

1. Do you think that bullying is a problem at this school? Yes   No
2. Have you ever been a bully?   Yes   No
3. Have you ever been bullied?   Yes   No
4. Have you ever been a bystander?   Yes   No
5. Do you have any preconceived biases that might   Yes   No
   affect your ability to be on this team?
6. Do you want to be part of this Safe Schools Team?   Yes   No

Follow-Up Activity:

Review the survey answers and confirm that your potential team members fit with your thoughts about them. Then invite them to be part of your team.