Implementing the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

How school administrators can improve program effectiveness

The purpose of this research brief is to identify common challenges experienced by schools that have implemented the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and discuss ways that school administrators may address bullying in their schools by promoting implementation of this research-based program with high-fidelity.

Violence prevention, specifically bullying prevention, continues to be an important focus for schools. Recognizing that bullying and peer victimization are systemic problems, prevention efforts have focused on the development and implementation of evidence-based, anti-bullying programs in the school system.[1-4] In order for a program to be effective and thus result in behavior change, the program must be implemented with fidelity.[5-8] Implementation with fidelity means that the program was delivered as it was intended by the program developer.[6,9,10] In general, we know that training and technical assistance along with characteristics related to the implementing organization, prevention program, and school/community context influence the quality of program implementation.[9,11]

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is an evidence-based, whole-school, systems-change program[12-14] that has been widely disseminated in the United States. The goals of OBPP are to reduce bullying behaviors, prevent the development of bullying behaviors and improve the school's climate among students.[14-16] Core components target behaviors at the school, classroom, individual and community levels.[17,18]

Research on the effectiveness of OBPP has found that implementation fidelity is associated with program outcomes.[16,19,20] Specifically, the largest reductions in bullying incidents were evidenced in classrooms wherein key components of the program (i.e., rules about bullying, class meetings and role playing) had been implemented.[15,19,21-23] While studies in the U.S. suggest that OBPP may be challenging to implement with fidelity,[16,24-26] research to date has not identified which core program components may be easier to implement than others.

Thus, the current study sought to augment our understanding of implementation fidelity of OBPP by examining teachers' and professional staff members' reports of performing key program components. The focus was on teachers and professional staff because they have been identified as critical to successful implementation.[18,27,28] In addition, this study sought to determine whether implementation varied as a function of experience level with OBPP. Because it may take several years for a prevention program to become fully integrated in the school system,[29,30] the hypothesis was that participants who had been implementing OBPP longer (i.e., two years versus one year) would report greater fidelity to the OBPP model.

Who were the participants?

A total of 6,928[1] teachers and staff fully completed the online 2011 teacher/staff survey from 210 Pennsylvania schools; of which 122 were elementary schools, six elementary and middle schools, 46 middle schools, 17 junior and senior high schools, three kindergarten through 12th grade schools, 15 high schools, and one other[2]. The majority of participants were homeroom/classroom teachers and included core subject teachers and full-time special education teachers (65.4 percent). Participants were classified as staff if they self-identified as a counselor, nurse, psychologist, security, social worker, specialist or support staff. The majority of respondents were female (69.9 percent). Participants had either two years or one year of experience with OBPP implementation and were designated as Cohort II and Cohort III, respectively.

The online 2011 teacher/staff survey consisted of 74 items that measured socio-demographics, OBPP implementation, and attitudes and beliefs about OBPP and bullying. Of relevance herein are the 20 items that were selected or adapted from the Olweus Schoolwide and/or Teacher Implementation Checklists[3], which assess whether a specific OBPP programmatic activity has been implemented. Response options for these items were *completed*, *making good progress*, *progress needed* or N/A *(not applicable)*.

Implementation of OBPP Components

To determine how well respondents were implementing key components of OBPP, the study examined the percent of respondents who indicated that they had completed each activity. As indicated in Table 1, the *school-level components most likely* to be implemented across cohorts were attendance at the school kick-off and OBPP staff training. Over three-quarters of all respondents reported that they attended the school kick-off event. Nearly two-thirds of the sample indicated that they had participated in OBPP training. The *school-level components least likely* to be implemented were reading the materials on the OBPP Teacher's Guide CD-ROM, viewing and discussing the scenarios on the teacher guide DVD with students, and participating in monthly staff discussion

Table 1: School-level Components Implemented for All Respondents and by Cohort

School-level Components	% Completed		
Activity	**All**	**Cohort II**	**Cohort III**
Attended the school kick-off event	85.3	82.2*	87.3*
Participated in 6 hours of OBPP training	65.1	64.0	65.9
Read the OBPP Teacher's Guide	47.2	50.3*	45.5*
Viewed the OBPP Teacher's Guide DVD	42.8	45.5*	41.4*
Participated at least once a month in a staff discussion group	39.1	37.5	40.0
Viewed and discussed the scenarios on the teacher guide DVD with students	35.3	37.4*	34.2*
Read the materials on the OBPP Teacher's Guide CD-ROM	34.5	37.4*	32.8*

*Indicates statistically significant difference (p < .01).

groups. Statistical analyses[4] indicated that a significantly greater percentage of Cohort II respondents as compared to Cohort III respondents had read the OBPP teacher guide, read the OBPP teacher CD-ROM materials, viewed the OBPP teacher DVD, and discussed relevant bullying scenarios with students. A greater percentage of Cohort III respondents reported attending the kick-off than Cohort II respondents. Participation in OBPP training and monthly staff discussion groups did not vary by cohort.

Regarding *classroom-level components*, implementation was high for posting anti-bullying rules in one's classroom and explaining and discussing the anti-bullying rules with one's students (see Table 2). Slightly more than half of the sample reported holding regular class meetings to discuss issues related to bullying, while slightly less reported using the literature to explain key

concepts related to bullying. Holding classroom-level meetings with parents and explaining and discussing rules with parents of one's students were the least likely components to have been implemented. Statistical analyses[4] revealed that a greater percentage of Cohort II versus Cohort III respondents had posted the anti-bullying rules in their classrooms, explained and discussed the anti-bullying rules with students, and used the literature to explain key bullying-related concepts. In contrast, a greater percentage of Cohort III respondents had regular class meetings than did Cohort II respondents. No other significant differences as a function of cohort were observed.

As revealed in Table 3, a minimum of half of the respondents reported engaging in all of the OBPP *individual-level components*. The ones most likely to be implemented were intervening on-the-spot and investigating bullying

incidents that had been observed, with at least half of the sample or more reporting having engaged in these two activities. Giving students positive consequences for following rules two through four was the least likely component to be implemented. Statistical analyses[4] demonstrated that a greater percentage of Cohort II versus Cohort III respondents reported engaging in all of these individual-level components.

Conclusions
Results indicated that more symbolic components of OBPP are more readily implemented than components that involve more intensive engagement with the model. For example, over 80 percent of teachers and staff reported that they attended a kick-off, posted rules against bullying and discussed rules with students. These activities are symbolic as they serve as indicators of program adoption but do not require

Table 2: Classroom-level Components Implemented for All Respondents and by Cohort			
Classroom-level Components	**% Completed**		
Activity	**All**	**Cohort II**	**Cohort III**
Posted the anti-bullying rules in the classroom	82.4	84.4*	81.5*
Explained and discussed the anti-bullying rules with students	80.8	82.5*	80.1*
Held regular (weekly) class meetings to discuss issues related to bullying, peer relations and other related topics	55.9	51.2*	58.9*
Used literature to explain key concepts related to bullying	45.6	48.1*	44.4*
On several occasions had students engage in role-playing about bullying and related follow-up discussions	38.1	39.3	37.5
Explained and discussed the anti-bullying rules with the students' parents	29.8	30.3	29.5
Held two to three classroom-level meetings with parents about bullying	17.4	17.0	17.5

*Indicates statistically significant difference (p < .01).

substantive learning or organizational change. In contrast, less than 50 percent reported reading or viewing the program materials and only 40 percent to 65 percent of all respondents were exposed to learning experiences that met the OBPP authors' expectations regarding program fidelity.[31] These results are in agreement with other evaluations of the OBPP,[19,21,32] which have found that posting school rules and attendance at the school kick-off events were commonly implemented components of the OBPP.

With regard to activities that are designed to support student learning about bullying prevention, data reveal similar trends. While over 50 percent of respondents reported holding OBPP class meetings, fewer used the teaching tools and processes advocated by OBPP authors. That is, less than 40 percent of respondents had viewed the DVD scenarios with students or used role play to teach about bullying. This suggests that, for many respondents, OBPP did not have the intended impact on pedagogical practice.

These findings underscore the importance of addressing teacher/staff learning in OBPP implementation plans. Professional development efforts that seek to impact pedagogical practices should focus on helping teachers develop the skills and knowledge needed to enact the desired strategies.[33,34] This is most likely supported by professional development experiences that involve integrating new learning with other valued practices, are continuous, and involve teachers in collaboration, observation, modeling and reflection.[35]

Thus, school administrators who wish to combat bullying in their schools should:

• Ensure that bullying prevention is built into yearly staff development plans and school schedules.

• Connect bullying prevention efforts to other efforts which support youth development and positive school climate.

• Align OBPP professional development with best practices in teacher learning by including observation, modeling and reflection in staff development activities.

• Attend to teachers' use of OBPP classroom materials (Teachers' Guide, DVD and CD-ROM) and processes (e.g. class meetings, role play, interventions) as part of the professional development plan.

Table 3: Individual-level Components Implemented for All Respondents and by Cohort			
Individual-level Components	**% Completed**		
Activity	**All**	**Cohort II**	**Cohort III**
Consistently intervened on-the-spot in situations where you observed bullying	62.3	65.0*	61.0*
Investigated all incidents of bullying that you observed (where appropriate)	61.4	64.1*	60.0*
Investigated all incidents of bullying that you suspected (where appropriate)	56.3	59.8*	54.5*
Consistently intervened on-the-spot in situations where you suspected bullying	56.2	59.2*	54.6*
Consistently enforced negative consequences for students who did not follow rule 1	54.6	57.4*	53.2*
Given positive consequences for students who followed rules 2-4	50.7	53.0*	49.5*

*Indicates statistically significant difference (p < .01).

Beyond the implications for teacher/staff development, the present findings underscore the importance of maintaining engagement with OBPP over time. Across most fidelity categories, teachers and staff in the second year of implementation reported higher rates of fidelity compared to educators in the first year of implementation. These positive trends were most notable with regard to the individual-level program components. That is, teachers and staff reported greater responsiveness to individual acts of bullying as a function of program duration. This is consistent with other findings[27] and suggests that **successful implementation of the OBPP requires a long-term commitment to implementing the program elements, ongoing monitoring of program implementation, and supporting staff learning over time**.[21,36] ∎

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Highmark Foundation Partnership
In the past five years, the Highmark Foundation provided more than 350 Pennsylvania elementary, middle and high schools – with a total student population of more than 240,000 – with the tools and resources needed to implement OBPP. Through a unique partnership with the Highmark Foundation, the Center for Safe Schools created the PA CARES (Pennsylvania Creating an Atmosphere of Respect and Environment for Success) Initiative, a dedicated opportunity to build local school readiness and capacity for the successful implementation of the research-based OBPP and other proven intervention strategies. For more information about the Highmark Foundation, go to www.highmark.com.

Footnotes
[1]136 surveys were not completed online. Hard copies were completed and mailed to the Center for Schools and Communities. Survey data were manually entered into the database.
[2]elementary schools (grades K-5), elementary and middle schools (grades K-8), middle schools (grades 5-8), junior and senior high schools (grades 7-12), and high schools (grades 9-12).
[3]Permission to use these items was obtained from Dr. Sue Limber.
[4]Chi-square analyses were conducted. Specific details available from first author.

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