

The YPI Evaluation Newsletter

Central New York Rural Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative

A Report from the Independent Evaluator

Volume III, # 2 (June 2012)

A Report of the Youth Policy Institute, Inc.

The Central NY Rural Safe Schools/Healthy Students Project in Year 3: Bullying - Targets, Perpetrators, Witnesses, and Beliefs

Bullying is a common school event that students, school staff, and parents often accept as an unavoidable experience of growing up. National data reveal that 16% percent of students nationwide are bullied physically and/or verbally at least once during the school year, and 10% are bullied frequently.^{1,2,3}

The causes of bullying are unclear and complex, with many possible contributing factors including: a culture of peer tolerance; bullying behaviors at home; ineffective school discipline policies; exposure to neglect or abuse; and mental health problems including anxiety, depression, impulse control, and aggression.

However, the research is very clear that *being bullied* harms children emotionally and developmentally (as well as physically), and that bullied children frequently experience depression, anxiety disorders, poor attendance, and academic underachievement.⁴ The CNY Rural Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Initiative has implemented a spectrum of evidence-based programs designed to build student confidence and pro-social skills, and to prevent and address conflict and aggression in the classroom and in school. These programs include Second Step, Resilience Project, Therapeutic Crisis Intervention, the MOST counseling program, Safe Dates, and the School Resource Officer program.⁵

¹ Beaty, Lee A. & Alexeyev, Erick B. (Spring 2008) "The Problem of School Bullies: What the Research Tells Us." *Adolescence* 43, 1-11.

² Olweus, Dan (1993). *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

³ National Institute of Health (2001) New Release, Bullying Widespread in U.S. Schools <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/news/releases/bullying.cfm>

⁴ See, for example, Nansel, T.T., et al., (2001) Bullying behaviors among US youth: Prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment. *JAMA* 285; 2094-2100.

⁵ See, for example, "MOST Services after 16 Months," *YPI Evaluation Newsletter*, Vol. II, #1 (March 2011); "Resilience Project after 2 Years," *YPI Evaluation Newsletter*, Vol. II, #2 (July 2011); and "CREST Services from September 2009 to February 2012," *The CREST Reporter*, Vol. III #2 (March 2012).

This edition of the *Newsletter* is the second in a series of five reports on the impact of three years of this SS/HS Initiative examined from the perspectives of students and staff. The first report explored the quality of implementation of SS/HS Initiative programs and school climate. This report will examine the issue of bullying; three additional reports will examine the Initiative’s impact on mental health, violence, and substance use.

Targets of Bullying

In annual student surveys, 4th-12th graders were asked to report how many times in the past 30 days they had been bullied physically, verbally, and/or sexually.⁶ *The percentage of students targeted by physical and verbal bullying at least once in the past month did not change during the three project years, but the number of those who reported being sexual bullied declined markedly in Year 3 in comparison to the prior two years (Table B.1).*

	<i>Physically Bullied</i>	<i>Verbally Bullied</i>	<i>Sexually Bullied</i>
Year 1	21%	38%	11%
Year 2	21%	39%	11%
Year 3	21%	39%	8%

- ❖ The percentage of students who reported they were *frequently bullied* (at least 3 times in the last 30 days) did not change appreciably from Year 1 to 3 (**Appendix B.1**):
 - ❖ 9-10% of Initiative students reported that they were physically bullied frequently;
 - ❖ 21% were verbally bullied at least 3 times in the past 30 days; and
 - ❖ 5-6% were frequently sexually bullied.

Key Finding

The percentage of students who reported being physically or verbally bullied, whether frequently or infrequently, has not changed over the course of the project. However, fewer students reported being sexually bullied at least once in the previous month.

- ❖ *During all three years of the SS/HS Initiative, there were gender differences in the targets of verbal and physical bullying but not sexual bullying (Appendix B.1):*
 - ❖ More males (23-24%) than females (18-19%) were physically bullied in the past 30 days.
 - ❖ By contrast, more females (42-43%) than males (35-36%) were verbally bullied.

⁶ Student and teacher surveys define bullying generally as a purposeful act in which one or more students do something hurtful or harmful to another student or group of students. The surveys distinguish between: (a) **physical bullying**, defined as shoving, hitting, kicking, poking, choking, hair pulling, kicking, biting, restraining, and excessive tickling, as well as taking, damaging, or scattering books, money, or other belongings; (b) **verbal bullying**, defined as hurtful name-calling, gossip, repeated mean teasing, threatening, taunting, ridiculing, and blackmailing, done in person or over the internet or phone; and (c) **sexual bullying**, defined as inappropriate touching or grabbing, sexual propositioning, indecent exposure, sexual harassment, and abuse involving actual physical contact and sexual contact.

- ❖ While it is generally assumed that girls are sexually bullied more often than boys, *there was no difference* by gender in percentages of students who reported being sexually bullied at least once in the past month.

Key Finding In all three project years, more males than females were physically bullied, and more females than males were verbally bullied. There were no differences by gender among those who were sexually bullied.

In Years 1 and 2, more students of color than white students reported that they were bullied. By Year 3, there were no significant differences by race/ethnicity among those who reported being verbally and sexually bullied (**App. B.2**). This change is due entirely to a decline, from Year 1 to 3, in the number of students of color who reported being verbally bullied (from 44% to 39%) or sexually bullied (from 21% to 10%) at least once in the past month.

- ❖ In all three project years, more students of color than white students reported being targeted by physical bullying, however, the difference by race/ethnicity declined significantly. As with other forms of bullying, this change is due entirely to a decline in the number of students of color who were physically bullied at least once in the past month, from 31% in Year 1 to 26% in Year 3.

Key Finding There were significant declines in the percentage of students of color who reported being targeted by physical, verbal and sexual bullying. By Year 3, there were no differences in the extent to which students of color and white students were verbally or sexually bullied, and the difference by race/ethnicity diminished markedly for physical bullying.

During all three years of the SS/HS Initiative, fewer high school students reported that they were targeted by physical or verbal bullying than students in grades 4-8. With one exception, each grade group (4-5, 6-8, 9-12) experienced the same level of bullying from Year 1 to 3, for all three project years. *However, the percentage of 4th and 5th grade students who were verbally bullied at least once in the past month increased from 36% to 41% (App. B.3).*

Some core features of victimization by bullying did not vary over time:

- ❖ School district: For all three types of bullying, the percentage of students who reported being bullied in the past month did not vary significantly by school district.
- ❖ Group bullying: During all three project years, 13-14% of targets of bullying were confronted by at least 3 antagonists at a time. There was little variation in the presence of group bullying by grade level (**App. B.4**).

- ❖ **Duration:** In each year of the SS/HS Initiative, 17-18% of students (grades 4-12) reported that they were bullied on at least 4 days during the past month (**App. B.5**).

Instructional staff in grades 4 to 12 were asked to estimate how many of their students were targeted by different forms of bullying during the past month. *They reported significantly lower levels of bullying than the levels reported by students* (**App. B.6**).

- ❖ According to instructional staff, in Years 1 to 3, only 3% of their students were physically bullied at least once in the past 30 days (compared to 21% reported by students); 5-6% were verbally bullied (compared to nearly 40% reported by students); and 1% were sexually bullied (compared to 8-11% reported by students).

Key Finding Student reports of being targeted by bullying far exceed the levels reported by instructional staff.

Bullies

From Year 1 to 3, fewer students reported that they physically or verbally bullied other students at least once during the prior 30 days. (**Table B.2**).⁷

- ❖ **Physical bullying** by males declined substantially, from 20% of males engaging in this aggressive behavior at least once in the past 30 days in Year 1, to 15% in Year 3. Among female students it declined slightly, from 10% in Year 1 to 8% in Year 3. In all three years, more male than female students reported they physically bullied another student (**App. B.7**).
- ❖ **Verbal bullying** declined among males (from 31% engaging in the behavior at least once in the past 30 days in Year 1 to 24% in Year 3) and females (from 26% in Year 1 to 22% in Year 3). By the third year of the SS/HS Initiative, there were no gender differences in this behavior (**App. B.7**).

	Physical Bully	Verbal Bully
Year 1	15%	28%
Year 2	13%	24%
Year 3	12%	23%

Key Finding Fewer male and female students reported being physical or verbal bullies. In Year 3, as in prior years, physical bullying was more common among male students; however, there were no significant differences in levels of verbal bullying by male and female students in Year 3.

⁷ Only 3-4% of students reported they engaged in sexual bullying; with such low numbers of students acknowledging their role in this activity, it is impossible to identify trends in the behavior.

Just as fewer students of color reported being targeted by physical or verbal bullying, there was a *substantial decline in the percentage of students of color who reported acting as verbal or physical bullies at least once in the past month.*

- ❖ From Year 1 to 3, the percentage of students of color who physically bullied another student at least once in the past 30 days declined from 26% to 16%. The percentage of students of color who verbally bullied another student at least once in the past month declined from 35% in Year 1 to 25% in Year 3.
- ❖ The declines in bullying were far greater among students of color than white students. From Year 1 to 3, the differences by race/ethnicity in the percentage of students who were physical bullies narrowed significantly. By Year 3, there was no marked difference among white students and students of color in verbal bullying, a significant change from Year 1.

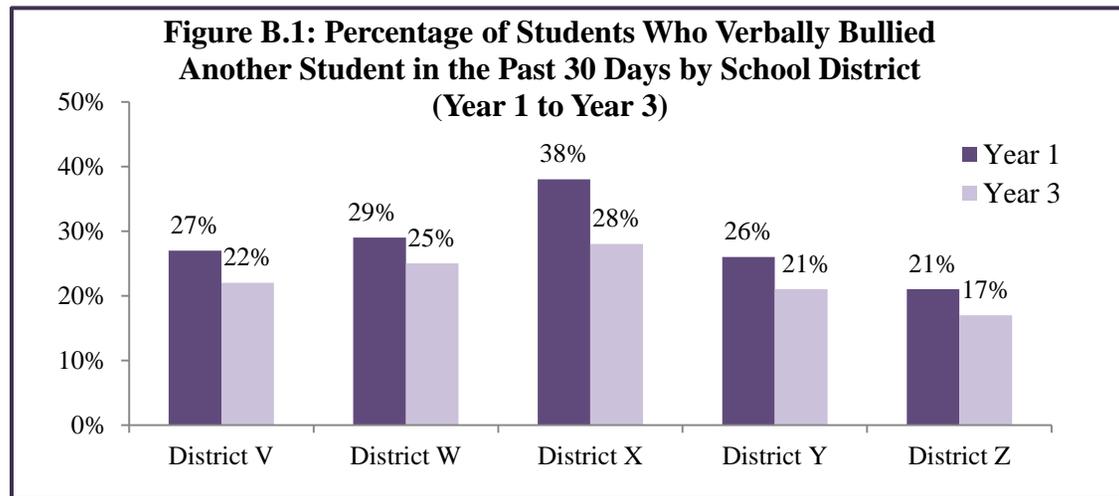
Key Finding By Year 3, differences by race/ethnicity diminished markedly for physical bullying and disappeared entirely for verbal bullying.

From Year 1 to 3, the percentage of physical bullies declined in all school districts but District Y, where it remained stable. As seen in **Figure B.1**, verbal bullying declined in every SS/HS Initiative district.

Bullying Beliefs

Certain beliefs about bullying, when commonly held, can diminish awareness of the harm caused by bullying and can contribute to increased tolerance of bullying behaviors. In addition, the ways in which school communities tolerate and react to bullying can promote a culture that either deters or encourages bullying.

Both student and instructional staff surveys probed the extent to which respondents held certain beliefs about bullying. *In their responses, instructional staff were less likely than students to hold beliefs that are indicative of a tolerance of bullying (Table B.3 below).*



**Table B.3: Prevalence of Beliefs About Bullying Among 4th -12th Grade Students and Teachers
(Percentages of affirmative responses)**

<i>Do you agree with this statement?</i>	Students			Teachers		
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Bullying often helps the bullied person by making them tougher.	29%	28%	28%	11%	6%	9%
Most teasing at this school is done “in fun,” not to hurt someone’s feelings.	66%	64%	67%	45%	43%	45%
At this school, bullies are usually more popular.	42%	40%	42%	37%	29%	36%

As noted above, the percentage of students who were physically or verbally bullied did not change from Year 1 to Year 3. By the same token, prevalent beliefs about bullying also did not change over the course of the SS/HS Initiative. For example, two-thirds of students and nearly one-half of staff report that they believed, in Year 3 as much as in Year 1, that most teasing was harmless.

Key Finding

From Year 1 to 3, prevalent beliefs about bullying did not change appreciably among instructional staff and students. Significant numbers of students, in particular, hold beliefs that suggest tolerance of bullying.

Table B.4: Frequencies of Physical Bullying Among Students Who Agree or Disagree with “Bullying often helps the bullied person by making them tougher” (4th-12th Grade): Years 1 and 3

		Agree or Strongly Agree	Disagree or Strongly Disagree
Physically Bullied Others at Least Once in the Past Month	Year 1	47%	53%
	Year 3	45%	55%
Did Not Physically Bully in the Past Month	Year 1	25%	75%
	Year 3	24%	76%

Table B.4a: Frequencies of Verbal Bullying Among Students Who Agree or Disagree with “Bullying often helps the bullied person by making them tougher” (4th-12th Grade): Years 1 and 3

		Agree or Strongly Agree	Disagree or Strongly Disagree
Verbally Bullied Others at Least Once in the Past Month	Year 1	39%	61%
	Year 3	37%	63%
Did Not Verbally Bully in the Past Month	Year 1	25%	75%
	Year 3	25%	75%

There is a strong relationship between students who hold certain of these beliefs, particularly the idea that bullying builds toughness, and a predisposition to bully. Over the course of the SS/HS Initiative, those who held this belief were far more likely to physically bully another student at least once in the past month than those who did not hold this belief (**Table B.4**). To a lesser extent, this was also the case for verbal bullies (**Table B.4a**).

Key Finding

In Year 3 as in Year 1, students who believed that bullying builds toughness were more inclined to engage in physical and verbal bullying than students who did not share this belief.

Intervening in Bullying

During all three years of the SS/HS Initiative, most students who were bullied reported that their peers were willing to intervene on their behalf. One-quarter of targets of bullying reported that other students would “usually” try to stop the bully or would offer them support or assistance; between 40-45% would “sometimes” offer such support. Students targeted by bullying also indicated that their peers were willing to seek immediate help from an adult; in Year 3, 19% reported this happening “usually” and 39% “sometimes” (**App. B.10**).

- ❖ Although older students were less inclined to intervene by seeking adult intervention, there were no substantial differences among grade grouping (4-5, 6-8, 9-12) in students trying to stop bullies or offering targets of bullying support or assistance (**App. B.10**).
- ❖ During all three project years, instructional staff consistently reported a greater willingness on the part of students to intervene in bullying than did the students themselves. In Year 3, for example, 91% of staff indicated that students sometimes or usually sought immediate help from an adult to intervene in the bullying (compared to 58% of student survey respondents) (**App. B.11**).

Key Finding

During all three years of SS/HS, a majority of students targeted by bullying reported that their peers would “sometimes” or “usually” seek help immediately from an adult, try to stop the bully, or otherwise offer them support or assistance.

In all three years of the SS/HS Initiative, 10-15% of students reported that when they were bullied, other students would “usually” worsen the situation by encouraging the bully or joining in. Approximately one-quarter of bullied students reported that other students “sometimes” engaged in these negative behaviors (**App. B.12**).

- ❖ According to students, these aggravating behaviors occurred more frequently as students advanced in grade group (4-5, 6-8, 9-12). In Year 3, 52% of students in 9th-12th grade who were bullied reported that their peers encouraged the bullying by cheering or applauding, compared to 21% of students in 4th-5th grade and 36% of students in 6th-8th grade (**App. B.12**).

During all three years of the SS/HS Initiative, instructional staff were far more likely than bullied students to report that other students would engage in aggravating behavior “sometimes,” and far less likely to report that students “usually” worsened the situation. In

Year 3, for example, 69% of staff indicated that students “sometimes” cheered or applauded bullying, compared to 27% of students; only 3% of staff reported that students “usually” engaged in this behavior, compared to 13% of students.

- ❖ From Year 1 to 3, there was a substantial increase in the percentage of instructional staff that witnessed students who were “sometimes” aggravating bullying incidents:
 - ❖ In Year 1, 56% of staff reported that students sometimes encouraged a bully, compared to 69% in Year 3; and
 - ❖ In Year 1, 70% of staff reported that students sometimes joined in the bullying, compared to 79% in Year 3 (**App. B.13**).

Key Finding

In all three years of the SS/HS Initiative, a minority of students reported that their peers “sometimes” or “usually” aggravated bullying incidents. A growing majority of instructional staff reported that students would “sometimes” engage in this behavior.

During all three years of the project, most students and instructional staff “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that more could be done by students and adults to lower the levels of bullying.

- ❖ Approximately 7 in 10 students in 4th-12th grade indicated that students, teachers, and administrators could do more to stop bullying. With each grade group (4-5, 6-8, 9-12), students were more inclined to “agree” than “strongly agree” that more could be done (**App. B.15**).
- ❖ In all three project years, nearly 9 in 10 instructional staff agreed or strongly agreed that students could do more to stop bullying, and nearly 7 in 10 staff reported that teachers and administrators could do more in this regard (**App. B.16**).

Key Finding

A majority of students and instructional staff agreed that more could be done by students and adults to lower the levels of bullying in their schools.

Aggregate Bullying Variable, Implementation Quality, and Program Effect

There are significant differences in the extent to which bullying occurs in SS/HS Initiative buildings. It is important to know whether this variation is affected by the building’s Implementation Quality (IQ). In other words, are schools with higher levels of implementation of SS/HS Initiative programs likely to see lower levels of bullying?

This analysis of the relationship between IQ and program effects at the building level uses only student data; there are too few responses from instructional staff to permit statistical analysis at the school level. YPI developed an aggregate indicator, the **Bullied** composite variable, which combines student reports about the extent to which they were targeted by physical, verbal, and/or sexual

bullying in the past month.

The Bullied composite variable was correlated with Implementation Quality (IQ) levels for the participating buildings during Year 3 of this project (the 2011-12 school year). Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was $-.560$, indicating a *strong, negative relationship* between the level of implementation of SS/HS programs in a building and the extent to which a student was bullied (statistical significance of $p < .019$). In other words, the greater the IQ, the lower the level of bullying.

Key Finding **During Year 3 of the SS/HS Initiative, higher levels of implementation of the project's evidence-based programs were strongly associated with lower levels of victimization by bullying.**

At the building level, this has important ramifications. Buildings where students are more likely to be targeted by bullying are buildings characterized by higher levels of student dysfunctional behavior. Buildings with higher levels of bullying are also buildings where students report lower levels of safety and orderliness (Spearman rank correlation coefficient of $-.770$, $p < .001$).⁸

Furthermore, there are strong and positive correlations at the building level between the **Bullied** composite variable and:

- ❖ The average number of school days missed because of truancy (Spearman coefficient of $.757$, $p < .008$).
- ❖ The average number of days that students received In-School Suspensions (Spearman coefficient of $.854$, $p < .0001$).
- ❖ The average number of times that students are sent to the principal's office for discipline (Spearman coefficient of $.873$, $p < .0001$).

⁸ A correlation of the Bullied composite variable and the Safe and Orderly Environment composite variable, which includes the following variables: student perceptions of how discipline is maintained in their school, student perceptions of school safety, and the extent to which students in a building report engaging in disruptive behavior.