Safe schools are what every student, teacher, school administrator, and parent wants and expects. But in the last few years, tragic incidents of bullying among students have made headlines, while gangs and violence have continued to threaten the safety of children and youth in many communities. According to the most recent data available, during the 2007–08 school year, 32 percent of students aged 12–18 reported having been bullied at school, 20 percent of public schools reported gang activities, and 75 percent of public schools recorded one or more incidents of violent crime (Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2010).

When students don’t feel safe, other problems can escalate—academic failure, truancy, suspensions, expulsions, substance use, and mental health issues. Changing that trajectory is possible. The Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Initiative is at the forefront of efforts to build safe learning environments and promote a positive school climate. SS/HS grantees apply a comprehensive public health approach—using data to identify needs, implementing strategies to address those needs, and monitoring the results.

To learn more about school safety, the SS/HS National Evaluation reviewed information collected from grantees through grant applications, interviews, and performance reports. Many of the grantees funded from 2005 to 2009 have identified bullying at schools, on school buses, and in the community as a major problem. They have also focused on the need to improve school security and reduce fighting and involvement in gangs.

What are SS/HS grantees doing to make their schools safer? Many have implemented evidence-based programs and practices to identify and reduce violent and aggressive behaviors, address gang-related issues, and promote a positive school climate. Among the programs grantees cited most often are Olweus Bullying Prevention, Steps to Respect, Stop Bullying, Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT), and Gang Resistance Intervention Program (GRIP). Other strategies grantees have used include:

- Developing or strengthening policies and procedures that address school safety, and training staff to implement them
- Establishing mentoring programs to provide healthy role models and promote positive relationships within the community
- Implementing innovative approaches such as restorative justice programs and re-entry programs for students returning from the juvenile justice system
- Designating school safety coordinators to manage safety and violence prevention programs
- Placing school resource officers (SROs) and probation officers in schools

The SS/HS Initiative appears to be making a difference. School staff from the 2005–2007 cohorts reported positive change in perceptions of safety (see chart, page 2). The following pages highlight ways SS/HS is striving to reduce problems related to bullying, gangs, and school safety in general. For more information and resources on these topics, see the box on page 4.
Bullying

Nationally, there have been a number of high-profile efforts to address bullying and dispel the myth that it is a harmless rite of passage. In March 2011, the White House held its first Conference on Bullying Prevention, bringing experts together to see what could be done. Last year, a Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention Task Force met and developed a Web site with resources for students, teachers, parents, and communities (see resources, page 4). And following a series of suicides by youth who were bullied because of their sexual orientation, President Barack Obama joined more than 10,000 others in posting videos online with a message of hope: It Gets Better.

Locally, many SS/HS sites identified bullying as a concern at the outset of the grant. Students reported being victims of bullying and witnessing bullying, and some were even skipping school as a result. However, many grantees lacked the resources to address and prevent bullying.

SS/HS has supported schools’ efforts to develop and implement policies against bullying and harassment. Such policies are now required by law in most States. Some grantees created new polices, while others modified existing ones or improved their implementation. The policies tend to be district wide. Schools and SROs have provided joint trainings to help staff recognize and deal with bullying when it occurs, and they have taught students how to recognize, refuse, and report bullying. Educational campaigns and presentations to parents and community members have improved awareness of bullying and generated support for the schools’ approach.

Grantees have also adopted bullying prevention curricula such as Olweus Bullying Prevention, Steps to Respect, and Stop Bullying. One site developed a program that involved students, schools, local media, and parents in addressing cyberbullying and cybersafety. The program helped young people understand how the choices they make while using social media can have long-term consequences. Gaining buy-in from school and district-level administrators has helped grantees overcome challenges such as finding time in the school day for new programs.

Students are now more likely to report incidents of bullying...parents are also more aware of bullying and are more likely to report (it). Prior to this initiative, the students and school district staff were unaware and uninformed about bullying.—2006 Cohort Site

The partnership learned through focus groups that students wanted more adult supervision during lunchtime to reduce bullying and other antisocial behaviors. In response, the partnership established lunch clubs...where students played games and/or learned social skills. Mental health service providers facilitated the lunch clubs on each campus. In followup focus groups, students said that the lunch clubs were a place where bullies could go to make friends and that it had reduced bullying on campus.—2006 Cohort Site
Gangs

Many SS/HS grantees reported gang activity and recruitment in their schools and communities, and they recognized the associated risks for increased violence, truancy, and dropout. Integrated approaches were needed, and the SS/HS grant provided a framework for action.

Through the grant, law enforcement officials, including SROs, have played an important role in addressing gang issues at schools through trainings and presentations to school staff, students, and parents. They have also implemented evidence-based gang prevention programs including Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) and Gang Resistance Intervention Program (GRIP). Law enforcement agencies have worked with schools to improve gang surveillance and intervention, while SROs have developed positive relationships with students and changed their perceptions of police. By strengthening bonds with students, schools may help them resist gang involvement.

School Safety Policies and Procedures

As part of the SS/HS grant, sites have conducted school safety assessments and examined their policies and procedures. This has included developing or revising emergency preparedness plans, threat assessment protocols, and student discipline codes. Grantees have also provided training for school staff, students, and parents to educate them about the policies and help ensure that they are implemented consistently.

Some grantees have included environmental modifications as part of their school safety plan, such as adding or upgrading security cameras, metal detectors, lighting, and fences. Others have developed emergency communication systems or begun using identification badges for students and staff.

The partnerships funded by SS/HS have also increased local coordination and service integration. Many sites have created committees and task forces to address safety concerns, with participation by partner agencies, parents, and community members. Together, committee members have selected programs, assisted with writing policies and procedures, and organized trainings and conferences.

Grantees have used databases and shared information across partner agencies to monitor student behavior and coordinate appropriate services. For example, a grantee developed a risk management system to help identify and track students exhibiting academic and behavioral challenges that put them at risk for school failure, mental health disorders, violence, or other problems. Once identified through the system, students have access to counseling and other services. The system was developed jointly by the school district and the mental health and juvenile justice partners.

The police department offers GRIP in two district schools...this program focuses on getting troubled youth to connect with their school community rather than connecting with a gang community.—2006 Cohort Site

Representatives of each of the required partner sectors—including mental health, juvenile justice, local police departments, county sheriff, and school district representatives—participated in a gang violence prevention task force. The partnership’s gang prevention efforts have become more grassroots by getting community members involved and coming up with action steps to reduce gang activity locally.—2005 Cohort Site

There has been an incredible level of networking and communication between the law enforcement agencies and the school districts to address emergency response and preparedness policies...Planning sessions on incident command structure, rapid responders, and sheltering in place...have been provided to school administrators, counselors, teachers, safety and other school staff, law enforcement, and public safety/fire personnel. In-service trainings have been held on issues such as lockdowns, emergency communication, and large-scale responses.—2007 Cohort Site
For more information on topics related to school safety, visit these Web sites.

- **http://sshs.promoteprevent.org**
  The SS/HS Technical Assistance Center provides online resources for grantees on a range of topics, including violence prevention.

- **http://www.stopbullying.gov**
  The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in partnership with the Departments of Education and Justice, provides resources for educators, law enforcement and mental health professionals, and young people. The site includes assessment tools and materials from the White House Conference on Bullying Prevention.

- **http://www.safeyouth.gov**
  STRYVE (Striving To Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere)
  Led by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, STRYVE takes a public health approach to preventing youth violence and provides communities with the knowledge and resources to be successful.

- **http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov**
  National Gang Center
  This site shares effective community-based gang prevention and intervention strategies.

- **http://rems.ed.gov**
  Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center
  The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools established this center to help schools, school districts, and institutions of higher education strengthen their emergency planning. Visit the Web site for resources on developing, implementing, and evaluating comprehensive emergency and crisis response plans.

- **http://www.cops.usdoj.gov**
  Office of Community Oriented Policing Services
  This office of the U.S. Department of Justice advances the practice of community policing in America’s State, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies. Resources include a School Safety Toolkit for addressing issues associated with school safety and youth violence.


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