A Bullying Intervention System: Reducing Risk and Creating Support for Aggressive Students

Kathleen P. Allen

ABSTRACT: Involvement in bullying is a contributor to student failure. The author describes a bullying intervention system that has been developed and implemented in a high school that aimed to interrupt bullying, conflict, and aggression before it escalates. A high school tried to reduce student involvement with the school’s disciplinary system and advocated nonpunitive educative interventions to support student behavioral change. This attempt reflected a systemic, schoolwide response to bullying and the behaviors that can lead to bullying.

KEYWORDS: aggression, at-risk students, behavior problems, bullying intervention, social–emotional learning

BULLYING IS RECOGNIZED AS A PROBLEM in many—if not all—American schools, and has been linked to lethal school violence (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). Statistics regarding the numbers of students involved in bullying vary by study, but a major U.S. survey reported that 29.9% of students in Grades 6–10 were involved in moderate to frequent bullying (Nansel et al., 2001). Although most schools prohibit bullying in their codes of conduct or school policies, enforcement of these structures can be challenging. This is in part because of the covert and subtle nature of much bullying and because it is sometimes difficult to determine whether conflict or aggression meets the school’s definition of bullying. Whether a particular act of aggression is bullying is often a subjective conclusion made by an adult who has limited information about the acts in question and the intentions of those involved. In addition, interactions may slide back and forth between innocuous conflict and bullying, as noted in a study of classroom ecologies (Doll, Song, & Siemers, 2004), making it difficult to accurately assess the nature of any particular interaction. At-risk students are vulnerable to involvement in conflict—whether it is aggression that qualifies as bullying—both as perpetrators and as victims. When aggression is interrupted at an early stage, it is less likely to escalate into serious problems (see Goldstein, 1999) than if it is allowed to progress. The bullying intervention system we describe in the present article may offer a solution to managing low-level aggression and conflict—bullying or not—hence supporting at-risk students and furthering their school success.

Background

Educators trying to deal with bullying in their schools are often exhorted by researchers to “develop a common plan of action” and to “react [to bullying] in a relatively consistent manner to similar situations” (Olweus, 1993, p. 79). Unfortunately, little guidance is offered aside from the recommendation to explore the problem of bullying in a conference day (Olweus). Research has also indicated that teachers are limited in their knowledge of how to respond to bullying (Nicolaides, Toda, & Smith, 2002). Without specific guidance on what to do and how to do it, knowledge of bullying by itself is unsatisfactory. The bullying intervention system subsequently described has attempted to provide guidance to educators that is reflected in a clear plan of action, designed to promote consistent responses to situations that may be bullying.

The Bullying Intervention System

The following system, its components, and the process that created it took place in a suburban high school in the United States that was concerned about bullying and its effect on student peer interactions and school social climate. Following an initial needs assessment and presentation of this data to the entire faculty, a core group of teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, a parent, and a student met two to three times per month for more than 1 year to develop this system. The process was supported by the school principal and endorsed by the

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building’s building planning team, a group equivalent to a shared decision-making team. The system was introduced to the faculty during professional development sessions just before the beginning of the school year. Staff members piloted the system during the first semester, and the core team presented the system to students and parents midyear. The system is in its 2nd year of implementation for staff, and 1st full year of implementation for students and families. The core team continues to monitor the use of the system, and an evaluation is underway.

It is important to note that the bullying intervention system is not the same as the school’s code of conduct, nor does it supplant it. Whereas the code of conduct is designed to deal with serious infractions via main office referrals initiated by staff that are dealt with through usually punitive consequences, the bullying intervention system was designed to offer educative support to improve student behaviors. Reports to the system do not appear in students’ files nor do they become part of the school’s discipline record. However, if it is apparent that behaviors that warrant activation of the code of conduct have occurred, a main office referral may be generated in addition to activation of the bullying intervention system. Code-of-conduct violations are often viewed and treated as isolated events, whereas bullying problems are often ongoing processes. Essentially, the code of conduct and the bullying intervention system run parallel to each other with occasional intersections, but because bullying is usually not a single event, the bullying intervention system continues to monitor a situation even after triggering events have been addressed. Thus, the bullying intervention system was designed to alter the dynamics of bullying relationships through ongoing support, with the expectation that fewer code-of-conduct violations will occur.

A Word of Caution

Bullying is a systemic problem. It may reflect attitudes and beliefs about the way people can treat each other that are entrenched. It is sometimes supported by adult modeling. It is often insidious, with only egregious instances becoming apparent to students and adults in a school. Prevention efforts that offer a single dose, educational session are ineffective. Changing a culture of bullying requires changing how adults respond to students. Furthermore, without a system as described in this article, bystanders who are often encouraged to intervene in bullying situations can become highly vulnerable themselves. Changing bullying is not quick or simple. The bullying intervention system we describe in this article is a comprehensive and detailed mechanism that offers adults and students a vehicle for changing a school culture that supports bullying.

Components

The bullying intervention system comprises four main components: a reporting form, an intervention and follow-up process, a continuum of responses, and an intervention team. (See Figure 1 for a schematic diagram of the system.)

The Reporting Form

Reporting of information is critical to the success of interventions. The form (see Appendix A) is available online for electronic submission or it can be downloaded and filled out. The form solicits a variety of information that offers guidance to adults regarding how best to deal with the problem. A second purpose of the reporting form is to create a record of bullying situations and their resolution. Without data that track problems and their management, school staff will have a fragmented and incomplete picture of bullying problems in the school as a whole. In high schools, where students interact with multiple teachers in multiple settings throughout the day, it is critical for teachers to share information about students who may be exhibiting or experiencing aggression to determine the scope and severity of the problem.

Who can file. Knowledge of behaviors that are or may lead to bullying is critical to the functioning of this system. Students, staff, and parents may be privy to information that is relevant; hence, all three of these constituents are encouraged to make reports. Students are encouraged to report problems to a staff member who may be close to the situation. However, often, students approach staff members but are reluctant to fill out a form. In these cases, the staff member usually fills out a form, becoming the reporter.

Options for reporting. Although it is easier to investigate bullying problems that are presented by an individual who is willing to have his or her identity known, it is much more realistic to offer the option of anonymity to reporters. Without a choice of anonymity, it is certain that important information will not be shared. Thus, those who report a problem can do so verbally to a staff member, through a written report submitted to a staff member, or electronically. All of these options can also include a request for anonymity.

Receivers, Responders, Liaisons, and Coaches

Receivers are staff members who receive the report. If a report is filed electronically, the Social-Emotional Learning Intervention Team (SELiT) chairperson or an assistant principal become the receiver. (More information about SELiT is provided further on.) The receiver has a variety of options including the following:

1. Managing and resolving the situation alone.
2. Managing the situation in collaboration with a SELiT coach or an assistant principal.
The responder manages and handles the bullying report. Because the bullying intervention system offers several possibilities for responding to situations, responders can be any one of the following:

1. **Staff member.** A staff member who is the recipient of a bullying report responds to it by himself or herself.
2. **Staff member and SELiT coach.** A staff member may solicit the help and support of an SELiT coach. SELiT coaches are members of the SELiT who have had training in various ways to respond to bullying. In some cases, a SELiT coach who has assumed responsibility for handling a bullying report may invite a staff member who is closely connected to the situation to participate in responding to a bullying situation. In either situation, the two individuals collaborate as a team in dealing with the bullying situation.

3. **Staff member and an assistant principal.** A staff member may solicit the help and support of an assistant principal. In some cases, an assistant principal who has assumed responsibility for handling a bullying report may invite a staff member who is closely connected to the situation to participate in responding to a bullying situation. In either situation, the two individuals collaborate as a team in dealing with the bullying situation.

In addition to receivers and responders, there is also a role defined as a liaison. A liaison is a staff member who takes on the responsibility of helping an individual with a bullying situation while keeping the person's identity confidential. In these situations, the liaison agrees not to divulge the identity of the reporter without first securing the individual's permission.
The final role is that of coach. Coaches are all members of the SELiT. SELiT acts as a clearinghouse for bullying intervention reports; tracks data on bullying problems; and may resolve, monitor, or assist staff members as SELiT coaches. They are a key component of the bullying intervention system because they have specialized knowledge regarding intervention responses and because they act as a clearinghouse for all reports of suspected bullying. Staff members who are receivers, reporters, or liaisons may choose to act on their own to resolve a bullying problem or they may seek assistance from a SELiT coach. Whether a staff member chooses to collaborate with a SELiT coach or an assistant principal depends on a number of factors. Assistant principals are the person of last resort in that they have more authority than does a SELiT coach. (See Appendix C for a glossary of definitions that includes the aforementioned roles.)

**Bullying or Not?**

Determining whether conflict is bullying can be particularly challenging at the high school level when students are developmentally sophisticated and have opportunities to bully in many settings in which adults are not closely monitoring their interactions. Compounded with the availability of text messaging, instant messaging, cell phones, and e-mail, adolescents have access to myriad vehicles for aggravating against each other. Determining whether a situation has bullying characteristics is usually ascertained by doing some preliminary investigation. Answering the following questions can help determine whether a situation is bullying:

1. Is there a power imbalance between the two parties? Is it being exploited?
2. Is there a history to the aggression? Is it ongoing, or a “one off” event? What is the frequency and duration of the interactions?
3. Does it appear that it is normal conflict that may “slide across the line” and become bullying conflict?
4. What is the effect of the behaviors on those involved? Is the problem causing great distress?

It is critical for the bullying intervention system to be presented as a mechanism that can be used to manage conflict of any sort, in part because normal conflict can escalate into bullying. Preliminary evaluation data indicate that a majority of the cases that were managed by SELiT did not clearly meet the definition of bullying but had the potential to become bullying. In the cases that were clearly bullying when they were initially reported, SELiT members felt that they were able to prevent the problem from escalating in severity.

**A School Problem or Not?**

One question that may arise when dealing with a potential bullying situation is whether the activities in question have occurred at school or whether they have occurred outside of the school’s jurisdiction. It is common for social problems among students to reverberate in the context of school even if the problem did not start in school. In situations in which a staff member is aware of a potential bullying situation that appears to have originated outside of school, he or she should fill out a bullying reporting form and forward it to the SELiT. SELiT will determine whether the situation warrants a response from the school.

**Intervention and Follow-Up Process**

Figure 1 provides a detailed schematic of the bullying intervention system. Although SELiT is available to assist staff members in dealing with potential situations, the system is designed so that staff members who are able to manage a problem on their own are encouraged to do so. The only involvement they may have with the system is the completion of reporting and a follow-up forms (see Appendix B) that are submitted to SELiT. Staff members’ decision to manage a situation alone is influenced by their assessment of the problem as being of a minor, moderate, or severe nature, on the basis of their preliminary investigation of the situation.

**The Five Phases of Responding**

There are five distinct phases to responding to a bullying report. Because each situation is different and because there are so many ways that a report can be generated, it is likely that several phases will flow together. For example, if a student approaches a staff member and verbally describes what could be a bullying situation, the staff member may complete Phases 1–3 all in one conversation with the student that takes place immediately. However, in other cases, the phases may happen distinctly from one another and not immediately.

Responding to a bullying report involves these five phases:

**Phase 1. Receipt:** “Thanks. I got it. We’ll look into it.”

**Phase 2. Preliminary activity:** “We are gathering information.”

**Phase 3. Intervention activity:** “We are dealing with the situation.”

**Phase 4. Resolution:** “We think we have resolved the problem.”

**Phase 5. Follow-up:** “We are checking to make sure things are resolved.”

Regardless of who manages a bullying problem, it is key to communicate with those who initially shared concern.
that triggered a report so that they know that the problem is being addressed. Figure 2 describes the communication process, and it can be managed by anyone working to resolve the problem. Staff members who fulfill this role may often be limited to a reassurance that the matter has not been forgotten and that it is being addressed. Sharing of specific details may not be possible or advantageous. Professional judgment and discretion should be the norm.

**Stages for completing a follow up form.** Follow-up forms are intended to keep the SELiT apprised of a situation so that if there are other related situations people can coordinate their efforts to resolve bullying problems. There are three general stages when a follow-up form should be completed and passed on to the SELiT:

1. **Interim reports:** An interim report is really a status report. It tells the SELiT what is happening, what the responder is doing or planning to do, and how the efforts seem to be affecting the situation.
2. **Final report:** A final report is completed and passed on to the SELiT when the situation is believed to be resolved.
3. **Follow-up report:** This part of the process assures all involved that there has been follow-up and that the situation is resolved.

This is not meant to be a rigid system. There is no specific timeline for reporting on the various stages of a report and response to a bullying problem. The intent is to make sure of the following:

1. Problems are addressed and that they do not fall through the cracks.
2. Bullying problems that are happening in multiple places that have a common thread can be managed through collaboration among staff members.
3. Follow-up takes place to make certain that a problem has not reoccurred, gone ‘underground,’ or resulted in retaliation.
4. Records are developed and maintained so that staff can evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the system, monitor progress in each situation, and determine the outcomes of these efforts.

**Involving Relevant Staff Members**

In some situations, it might be helpful to inform other staff members of a bullying situation because of their proximity to it. If students are picking on a particular student and it is known to be occurring in particular classes or in particular areas of the school, adults who teach or supervise those students may need to be informed of the problem. In these cases, the following concerns should be taken into consideration by the informing adult:

1. Information should be shared confidentially to protect targets or potential targets from retaliation.
2. Information should be shared verbally, so as not to create a paper or electronic record that would fall into the hands of someone outside the bullying intervention system.
3. Follow-up takes place to make certain that a problem has not reoccurred, gone ‘underground,’ or resulted in retaliation.
4. Positioning oneself in the vicinity of the bullying (hall or other space), so that an adult or authority presence is established.
5. Enlisting another adult in the vicinity to collaborate on modifying the environment so that the problem dynamics among students can be altered.
6. Giving a perpetrator a task or responsibility that removes him or her from the vicinity of the target.
7. Giving a perpetrator a role to play in which he or she can productively uses his or her power positively, hence shifting the focus of the perpetrator’s attention.

**Family or student meetings.** In situations in which the perpetrator’s behavior is at a minor to moderate level, a nondisciplinary meeting with either the student alone or with the student and his or her family may be successful in providing a student with the solutions-based support needed to modify his or her behavior. One or two adults who are involved with the situation and who have knowledge of the student and his or her family can facilitate this meeting. Usually, the meeting would include a concerned teacher and a SELiT coach. Such a meeting would have the following characteristics or would subscribe to the following criteria:

1. The purpose of the meeting is to express concern for the student who may be in a situation that reflects an unhealthy or problematic relationship that is causing harm to others at school. If parents are included, the purpose is to elicit their help in supporting the student to change or alter his or her behaviors.
2. The tone of the meeting is positive and nonpunitive and takes a problem-solving stance. The meeting is not framed as a disciplinary action, nor does it result in any kind of information being generated that will go into the student’s file.
3. If the meeting includes parents, it should provide them with specific information (e.g., handouts, reading lists) so that they are offered guidance in supporting their child.
4. The process should include some follow-up action, such as a phone call, conversation, or both with the student, the parents, or the students and parents to determine how things have progressed and whether there is a need for another meeting.

**Student-support approach: Group or individual.** Historically, bullying interventions have tended to focus on the behaviors of the bully and, in some cases, the target. Maines and Robinson (1997) developed an alternative system for solving bullying problems that takes a contextual approach. Young (1998) has modified and expanded this process. This approach includes the following elements: (a) the encouragement of empathy among students, (b) the promotion of a shared responsibility among students for the wellbeing of others, and (c) the need...
to solve the problem, as opposed to apportioning blame. The process adapted from Young (1998) is subsequently summarized and includes the following steps:

1. The adult facilitator interviews the victim alone to discuss the kinds of things that are happening, as opposed to specific incidents. The student talks about anything that needs to be known about the situation. The adult accepts the student’s comments without judging or questioning its validity. The student is reassured that the bully will not get in trouble, so the student should not be concerned about retaliation. The purpose of the meeting is to reassure the student that the problem can be solved and to find out (a) who the bullies and their supporters are, (b) who the neutral bystanders are, and (c) who the student views as potential friends or supporters. The student is informed that the group will be asked to help improve the situation so that the student is comfortable at school.

2. The adult assembles a group of students using the names supplied by the targeted student. All the main aggressors, with some bystanders, and some supporters (or potential friends) are included. The group needs to be mixed, and no one is labeled. The adult meets with the group separately from the victim. The group is told that Student X is unhappy in school and that they have been chosen because they are all in a position to help. There is no use of the word bullying. There is a nonjudgmental atmosphere in this meeting. Students who sense they are there because they think they are in trouble are reassured that no one is in trouble.

3. The adult asks if any of the students have ever been unhappy in school. The feelings of students who acknowledge unhappiness are briefly discussed and related to Student X’s feelings. The goal is to raise empathy for Student X.

4. The adult suggests that no one should feel unhappy in school, and because these students know Student X, they are probably able to tell when Student X is unhappy. If students name names of aggressors, the adult reaffirms that this is a meeting to help Student X, not to judge anyone else. The meeting is not about assigning blame for the problem.

5. The group is asked to make suggestions for helping Student X to be happier in school. The adult cites the fact that because students know each other and Student X better than the adults, they are in the best position to help Student X. The adult waits for suggestions to be offered. The adult ignores resentment and encourages positive solutions. The activities being suggested to help Student X must be offered by the students. If students do not generate solutions on their own, the adult can further explore the circumstances that are upsetting to Student X. No formal plan is elicited. Individual offers from students have generally been sufficient to alter the situation.

6. The adult thanks students for their support and are told that their ideas are very likely going to solve the problem for Student X. They are told that they will reconvene in a week to see how their plans are working.

7. The adult meets with the victim to see how things are going, usually about a week later. The student is complimented on how well things are going. Then, the adult meets with the group. They are asked if they think that Student X is doing better and if so, what is happening. Students are invited to share what they have contributed to the improvement of the situation. The adult compliments them, thanks them, and asks whether they will continue for another week. Reviews are continued for as long as necessary (usually not more than two weeks). Individual follow-up may occur. Parents are contacted to let them know that the school has been involved in trying to help their child be happier at school and are asked for their views on how things are going for their child.

A modification of this process is one in which a SELiT coach meets individually with all of the students who would normally be included in a group meeting to problem solve the situation. Again, the focus is on problem solving not gathering incriminating evidence. In such a situation, the adult would approach the situation by meeting with each individual separately and doing the following:

1. Express concern that there is a problem that the student might know about regarding Student X, indicating that the adult is soliciting the student for help that only students can provide.

2. Ask the student what information he or she might be able to contribute which illuminates the nature of the problem.

3. Share any relevant information with the student about the situation as deemed appropriate.

4. Ask the student what he or she thinks might be done to alleviate the problematic nature of the situation.

5. Thank the student for his or her help with information and suggestions for solving the problem.

6. Meet with the victim 1–2 days later to determine whether the situation has improved.

This process may or may not include the bully, and the decision to involve the bully would be determined by the individual circumstances and the judgment of the adult. The reason that this individual student approach might be advantageous over the support group meeting approach is that there might be times when there is a strong possibility that the bully might dominate the group meeting and preclude the adult from generating a sense of responsibility and compassion for the target.

The most important feature of the processes that Maines and Robinson (1997) and Young (1998) suggested is that there is no investigation of the bullying and there is no
punishment meted out to aggressors. The reasons for this approach are beyond the scope of this article. (For details, see Maines & Robinson; Young.)

**Successful Intervention Equals Prevention**

An evaluation of the bullying intervention system is underway and preliminary results indicate that early intervention in problem behaviors results in the prevention of bullying. This may be because of the actions of adults which support positive student behaviors, but it may also be due to the fact that the existence of such a system acts to deter students from engaging in bullying because they know that they are likely to be confronted by adults.

The bullying intervention system described in this article is a uniquely tailored response that has been designed to work in one setting. We offer a template to other schools that recognize that bullying must be addressed systemically, and that efforts to change a culture must begin by altering the environment before instituting educational or curricular measures to change student behaviors on a large scale. Replication of this system is dependent on the ability of a school to form a committee of concerned staff members, who are respected by their peers, and who have the time, resources, and authority to develop and institute a schoolwide, systemic response to managing conflicts that are or have the potential to become bullying. If there is one lesson that the committee who developed this system learned, it is that there are no magic bullets for solving bullying problems. Effective solutions are neither quick nor simple.

**Conclusion**

Students at risk for involvement in conflict, aggression, and bullying may benefit from an intervention system that provides early detection and supportive behavior change. Accordingly, it may result in reduced contact with the school’s disciplinary structure and better performance in school.

**AUTHOR NOTE**

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**REFERENCES**


APPENDIX A
Bullying Incident Report

1. Please indicate the seriousness of the incident, according to the scale below. (Please circle)

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<td>1</td>
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<td>Minor</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Severe</td>
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2. Please check those that apply:

_____ I was directly involved in this incident.

_____ I observed this incident.

_____ I heard about this incident. (If so, please identify from whom.)

3. When did this incident occur (include date and time)? ______________ Has it happened before? Please explain.

4. Where did this incident occur?

5. Who was involved? Include the names of those directly involved and bystanders.

6. Briefly describe the situation.

7. To your knowledge, has there been any intervention? If so, please describe

Reported by ________________________________ Date Reported _______

If you believe it is necessary for you to make this report anonymously, please complete this form on paper (not electronically) and hand it to a trusted staff member. Tell the adult that you wish to remain anonymous and do not include your name on this form. That staff member will act on your behalf and keep your identity confidential. If it becomes necessary for school officials to contact you, the staff member will ask your permission before disclosing your identity.
APPENDIX B
Bullying Follow-Up Report

Name of Person Who Received the Bullying Incident Report _______________________
Name of Person Who is Responding to the Bullying Report _______________________
Date of Report ________________
Type of Report (circle one): Interim Report       Final Report       Checking Back Report

For the following items, only include previously unreported information:

1. Please describe the nature of the bullying problem including who is involved, what behaviors occurred, and their frequency, duration, history, context, and impact.

2. Describe what steps have been taken to gather information. Include the names of those with whom you have solicited information regarding the situation.

3. Describe any actions that have been taken to intervene in the situation or to resolve the problem.

4. If you believe the situation is resolved, provide any information that indicates that this is the case.

5. Describe any actions that you have taken to ensure that the problem has not reoccurred.

6. Please include any other information that you believe is relevant to this situation.
## APPENDIX C
### Glossary of Key Terms

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<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>Any student, parent or staff member who files a report on a bullying issue. The reporter can be directly involved in the problem or be an observer of the problem.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Receiver</td>
<td>The staff member who receives a report from an individual either verbally or handwritten. An assistant principal or the SELiT chairperson will receive electronic reports.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responder</td>
<td>The staff member who works to resolve a bullying problem. The receiver of a report can choose to respond to the situation alone or involve a SELiT coach, in which case the receiver becomes a co-responder.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liaison</td>
<td>The staff member who serves as a go-between usually between the reporter and anyone else in the school. The liaison takes on the responsibility of helping an individual who makes a report about a bullying situation and chooses to remain anonymous. The liaison will attempt to resolve the situation without disclosing the identity of the reporter. If the liaison feels that resolving the problem cannot be done without disclosing the identity of the reporter, the liaison will secure permission from the reporter to disclose his or her identity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Emotional Learning Intervention Team (SELiT)</td>
<td>A subcommittee that acts as a clearinghouse for bullying interventions. The team tracks data on bullying problems and may resolve, monitor, or assist staff members as SELiT coaches.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Emotional Learning Intervention Team coach</td>
<td>A member of SELiT who is trained to assist faculty and staff in bullying interventions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Emotional Learning (SEL)</td>
<td>“The process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors” (M. J. Elias et al., 1997).</td>
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