

MULTIDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION IN A STATEWIDE SAFE SCHOOLS INITIATIVE: COMMITTED STAKEHOLDERS ADDRESSING BULLYING, HARASSMENT AND HATE CRIMES [634]

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Abstract

Numerous stakeholders have identified bullying, harassment, and hate crime as critical impediments to promoting safe schools and academic achievement. The Safe Schools Initiative, led by the Massachusetts Attorney General’s Office, is a two-year collaborative project that develops and tests targeted interventions that address the causes of these behaviors.

What Is the Safe Schools Initiative?

In order for children to learn and teachers to teach, schools must be safe environments. Safe environments include not only the physical measures of safety, but they also include a climate and culture of emotional safety and respect. As schools and communities become increasingly diverse, it is crucial that multiple stakeholders draw attention to the importance of creating and maintaining a school climate in which diverse children can learn—a climate free of harassment, bullying, and hate crimes. To combat these pervasive and deeply rooted social problems, schools must have access to the expertise of a wide range of disciplines to develop and implement effective strategies of prevention and response.

Description of Leadership and Collaboration

The Safe Schools Initiative (“SSI”), initiated and sponsored by the Massachusetts Attorney General’s Office (AGO), seeks to provide schools with the information and tools necessary to promote safe environments. To address the root causes of school violence, the SSI is developing strategies to support positive school climates. The central focus is a two-year pilot project designing detailed guidelines for demographically varying school districts to assess the nature and scope of school violence, identify underlying causes, and implement targeted interventions.

To establish the pilot project, the SSI invited Massachusetts school districts to apply. In considering districts for participation, the SSI considered the following factors: geographic diversity; demographic changes; bullying, harassment and hate incidents in schools; willingness to adopt the AGO’s Sample Civil Rights Policy (Massachusetts Attorney General’s Office 2005); and commitment to implementing strategies to address the root causes of bias-based behaviors. After a thorough application and interview process, the SSI selected three school districts. Community A, bordering a large urban center, was experiencing significant demographic changes as the long-term white population moved out and an African American, Asian, Caribbean, and Cape Verdean population moved in. Community B, a suburban community, was also

experiencing significant demographic changes as immigrants from Central and South America moved in. Community C, a rural district with little visible diversity, had experienced harassment and hate incidents in the last several years. All three districts demonstrated their commitment to implementing strategies to reduce bias-based behaviors.

Genesis of the SSI

The AGO plays a significant role in investigating and responding to bias-based bullying and harassment that may rise to the level of civil rights violations. Protecting children has been a significant priority of the Massachusetts AGO under Attorney General Thomas Reilly. Protecting children through promoting safe schools is a focus of the Children, Youth and Communities Division and of the Civil Rights Division. School climate is not only a child protection issue, but it is also a civil rights issue since educational equity and access to quality education are compromised when a culture of harassment, bullying, and hate crimes exists. Out of the AGO’s experience with school violence and bias-related behavior, three sets of needs have emerged that inspired the creation of the SSI:

1. The need to identify common circumstances contributing to the escalation of conflict in schools

It became increasingly clear over a period of approximately five years that bias-related behavior is one of the major root causes of violence in schools. This determination came from multiple sources, as follows:

- An increase in bias-related complaints to the Civil Rights Division
- A process evaluation of the AGO’s Conflict Intervention Team (CIT) Project
- The 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Education (Massachusetts Department of Education 2004)
- A Northeastern University study on hate crime among Massachusetts youth (Shively, McDevitt, Cronin, and Balboni 2002)

In considering the nature and scope of the problem, the AGO noted the results of the most recent Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Massachusetts Department of Education 2004: 23 percent of Massachusetts high school students reported being the victim of bullying at least once a week during the survey period and 5 percent of Massachusetts high school students stayed home due to concerns about safety. The AGO also noted the research project conducted by Northeastern University (2002 in which 7.7 percent of participating tenth grade students reported being the victim of a bias crime in the six months that preceded the survey.

The AGO saw these survey and research findings reflected in cases handled by its civil rights division, at the same time noting an increase in the number and serious nature of school-based cases referred to the division. For example, in a six-week period in the 2004–2005 school year, the AGO responded to five incidents, including harassment and assaults based on race and sexual orientation and threats based on religion directed at a teacher.

In other areas of the AGO, staff working with middle and high schools hosting the AGO’s Student Conflict Resolution Experts peer mediation program noted reports from schools about increases in the number of conflicts involving general harassment, racial issues, and sexual harassment. A 2002 process evaluation of the AGO’s Conflict Intervention Team project—a collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Education (MADOE) to provide emergency mediation services to schools experiencing or at risk for large-scale conflict—revealed that over 80 percent of team responses to schools involved bias-related incidents, most commonly related to issues of race. In addition to identifying the prominent role

that bias related behavior played in large-scale conflicts, this process evaluation also noted common circumstances that appeared to contribute to the escalation of large-scale conflict in schools.

These underlying circumstances included a lack of recognition and response to bullying and harassment, unclear and inconsistent disciplinary policies, and a lack of comprehensive prevention programs to foster tolerance and respect for diversity. As we discuss below, these three issues also emerged as concerns during the needs assessment phase of the SSI.

2. The need to move from a reactive to a proactive approach

As a result of its experiences and observations of increases in bullying, harassment, and hate crime *and* some of their common underlying causes, the AGO saw that significant challenges exist for Massachusetts schools and communities—challenges that require new, proactive tools and strategies.

The AGO historically responded to reported problems in schools by offering conflict intervention teams to prevent further escalation, pursuing civil rights violations, and providing training. Additionally, the Massachusetts Department of Education (MADOE) and other collaborators responded to problems in schools by also offering training and suggesting curricular programs, particularly from Safe and Drug Free Schools funds. These responses were targeted primarily toward increasing a school’s capacity to recognize and respond to bias-related behavior but only minimally toward identifying and addressing either the early warning signs or the underlying causes of this behavior in schools.

In one Massachusetts high school, the local district attorney’s office (DAO) and the AGO responded to a complaint involving a pattern of harassment and a hate crime perpetrated against a gay student. In response to the criminal conduct, the DAO pursued criminal charges against the perpetrator and the AGO secured a civil rights injunction to protect the student and prevent additional acts of hate. Although this response stopped the harassment and prevented the perpetrator from engaging in additional behavior directed at gay and lesbian students, within 18 months, the same school contacted the AGO to request Conflict Intervention Team services to defuse a conflict involving incidents of racial harassment. Addressing the conflict required identifying contributing factors and mediating the conflict. At the end of the intervention, the team provided administrators with an overview of contributing factors within the school environment and suggestions of resources that could be helpful in addressing those factors in a proactive way. Reconnecting with the school several years later, the AGO learned that the school had not built a proactive approach and continued to experience acts of bullying and harassment. It appears that without outside resources and technical assistance, the reactive pattern continued.

Conversely, the AGO and another DAO responded to a different school experiencing a violent conflict between some Latino and White students. In this incident, the local DAO pursued criminal charges against some students and the AGO/MADOE provided Conflict Intervention Team services, including mediation and assistance to identify underlying causes. In addition, staff from the AGO and the DAO provided training to all district administrators and staff, helped plan meetings, and supported the development of a district action plan. This plan detailed proactive steps to change the school climate that had fueled the problem incident. This district implemented some of its district action plan steps and has not experienced any significant issues of harassment or hate.

3. The need to apply a multisector, collaborative approach

Through its past collaborative efforts in civil rights cases and conflict resolution programs with schools, the AGO worked with a wide range of Massachusetts organizations and individuals. The AGO believed that these groups and individuals would bring the necessary expertise to identify, explore, and assess

underlying causes in order to improve the multiple dimensions of school climate. This could be accomplished by developing specific tools and strategies, and field testing and evaluating them through the SSI pilot project.

The AGO convened a group of collaborators, who along with additional other individuals and organizations, volunteered to join the Attorney General’s Safe School Initiative and serve as members of the Technical Assistance Team for the SSI Pilot Project. In order to develop the first year Needs Assessment, and for the upcoming second year Implementation Phase, a broad collaboration team with expertise in multiple dimensions of school climate was needed.

School Climate and Collaborative Partnerships

School Climate and the SSI

School climate has been broadly researched from multiple vantage points: from classroom to the cafeteria, from workplace environment to teachers’ lounge, from principals to parents (Freiberg 2003). Much research focuses on school climate as a factor in achievement (Skiba, Rausch and Ritter 2005; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer and Perry 2003). Research on equity issues as factors in school climate and achievement has been less widespread, although it is still a focus for many (Gottfredson and Gottfredson 1989; Boethel 2003). With the No Child Left Behind Act requiring states and school districts to consider all factors that affect achievement and to disaggregate achievement results by race and ethnicity, negative school climates, with little emphasis on social-emotional learning, are increasingly being seen as barriers to learning (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg 2004; Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, and Dumas 2003; Smith, Atkins, and Connell 2003).

Definitions of school climate abound. Rather than enter the definitional debate, we take the perspective, first, that school climate is composed of multiple dimensions, and, second, as stated by Brand et al. (2003) that

[S]tudents’ achievement and adjustment outcomes are more likely to improve when school improvement efforts bring about comprehensive change in multiple dimensions of social climate rather than focusing on piecemeal or fragmentary change in single elements of the school environment (p. 585).

From its inception, the AGO’s SSI leadership identified for the needs assessment phase multiple dimensions of school climate, but emphasized issues related to bullying, harassment, and hate crime. Instructional and curriculum issues, along with classroom management and schoolwide discipline concerns, were highlighted in the needs assessment phase (see below).

Collaborations—What Makes Them Work?

The key to understanding productive collaborative management lies in mission-driven endeavors (Agranoff 2005).

How many collaborative efforts have been initiated with great enthusiasm yet have quickly failed because their mission remained vague and the partners had varying levels of commitment to the central issues on the table? Many of us working on school safety issues have had this experience. Careful attention to research on successful collaborations in other fields may improve our chances for achieving the goals of a safe schools collaboration. The necessity of collaborative effort to solve complex public problems has become well recognized, particularly among governmental agencies and nonprofit groups (Agranoff 2005; Linden 2002). The shift has been from organizational change “within” to organizational change “between” (Linden, p. 4).

What’s going on is that many public and nonprofit agencies are placing more emphasis on collaboration than they did in recent decades. Despite the many hurdles, managers and leaders are learning to work across boundaries to form successful alliances and coalitions. Their goal isn’t collaboration for its own sake. . . . Rather, their goal lies at the heart of their organization’s mission: they are *working across boundaries to deliver better service, value, and outcomes for customers, stakeholders, and communities* (Linden, p. 6, emphasis in original).

Among public agencies, however, school districts have traditionally shown some resistance to open collaboration with other non-educational governmental agencies, which they may see as endangering their independence. There has been somewhat more openness to accept help from nongovernmental agencies, but making these true collaborations, with equal partnership, is difficult to achieve. However, as finances have become increasingly tight for school districts in the past decade or more, a gradual willingness to work with those who can bring low cost or no-cost resources has emerged.

Oregon’s Mid-Valley Partnership (MVP) for student threat assessment is an example of a multi-agency community collaboration of key stakeholders committed to school safety (Dreal, Cunningham, and Nishioka 2005). Based on Oregon legislation requiring safe school collaborations, the MVP faced a set of challenges similar to those that have, and are, facing the Massachusetts SSI. These include “differences in agency philosophy and mission . . . issues related to record sharing, confidentiality, and information storage, [and] funding limitations” (p. 250). It appears that MVP’s sustainability as a collaboration of “key representatives from school administration, law enforcement, mental health, juvenile justice, judicial, and community agencies” was at least in part a result of the strategic planning process they used:

1. Assess resources and define the issues
2. Create a shared vision
3. Develop and implement a plan
4. Monitor progress and refine process (Items 1–4, p. 251).

In part, this strategic planning process parallels the framework for collaboration that Linden (2002) outlines in *Working Across Boundaries: Making Collaboration Work in Government and Nonprofit Organizations*. The basics of his framework include a “shared purpose,” desire to “pursue a collaborative solution,” “right people . . . at the table,” “an open, credible process,” and “a champion . . . with credibility and clout who makes this a high priority” (p. 60).

Central to both analyses is creating a shared vision or purpose. Initially, this mission may come from the “champion,” or sponsoring organization. In the case of the SSI, the AGO set out the initial vision or purpose. However, the representatives of the collaborating organizations have taken the overall mission of changing school climate in order to reduce bullying, harassment and hate crime in some directions that may not have been previously anticipated. For example, it became clear to members of the needs assessment teams, from their previous experiences and from early contacts with the pilot districts even before the actual assessment was carried out, that how curriculum engages or fails to engage diverse learners is a significant factor in student behavior and overall school climate. Recognizing this early on helped to articulate the overall mission in a more detailed way.

High Stakes

An additional element in the collaboration framework is “high stakes”:

High stakes occur when the task at hand is very important to employees and outside stakeholders, the results are visible to others, and the consequences of getting it right (or

wrong) are large and will be felt directly by those doing the work in the near term (Linden 2002, p. 60).

In the SSI, at several points where obstacles arose, within the needs assessment teams, the larger collaborative group, or with the pilot districts, the recognition of both our shared mission and the high stakes for all involved moved us quickly toward solutions. For example, differences in leadership and communication styles were resolved through open conversation. Different organizational imperatives around confidentiality of data required compromise and an acceptance of the need to work around some restrictions. The very public nature of the SSI, including multiple local newspaper articles, set high expectations for success, increased the already high stakes for all concerned, and served as a real impetus to identifying obstacles, if not as they arose, at least before they caused a problem.

Collaboration Survey

Effective collaboration requires regular reflection on strengths and challenges as a way to “monitor and refine progress,” one of the steps in the MVP’s strategic planning process. With this in mind, the SSI informally surveyed a sample of core collaborators, including representatives of pilot school districts, to determine to what extent common elements of success and common obstacles exist within the collaboration. The survey was adapted from one included in Linden’s *Working Across Boundaries* (Appendix C, pp 271–274). Included in the elements of success were open, trusting relationships among the partners; high stakes; organizational support for collaboration; collaborative leadership; continuity of leadership; partners playing to strengths; voluntary collaboration; measured and communicated results; and balance between planning and action. A significant majority of participants responded that these elements of success existed to a good extent or to a great extent. In terms of areas where the SSI collaboration could strengthen particular elements, participants identified the potential challenge of organizational support for partners where a clear benefit to the organization is not apparent. Partners also identified the need to increase the emphasis on measuring and communicating results and for achieving balance between planning and action as critical to sustaining project momentum.

In surveying partners, the survey tool also asked participants to consider common obstacles to effective collaboration and whether the elements presented a major or minor obstacle or no obstacle to project success. Among the elements were the needs for control or the fear of losing control, partner-specific interest, clarity in investment/unclear benefit, turf control, lack of trust and confidence among partners, different rules and operating cultures among participants, and funding to support activities of the collaboration. A significant number of participants viewed partner-specific interest, turf concerns, clarity of investment/unclear benefits, and differing rules and operating cultures as minor obstacles to successful collaboration. In terms of moving to the next phase of the project, partners identified funding as a potential major obstacle to project success.

Despite the collaborative partners’ identification of some obstacles that require attention in the coming months, the SSI has proven to be capable of taking on the challenge of building key relationships with the pilot district leadership and staff, while carrying out an intensive needs assessment.

Needs Assessment Protocol and Tools

This SSI developed a Needs Assessment Protocol to measure the existence of underlying causes of conflict and hate incidents in schools. The protocol is a three-part process for collecting and examining both quantitative and qualitative data. The first part involves examining existing data maintained by each pilot district. The second part involves generating new data through formal surveys, focus groups and interviews. The third component will be an action plan for each district based on its needs assessments. At the time of this writing, these action plans are being developed.

Part 1: Existing Data

Collecting Existing Data and Information

In the first part of the needs assessment protocol, the SSI teams worked with districts to gather documents and statistical data about each of the district’s schools; staff and students; and policies, practices, programs, curricula, and activities. The teams sought to gather three school years of data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and gender. Data collected included:

- Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) standardized testing results
- School safety and discipline reports
- Civil rights and bullying complaints reports and police interventions
- Attendance, promotion and retention rates
- English language learner, special education, and Advanced Placement reports
- District mobility reports
- Racial, ethnic, and gender composition of staff
- Student participation and leadership in clubs and organizations
- Policies, protocols, and organizational practices on responding to bullying, harassment, and hate crimes
- District professional development and instructional plans
- District improvement plans
- Prevention-based activities, practices, programs, and curricula
- Collaboration with community organizations

Using Existing Data and Information

The needs assessment teams used existing data, such as school data about student discipline and police reports of responses to school-based incidents, in order to learn more about the nature and rates of bullying, harassment, and hate crimes and about how schools responded. The teams used information about the inclusion of diverse students in advanced placement classes and participation in student leadership organizations, clubs, and activities to make an initial assessment of how diverse students are integrated into enrichment activities that can lead to higher academic achievement and meaningful participation in a range of social opportunities. The needs assessment teams used information about existing prevention programs and collaborations with community organizations to gain a better understanding about how the district currently uses available resources. The teams also reviewed district professional development and school improvement plans to identify areas where staff could benefit from additional training programs. By examining current policies and practices, the needs assessment team has been able to work with pilot districts to adapt the AGO’s Sample Civil Rights Policy designed to promote a safe school climate.

Obstacles to Collecting Existing Data and Information

A major obstacle turned out to be the difficulty of getting the districts’ computerized student management systems to produce reports containing student and staff data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and gender. This was a particular problem with discipline data needed to understand aggressor and victim patterns in bias-related behaviors. When disaggregated data did exist in a computerized system, it often was not maintained in a format that could be reported districtwide.

In general, because data and information were often not available in a computerized or centralized system, district team members gathered information by hand, a labor intensive undertaking in a school-based environment where members had a range of other day-to-day activities and responsibilities. To meet the reality of staff time constraints, the needs assessment team reduced the complexity of initially requested data.

Part 2: Generating New Data

In part two of the needs assessment, teams worked with the districts to generate information about the current state of school climate and culture, explore underlying causes of problems, and gather recommendations for improvement. Activities included conducting surveys for students and staff, focus groups with staff, students, parents and community leaders, and interviews with key school and community leaders.

Student and Staff Surveys

Led by a representative of the AGO, a sub-group of the SSI team reviewed other surveys for measuring school safety and civil rights in schools. In collaboration with staff at the Student Assessment, Research and Evaluation Office (SAREO) at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, the survey design group produced student and staff surveys designed to:

- Identify detailed demographic information about students, staff and schools
- Gather information concerning participant experiences as a victim or observer of bullying, harassment, or hate crimes
- Measure the nature and scope of bullying, harassment, and hate crimes in schools
- Assess perceptions of safety from bullying, harassment, and physical violence
- Determine the level of interaction among diverse students
- Identify how students and adults respond to bullying, harassment and hate crimes.

The survey design group developed the staff surveys based on the questions posed in the student surveys. Some sample questions are below:

Sample from student survey: Please mark the response that best describes how often you have personally experienced each of the following behaviors during the current school year. Indicate if the behavior occurred “daily,” “a few times per week,” “a few times per month,” “a few times this school year,” “never,” or “don’t know.”

1. Students making jokes about you, teasing you, or using negative words because of your racial or ethnic background
2. Students physically harassing, threatening or frightening you because of your racial or ethnic background
3. Students making jokes about you, teasing you, or using negative words because of your religion
4. Students physically harassing, threatening or frightening you because of your religion
5. Students bullying you because of your clothes, weight, lack of athletic ability, physical appearance or where you live

Sample from staff survey: Please mark the response that best describes how completely you personally understand each of the following. Indicate “understand completely,” “understand somewhat,” “do not understand.”

1. How to report or complain to school staff if you are a victim of harassment, bullying, or a hate crime
2. How to report or complain to school staff if you see or become aware of harassment, bullying, or a hate crime
3. That bullying and harassment are against school policy
4. The possible discipline for teachers or staff taking part in harassment, bullying, or hate crimes
5. The possible discipline for students taking part in harassment, bullying or hate crimes
6. That some forms of harassment may be crimes

While the University of Massachusetts reviewed the survey data, the needs assessment team moved on to conducting focus groups and interviews, a massive scheduling and logistical challenge.

Focus Groups

The needs assessment team designed focus groups to gather qualitative data about student, staff, and community perceptions of school climate and culture, root causes of climate problems, and recommendations for new approaches and solutions. The needs assessment team developed a template for organizing and conducting focus groups, developed a list of model questions, and trained a cadre of facilitators to conduct the focus groups. Assisted by additional trained volunteers from the AGO and the MADOE, the needs assessment teams successfully facilitated more than 70 focus groups in the three pilot districts in a three-week time period.

The focus groups were designed and conducted according to variables in the school community: race and ethnicity as primary variables, along with gender and disability as secondary variables for student groups. Other variables included school community membership such as students (by grade levels), teachers, professional staff (guidance counselors, school adjustment counselors, school nurses, etc.), support staff, parents, and community members.

For the students, the facilitators conducted separate general focus groups with students at the high school, middle school, and elementary school levels; the youngest participants were fifth grade students. The facilitators also met with members of Gay-Straight Alliances in each district to gather information about the experiences of gay and lesbian students related to issues of harassment, bullying, and hate crime.

As with the surveys, the focus group design team developed a series of parallel questions for all focus groups that explored such areas as

- Adult support of students
- Existence of groups and cliques in schools and how they interact
- Experiences and observations of bullying, harassment, hate, hazing, and sexual harassment
- How students and adults respond to incidents of bullying, harassment, and hate
- Perceptions of discipline
- Recommendations for what all segments of the community could do to improve school safety and climate.

Sample student focus group questions

1. How do adults show you that they want you to do well in school?
2. What are the different groups or cliques at this school? How do they get along or fail to get along? How do kids fit in or fail to fit in? Do you hang out with different groups?

Sample staff focus group questions

1. How would you characterize the climate of your school?
2. How unified are staff and administrators in developing and carrying out policies, procedures, norms for behavior, curriculum priorities, and direction/mission of the school?

Sample parent and community focus group questions

1. What are the different groups in the community? How do they get along or fail to get along?
2. Which classroom practices, programs, or activities in which your child has participated at school have helped him or her to appreciate differences and get along better with other students? How important is this to you as a parent?

Interviews

In addition to surveys and focus groups, a small group of team members conducted interviews with key school and community leaders. Included in interview subjects were high-level school administrators and school committee members; teachers’ union representatives; police chiefs and school resource officers; representatives of social services agencies; and political, religious and business leaders.

Interview questions

1. Do school and district leaders, as well as community, political, and religious leaders, effectively communicate to the school and broader community the value of diversity, commitment to equality and fairness, and wrongfulness of discrimination and exclusion?
2. What effect do you think the change in demographics and other changes in the community have had on students, staff, the school district, and the community?

The focus groups and interviews often confirmed observations noted in site visits, project meetings, and interactions with school administrators. In some instances, the focus groups and interviews provided invaluable information that caused the needs assessment teams to challenge initial impressions we had heard from the district. For example, in one district the parent focus groups indicated a significantly higher level of parent support for changing school climate than administrators had perceived and communicated to us. In other instances, the focus groups helped identify previously unknown sources of support. For example, in one community, representatives of the faith community volunteered to serve as a bridge between the schools and parents with limited English language and skills. Student focus groups in all three pilot districts provided the needs assessment team with rich information on their perceptions of how inconsistencies in discipline affected them on a daily basis.

Interviews provided insight into organizational strengths and challenges. When provided with the assurance of confidentiality, interviewees at all district levels, from teachers to school committee members, were willing to share their sincere wish for significant change and their hope that the SSI project would be able to be the catalyst.

Part 3: Moving from Needs Assessment to Action Planning

Although the pilot districts differ in their demographics, staffing, and funding levels, their core challenges revealed by the needs assessment are similar to those challenges the AGO and its partners have commonly encountered when working with schools across Massachusetts. As mentioned earlier, these core challenges include the following:

1. The need for a discipline approach that includes
 - A shared philosophy of discipline that clearly communicates and reinforces expectations of acceptable behavior through positive incentives along with negative consequences
 - The capacity to monitor trends in how discipline is administered to diverse groups of students
 - Resources for alternative education programs
2. Policies and procedures for effectively recognizing and responding to bullying, harassment and hate crimes, including
 - Adopting the AGO Sample Civil Rights Policy
 - Training for administrators, staff and students
 - Creating school and community-wide awareness of the need to report and intervene to prevent bullying, harassment and hate crimes

3. Comprehensive, K-12 prevention approaches that foster tolerance and appreciation for diversity, including

- Curricular programs, such as those funded under the Safe and Drug Free Schools program
- Integrating multicultural themes into district curricula
- Activities that engage students and school community members

Looking Toward the Second Year of the SSI

As this paper is being submitted, the SSI technical assistance team is assisting the districts as they set priorities for their immediate needs and develop action plans for the short-term tasks that they will complete by December 31. All of the action plans the districts have drafted include action items directly related to the core challenges noted above. During the summer months, the technical assistance team will support the districts as they work to further evaluate data generated by the needs assessment process, develop longer-term goals, and design and implement action steps for changing school climate in the 2006–2007 school year.

Recognizing that the success of the pilot districts is dependent on the effectiveness of the SSI collaboration, members will work to strengthen core elements of effective collaboration, including recruiting additional expertise to meet the needs of the pilot districts, developing a strategy for managing a larger group of collaborators, identifying new ways to facilitate communication among partners, and determining benchmarks by which the collaboration will measure its success at the end of the second year of the project.

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