Research and Resources for Equitable and Safe Schools
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The Center for Disease Control states: "Violence is a serious public health problem. From infants to the elderly, it affects people in all stages of life. Many more survive violence and suffer physical, mental, and or emotional health problems throughout the rest of their lives. They articulate their approach to prevention in a document entitled "The Social-Ecological Model: A Framework for Violence Prevention." The model identifies four levels of relations that address factors that put people at risk for or protect them from experiencing or perpetrating violence: Individual, Relationship, Community, and Societal.

It is critical that we discuss the role of schools in preventing violence. This piece aims to provide complementary research and resources that explicitly address the school setting and align to the four levels identified by the CDC's model.

Individual Level:

Identifies biological and personal history factors; such as age, education, income, substance use, or history of abuse, that increase the likelihood of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence.

Extensive research has shown that LGBTQ students are disproportionately targeted for bullying, harassment and assault in schools.

GLSEN's report on the 2017 National School Climate Survey is the most comprehensive and timely resource on how LGBTQ students experience the school environment. It should be noted, however, that "the final sample consisted of a total of 23,001 students between the ages of 13 and 21." The report does not include data on students in elementary or early middle school. The statistics below are taken from the report to provide a snapshot of the degree to which LGBTQ students are disproportionately victimized.

- 70.1% of LGBTQ students experienced verbal harssament at school within the past year based on sexual orientation.
- 28.9% were physically harassed (e.g. pushed or shoved) in the past year based on their sexual orientation.
- 59.5% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 44.6% because of their gender expression, and 35% because of their gender identity.
- 34.8% of LGBTQ students missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, 10.5% missed four or more days in the past month.
- 55.3% of LGBTQ students who were assaulted or harassed in school did not report the incident to school staff, most commonly because they doubted that effective intervention would occur or feared the situation could become worse if reported.
- 60.4% of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did not nothing in response or told the student to ignore it.

These statistics make it clear that our LGBTQ students do not feel safe at schools and raise legitimate concerns about the degree to which efforts to promote positive school climate are inclusive and supportive of students who do not adhere to heteronormative binaries. Fortunately, GLSEN also provides extensive resources for educators to help them create more equitable and safe environments for LGBTQ students:

- Ready, Set, Respect! Elementary Toolkit, a resource developed in collaboration with the National Association of Elementary Principals to teach inclusivity and tolerance: "The lessons focus on name-calling, bullying and bias, LGBT-inclusive family diversity and gender roles and diversity and are designed to be used as either standalone lessons or as part of a school-wide anti-bias or bullying prevention program."

- LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum Guide for Educators, a framework that helps educators develop LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum in order to "promote safer school environments.
- "Working with LGBT Students of Color: A Guide for Educators provides a helpful framework to help educators support students who may be experiencing intersecting discrimination due to multiple factors by "affirming their complex identities."

Relationship Level:

Examines close relationships that may increase the risk of experiencing violence as a victim or perpetrator. A person's closest social circle - peers, partners and family members - influences their behavior and contributes to their range of experience.

NYSED's "Social Emotional Learning: A Guide to Systemic Whole School Implementation" adopted CASEL's Five Core Social Emotional Competencies framework as a cornerstone of its efforts to integrate SEL into schools' broader educational mission. It also states "SEL is crucial to advancing our work toward educational equity." The guidance continues: "Nurturing SEL competencies in both adults and young people will allow them to better recognize and manage biases, appreciate diversity, develop rich relationships with diverse individuals and groups, and make responsible, ethical decisions."

CASEL defines relationship skills as "The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed." Clear communication, active listening, and constructive conflict resolution are essential characteristics of both educators and students who wish to foster healthy school climate.

Mentoring programs are one means of helping students develop positive relationships and feelings of connectedness to their school community. Locally, programs such as Capital Region Sponsor-a-Scholar and Schenectady's My Brother's Keeper initiative pair students with mentors who empower them to navigate challenges and grow academically.

Effects of a School-Based Mentoring Program on School Behavior and Measures of Adolescent Connectedness, a 2013 article published in the School Community Journal aimed to "examine the impact of participation in a School-Based Mentoring Program (SBMP) on behavioral and social outcomes for sixth through tenth grade students." Authors Janet Gordon, Jayne Downey, and Art Bangert found: "Analyses revealed that compared to control students, SBMP participants had significantly fewer unexcused absences (with moderate effect size) and discipline referrals (with large effect size) and reported significantly higher scores on four measures of connectedness (with moderate to negligible effect sizes). First year participants also reported significantly higher scores on one measure of connectedness (with a large effect size)."

It should also be noted that cultivating relationships with students is a cornerstone of culturally responsive-sustaining education and is highlighted in NYSED's CR-S framework in the "Welcoming and Affirming Environment" section.

Community Level:

Explores the settings, such as schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods in which social relationships occur and seeks to identify the characteristics of these settings that are associated with becoming victims or perpetrators of violence.

Schools simultaneously exist within the communities and neighborhoods they serve and constitute communities unto themselves. Students' and community members' diverse identities, cultures, beliefs and practices profoundly mediate the

experience of schooling. In The Racial School Climate Gap: Within-School Disparities in Students' Experiences of Safety, Support, and Connectedness authors Voight, Hanson, O'Malley and Adekanye provide data substantiating the fact that Black and Hispanic students have different perceptions of climate within the same setting. They found "analyses showed that, for both racial comparisons and for most school climate dimensions, significant gaps existed within schools." Additionally: "the results showed an overall statewide gap in experiences of safety and connectedness and adult-student relationships between Black and White students and suggested that these overall gaps were due more to disparities within schools."

Their analysis went on to consider whether school climate disparities influenced academic achievement. The researchers found "holding constant overall academic performance, schools with larger Black-white achievement gaps had larger gaps in perceived safety and connectedness" and ""the same general findings, with lesser magnitudes, were evident for Hispanic-white disparities."

These findings and the GLSEN data above demonstrate the difficulty of measuring school climate and suggest that educators looking to utilize school climate surveys should disaggregate data by race, gender identity, socio-economic status, and disability to ensure that school climate initiatives are inclusive of and responsive to all students.

Equity audits are an excellent tool to ensure that student and community needs are identified and prioritized. Terrance Green's "Community-Based Equity Audits: A Practical Approach for Educational Leaders to Support Equitable Community-School Improvements" provides a clear framework and process for recognizing and leveraging community assets and empowering students, families and community leaders to develop equitable programs, partnerships and supports to help students thrive.

Societal Level:

Looks at broad societal factors, such as health, economic, educational and social policies, that help create a climate in which violence is encouraged or inhibited and help to maintain economic or social inequalities between groups in society.

Thinkers as politically divergent as Thomas Jefferson, John Dewey, Pierre Bordieu, and George Counts ponder the question of the relationship between schools and society. Jefferson himself stated "the cornerstone of democracy rests on the foundation of an educated electorate." If schools are to have any meaningful role in addressing society's structural and systemic problems, then students must be empowered to develop critical thinking, agency and self determination.

NYS Board of Regents' guidelines for Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education state that educators should "cultivate students' critical thinking" and "empower students to be agents of social change." In order for this to be achieved, schools must be safe spaces for all students. The document addresses this by providing best practices for creating a welcoming and affirming environment. It suggests that teachers "build rapport and develop positive relationships with students and their families, by learning about their interests and inviting them to share their opinions and concerns." They should also "create opportunities to allow different groups and ideas to become part of the fabric of the school community by organizing proactive-community building circles and activities that promote positive relationships among individuals from diverse backgrounds."

Incorporating these practices into classroom and school activities will promote feelings of safety, connectedness, belonging and self-determination, laying the ground for students to become "agents of social change" capable of tackling intractable social problems.