Moving the needle on bullying and educational outcomes

by Sebastián Kiguel

This research helps school communities and policymakers better understand the cost of bullying and what type of school policies and practices can help to address it. Specifically, it answers:

1. To what extent do some high schools **reduce the fear of bullying** relative to others?
2. What is the **effect of attending a high school that reduces the fear of bullying** on students' longer-term educational outcomes?
3. What **school-level policies and practices** predict a reduction in the fear of bullying?

Findings

1. Some high schools in Chicago reduced the fear of bullying relative to students' previous experiences, while others increased it. School differences were especially pronounced for students with a history of victimization.[1]
   - Students who reported fearing bullying "all the time" in eighth grade were 7 percentage points less likely to report fearing any type of bullying in ninth grade if their school was in the 85th percentile[2] in bullying reduction vs. the 15th percentile.
2. Students' graduation rates were also higher if they attended a school that reduced the fear of bullying.
   - Students who attended a school at the 85th percentile of bullying reduction graduated high school at rates that were 4 percentage points higher vs. the 15th percentile.
3. The effects on victimization and educational attainment were more pronounced among students who feared bullying in the past.
   - Students who were afraid of bullying "all the time" in eighth grade had graduation rates that were 8 percentage points higher at schools at the 85th percentile in bullying reduction vs. schools at the 15th percentile.
4. Schools that scored higher on the *5Essentials* Survey, and especially schools with more Supportive Environments, were more likely to reduce students' fear of bullying.
   - Schools' *5Essentials* Survey results explained 36% of the differences across schools in their effects on bullying.
     - This was driven by Supportive Environment, which on its own explained 35% of the variation.
   - And improvements in Supportive Environment over time predicted reductions in students' fear of bullying.
   - Supportive Environment is defined based on students' and teachers' reports on six measures, shown in Table 1 on p2.

Table 1. Measures in the Supportive Environment essential in the *5Essentials* Survey

Measures	Examples
Peer support for academic work	Their peers try hard to get good grades and feel it is important to pay attention in class.
Academic personalism (teacher support)	Their teacher is willing to give extra help on schoolwork and notices if they have trouble learning something.
Safety	They feel safe in school hallways and traveling between home and school.
Student-teacher trust	They feel safe and comfortable with their teachers and their teachers treat them with respect.
School-wide future orientation	Teachers at their school make sure all students are planning for life after graduation and teachers work hard to make sure that students stay in school.
Expectations for post-secondary education	The curriculum at their school is focused on helping students get ready for college and teachers feel it is a part of their job to prepare students to succeed in college.

Policy & practice takeaways

- Policymakers can identify schools that increase or reduce the fear of bullying and extend resources accordingly.
- School teams in Illinois can dig into their annual *5Essentials* Survey data to uncover which aspects of their school environment are strengths on which to build, and which aspects would benefit from additional attention and improvement to reduce and prevent bullying and help their students feel safer.

Data & methods
The study used administrative data from 78,951 first-time ninth-graders in Chicago Public Schools from school years 2013–14 to 2016–17, including student enrollment, attendance, disciplinary incidents, grade progression, dropouts and graduation, and *5Essentials* Survey data, including supplemental measures

Note: This study used survey measures about whether students feared bullying, rather than whether they were actually bullied. While these two constructs are related, share correlates, and similarly predict outcomes, this cannot measure actual incidents of bullying.

Study details
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About the author
Sebastián Kiguel is a research associate at Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC) at the Discovery Partners Institute. Sebastián earned his PhD in Human Development and Social Policy from Northwestern University. His research focuses on bullying, peer relations, and the social experience of schooling more broadly. He was awarded the National Academy of Education/Spencer Dissertation Fellowship in 2021.

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[1] Students who reported fearing bullying "most of the time" or "all of the time" in eighth grade are classified as having a history of victimization.
[2] Calculated as one standard deviation above the mean.