

Reach victims using confidential, not anonymous, surveys

While students who misbehave or struggle academically may already be on a school counselor's radar, there's a group of troubled students who are harder to spot.

Key points

- Reach students who normally wouldn't seek counseling.
- Identify specific safety concerns.
- Create actionable data for administrators. ■

Al Larson, a research and evaluation specialist with Meriden (Conn.) Public Schools, estimates there are 5 to 10 percent of students who believe they are being bullied in school, but who never speak up. That's one reason to use school climate surveys;

they give students a non-threatening way to clue administrators in on general safety issues or problems with other students, Larson said. Typically, these surveys allow students to report concerns anonymously, with the hope that students would be more honest since they aren't connected to their responses. However, when a student who reports feeling bullied writes in the survey, "Sometimes I want to die and kill myself the next day... please help me," as one student wrote in a school climate survey in Meriden Public Schools, anonymity may interfere with helping students in need of counseling, Larson said.

Fortunately, the student in the above example was in a pilot program that Meriden Public Schools conducted using a non-anonymous school climate survey. Counselors were able to meet the student the same day, Larson said.

Twice a year students are given the opportunity to complete a confidential school climate survey, he said. Confidential means that if a student reports a dangerous situation or feeling bullied "very often" or "always," their response triggers an email to the school's psychologist or counselor.

"It's a developmentally appropriate method for reaching these students before they become disengaged," Larson said.

By using confidential rather than anonymous school climate surveys, schools can identify specific students in need of counseling and address safety issues.

Larson explains how schools can implement confidential school climate surveys:

■ **Explain confidentiality agreement.** Inform students that their responses are confidential, unless they indicate danger. Meriden Public Schools' survey states: "All of your answers are confidential. That means we

cannot share your answers with anyone, unless you tell us about danger or someone is going to be hurt. We must keep all students safe."

■ **Allow practitioners to provide individualized counseling.** A school counselor may receive a trigger email if, in response to a question like, "Tell us how often you get hit or threatened," a student selects "very often" or "always." Once the school counselor receives the trigger email, he decides how he wants to address the student, Larson said. "This gives administrators actionable data, but it's up to the school counselor on how they want to use it. They can start to develop a relationship and build trust with that student," he said.

In some instances a counselor might wait and meet the student at a later time without mentioning the survey. The type of response depends on the school psychologist and their training, Larson said. "It's meant to be a supplementary tool that can be used with other character education programs or interventions," he said.

■ **Prepare for responses.** Be prepared to schedule a block of time for meeting with students after the survey, said Jennifer Batchelder, a social worker at Washington Middle School in Meriden Public Schools. Determine which students you need to meet with first, depending on the type of message and whether you know the student already, she said. Schedule the surveys after evaluations or exams so that counselors have time to respond to students without interrupting studies, said Michelle Dwyer Dupree, school psychologist at Platt High School. Batchelder said she asks an office secretary to call the students one at a time to her office to avoid other students finding out where they're going and why. She said many students have already resolved the issue that they mentioned in the survey, some are students who she already works with, and a few are students who were struggling with a problem she didn't know about. "I have met kids who I wouldn't have known otherwise," Batchelder said.

■ **Address specific concerns.** Having the ability to connect the survey to the students makes it possible to address the students' concerns directly, Larson said. In one survey, multiple students reported feeling unsafe on their way to and from school. When the school investigated, they found that the students' bus driver was driving too fast, Larson said. The driver was changed.

"We encourage kids to tell an adult if something's not right or they're being bullied, but research shows that they rarely do," Larson said. He said non-anonymous climate surveys can give troubled students another way of reaching help.

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