



Catherine Bradshaw

In May 2017 the journal Pediatrics released new research, which received wide attention, showing that school bullying has declined in the past 10 years. Over the 10-year study period, being bullied, being a bully, and witnessing bullying became less common. There were also decreases in the rates of student reports of being pushed, threatened, and cyberbullied.



Trish Shaffer

We recently spoke with the senior author and lead investigator of that study, Catherine Bradshaw, a professor of education at the University of Virginia and a CASEL board member, and Trish Shaffer, Coordinator for Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and Social and Emotional Learning for the Washoe County (Nev.) School District, which has done extensive work creating positive school climates and other bullying-prevention strategies. The Washoe County district is part of CASEL's [Collaborating Districts Initiative](#).

What were the major takeaways of your research?

Bradshaw: A unique aspect is that this was not a typical research study. It reflects a long partnership with the Maryland State Department of Education and several school districts, one in particular. We started in 2004. Around that time, the state had passed a law on bullying, and several districts didn't want a knee-jerk reaction, but rather wanted to better understand how bullying relates to SEL, PBIS, climate, and related issues.

Over 10 years we did extensive data collection in partnership with the state and several school systems using online anonymous and voluntary surveys to collect data from students, parents, and school staff. We also built into the system a series of reports, so that the school and district leadership could review the data in real time and make data-informed decisions regarding positive behavior support, SEL, and bullying prevention.

When our research team started to analyze the data over multiple years, we noticed some important trends. It appeared that things were getting better for many of the schools across the decade-long data collection effort. Specifically, 10 of the 13 indicators moved in a positive direction. Despite caveats about the research—such as this was census research like the CDC and U.S. Education Department do, but not randomized trials—these findings gave us some hope and optimism. Schools are not just admitting the problem but doing something about it.

What are they doing?

Bradshaw: They're raising awareness about why this is important and why they need to do something about it. They're collecting and analyzing data, and using those data to make programmatic decisions about professional development and programming for students. And they're providing a wide range of coaching and positive behavior support. Some of the support focuses on SEL. For instance, a middle school in one district has developed 40 SEL lessons using teacher-created content.

What kinds of things is Washoe County doing? And what impact are you seeing?

Shaffer: We've been implementing PBIS for about a decade, and all schools have been trained. In March 2016 we completed training all 102 schools in SEL, using a train-the-trainer model. The three-day training focused on implementing SEL schoolwide through use of the district's SEL standards and other intentional strategies to strengthen climate and culture, build relationships, integrate SEL into academic lessons, and use an evidence-based curriculum.

We're already seeing some positive outcomes. Students who report higher social-emotional (SE) competencies score significantly higher in reading and math on Smarter Balanced assessment, even when we control for factors known to predict student reading and math achievement—for example, previous year's test scores, gender, ELL, income, and IEP status. Students who report higher SE competencies also have higher rates of attendance and are more likely to be on track to graduate than peers who rate themselves lower.

Schools with staff who report higher self-confidence in teaching SEL have students who score significantly higher in competencies such as self-management of goals and school work compared to schools that had low confidence to implement SEL, even after controlling for those other factors.

And individual schools are showing significant decreases in disciplinary referrals and events.

On bullying specifically, the data are hard to track longitudinally because of changes in data requirements over the years. But anecdotally we hear from student focus groups where SEL is implemented well, "Bullying just isn't allowed in our school."

How are positive behavior support (PBS) and SEL connected?

Bradshaw: I think the similarities and connections are becoming more salient. There are some theoretical and philosophical differences between the two models, but I think they can be complementary. For example, PBS takes a more behaviorist approach and is focused a bit more on strategies teachers and adults can use to set clear expectations and teach and reinforce those good behaviors across all school settings. SEL is more of a student competency-based approach. At the end of the day, if you promote the five SEL competencies, you're likely to change behavior, too.

PBS is like the operating system on your computer. It provides the structure and organization for delivering programs and practices. But you still need structured content like SEL. This is one way in which I think the two models are becoming more connected, as there is growing awareness of the importance of the broader implementation infrastructure needed to support SEL implementation.

Shaffer: I like Catherine’s analogy about the operating system. PBS allows you to look at student needs in efficient ways. Effective, organized PBS systems help create a climate for students to learn and apply the social-emotional competencies in their environment.

Many have expressed concern about the current climate, with reports of increased bullying since last year’s election. What are you seeing?

Bradshaw: Our data in the study goes only through 2014. Though we saw some improvements, we can’t check this off the list. After all, 20% of students still reported concerns about safety. I’m troubled by recent events in the media. We’ve heard lots of reports, pre- and post-election, that the tenor and tone of schools have changed. Anecdotally, we’re hearing that suspension rates were higher this past school year.

It’s hard to identify an exact cause. But issues related to school climate appear to be more challenging for both kids and adults. And there’s lots of confusion about how to address the issues in schools related to race, immigration, transgender, and LGBT students—yet many of these issues are also relevant to the issue of bullying. School staff are uncertain whether they should talk about these issues with students or try to avoid them. We are currently reviewing additional data on bullying and school climate collected over the past few years [since the 2014 end date of the published study] and should have a report later this summer, which will help us better understand if the positive trends were sustained or if things have shifted.

What are you seeing in Washoe County? And how are you responding?

Shaffer: We’re seeing increases in self-reported social-emotional competence from students. We’re hearing from teachers the need to implement SEL and to teach how to build relationships and express empathy. I hope the recent events demonstrate the need to systematically teach SEL, using standards and curriculum, in classrooms every day.

I remember on the Today Show last year experts were advising not to discuss politics at Thanksgiving because it might cause a lasting rift in the family. I thought, that’s wrong. I really want to teach kids to be able to have a respectful dialogue, engage, and talk about problems. I don’t want to not talk to my Dad about something we don’t agree on because I’m fearful he might not ever speak to me again.

Stepping back, what do you see as major challenges for research?

Bradshaw: We need to understand more about sustainability. We can see the impact when you have high levels of implementation, with lots of coaching and support for two or three years. But what happens when issues like PBS and SEL slide off the radar and people start saying, “We used to do that but now we’re doing something new?” How do these approaches become embedded into the school’s work, which is what you really want to happen?

We want to ensure that these approaches become embedded into the school’s work and culture, but that’s hard to do with some many competing priorities and demands on their time, attention, and funding. In implementing school-based SEL approaches, it’s often less about *which program* educators are using but *how well* they’re doing it.

I also worry about new models that catch on before there’s lots of evidence that they work. For instance, I’m optimistic about restorative practices, but we need to better understand what the model really is and what supports are needed. Does the approach work? For whom? Under what conditions? This means that researchers need to keep up with the needs of the field. We need to be nimble and responsive to emerging trends in school-based programming and do the necessary research to document impacts.

How is Washoe County using data such as Catherine’s and your own data to improve?

Shaffer: That’s a big part of my job, looking for effective approaches and making sure people in our buildings know about the latest research and best practices. That’s the role of a strong central office, to constantly watch and learn. Plus, we have an incredibly strong office of accountability, research, and evaluation that provides us with a tremendous amount of data and regularly conducts in-depth evaluations of our work and the outcomes we’re seeing. We use those data to see what is working well and identify what supports or next steps are needed. Their work is invaluable to us as a district.

Bradshaw: Research papers are helpful, but local exemplars and storytelling are more compelling for many stakeholders and policymakers. We need a research-based approach, but we also need district and school leaders to discuss the transformative impacts these programs are having on kids and first-hand experiences and successes.

More generally, what advice would you give to other districts, given Washoe County’s leadership on SEL?

Shaffer: Look at social-emotional competence as something for everyone. It’s not something to do for or to the kids but with the kids. Talk about SE competencies for adults, too. We used a whole system approach. We first adopted standards that we used for professional development. We taught strategies to build connections and relationships and modeled that in all our meetings and professional learning. When adults experience it themselves, they can model it and are more likely to translate

the work to schools and classrooms. We also wrote SEL into our strategic plan and rewrote job descriptions to support its implementation.

We focused on SEL standards and using them to strengthen school climate and culture, also how to integrate them into academic content first, the adopted SEL curriculum last. That way teachers could help us choose something that supported what they already were doing. SEL is much more than a binder that sits on the shelf and is pulled off for a 20-minute lesson. It's in everything educators do all day, every day.

When SEL is done well in a school, it is evident in how the building is set up, how adults interact with each other and with students, and how teachers open and close lessons. Ensuring that educators understand SEL is much more than a “program” has made a big difference for us.

RESOURCES

From Washoe County

- [Overview](#) of the district's efforts including links to its standards and an extensive set of data.
- Pine Middle School. [Profile](#) of one of the district's Beacon Schools, which are fully integrating SEL.
- [Links](#) to various resources. From an *Education Week* article about Washoe County's work to a case study of how the district is financially sustaining SEL.
- [Article](#) on how the district made sure it was assessing it accurately, given that reporting requirements have changed annually. Includes a discussion on how to improve the accuracy of self-reports by students.

From Catherine Bradshaw

- [Pediatrics](#). May 2017, research on bullying.
- [The Integration of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and Social and Emotional Learning](#). A chapter in the 2013 Handbook of School Mental Health.
- Committee for Children. Recent [blog overview](#) and update on bullying.

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