



Implementation of Antibullying Legislation in Iowa Schools: A Qualitative Examination of School Administrators' Perceived Barriers and Facilitators

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ABSTRACT

Adolescent bullying is linked to numerous adverse psychosocial effects that can persist into adulthood. In response to this problem, in 2007 Iowa adopted an antibullying statute requiring all school districts to adopt an antibullying policy. From 2013–2014, 47 semistructured interviews were conducted with school and district administrators in Iowa. Administrators identified many policy implementation challenges including limited funding and staff, and difficulties selecting prevention programs, applying the law's bullying definition in investigations, and understanding the school's jurisdiction for policy enforcement. Contextual barriers to implementation (e.g., media portrayals of bullying and parental attitudes) also emerged. This is the first study to use the interactive systems framework to examine antibullying law implementation, highlighting the importance of coordination among research translators, supportive organizations, and on-the-ground implementers.

KEYWORDS

Adolescent health; bullying prevention and control; implementation; legislation; qualitative methods

Introduction

Bullying is a serious public health concern impacting approximately 20%–50% of children in Grades 6 through 12 each year in the United States (Kann et al., 2014; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). In a national survey of students in Grades 6 through 10, approximately 54% reported involvement (bullying others, being bullied, or both) in verbal bullying, 21% in physical bullying, and 14% in electronic bullying, highlighting the pervasiveness of this behavior (Wang et al., 2009).

Bullying has been defined as repeated peer-on-peer aggressive behavior with the intention of inflicting harm, and is characterized by a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014). Bullying behaviors can be physical (e.g., hitting, kicking, damaging/stealing personal property), verbal (e.g., name calling, threats), and relational (e.g., spreading rumors, exclusion), and can be enacted face-to-face as well as electronically (i.e., cyberbullying) using cell/smart phones, e-mail, and social media or gaming sites. Victims can experience many adverse psychosocial effects, particularly anxiety and depression (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010; Schreier et al., 2009), and self-harm and suicidality (Hay & Meldrum, 2010), which can last into early adulthood (Holt et al., 2014).

In response to this growing public health concern, all 50 U.S. states and three U.S. territories have passed antibullying legislation (HHS, 2015). In 2007, the Iowa legislature required that all school

districts and accredited nonpublic schools implement an antibullying policy in their schools (Iowa Department of Education, 2012; Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011). Each school policy must include a statement that harassment and bullying “in school, on school property, or at any school function or school-sponsored activity” are against state and school policy (Iowa Code §280.28, 2007; Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). Other required components include a definition of harassment and bullying, actions to be taken against those who violate the policy, and procedures for investigating and reporting harassment and bullying (Iowa Department of Education, 2012; Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). These provisions, as detailed in Iowa’s antibullying law, are among the guidelines recommended by the U.S. Department of Education, and found in many state laws. The definition of bullying included in the Iowa law refers to both harassment and bullying as “any electronic, written, verbal or physical act or conduct toward a student” that creates a hostile environment and meets other criteria, including having a detrimental effect on the student’s health, academic performance, or ability to benefit from school services (Iowa Department of Education, 2012). In addition, the law encourages, but does not require, schools to train staff, students, and volunteers on the policy and provide antibullying or antiharassment programs (Iowa Department of Education, 2012). As with most antibullying laws throughout the country, the law does not identify any sources of funding to carrying out such training activities (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011).

Despite widespread adoption of antibullying laws, little is known about how those laws are implemented in schools and districts across the country. A nationwide Government Accountability Office report (2012) elucidated several challenges that selected school districts faced with antibullying law implementation, such as uncertainty in handling bullying incidents that occur outside of school, the need to continuously train students how to distinguish bullying from relational aggression, and limited funding; however, the report did not elaborate on how these barriers interrelate. Knowledge of the interactions and factors that influence implementation is important for understanding the effect that antibullying laws can have on bullying-related outcomes. Furthermore, efforts to improve antibullying legislation depend on an understanding of the mechanisms by which such legislation is carried out in schools. The present study begins to address this gap in the literature by qualitatively examining the perceived barriers and facilitators that a representative sample of school administrators in the state of Iowa faced while implementing the antibullying law in 2013–2014, approximately six years after the law’s provisions were enacted. This study focuses primarily on implementation of the law and its implementers (school administrators), with the interactive systems framework (ISF) as the scaffold for analysis and interpretation (Wandersman et al., 2008).

Methods

Interactive Systems Framework

The ISF, which originated from an attempt to bridge the gap between research and practice in youth violence and child maltreatment prevention, guides understanding of how systems interact when developing, testing and adopting innovations (Saul et al., 2008; Wandersman et al., 2008). To our knowledge, it has not been applied to school bullying policy previously; however, the ISF has been applied to understanding, improving, and evaluating implementation of evidence-based prevention and social interventions in schools, and has highlighted the importance of support for prevention delivery, including building capacity within the Prevention Delivery System (Duffy et al., 2012; Flaspohler, Meehan, Maras, & Keller, 2012; Halgunseth et al., 2012; Rhoades, Bumbarger, & Moore, 2012; Smythe-Leistico et al., 2012). In the ISF, innovations are defined as “new knowledge or information that could be useful to prevention efforts in the field” and include “programs, policies, processes and principles” (Saul et al., 2008). In the present study, the innovation of interest is Iowa’s antibullying law. Three major systems comprise the ISF: (a) the

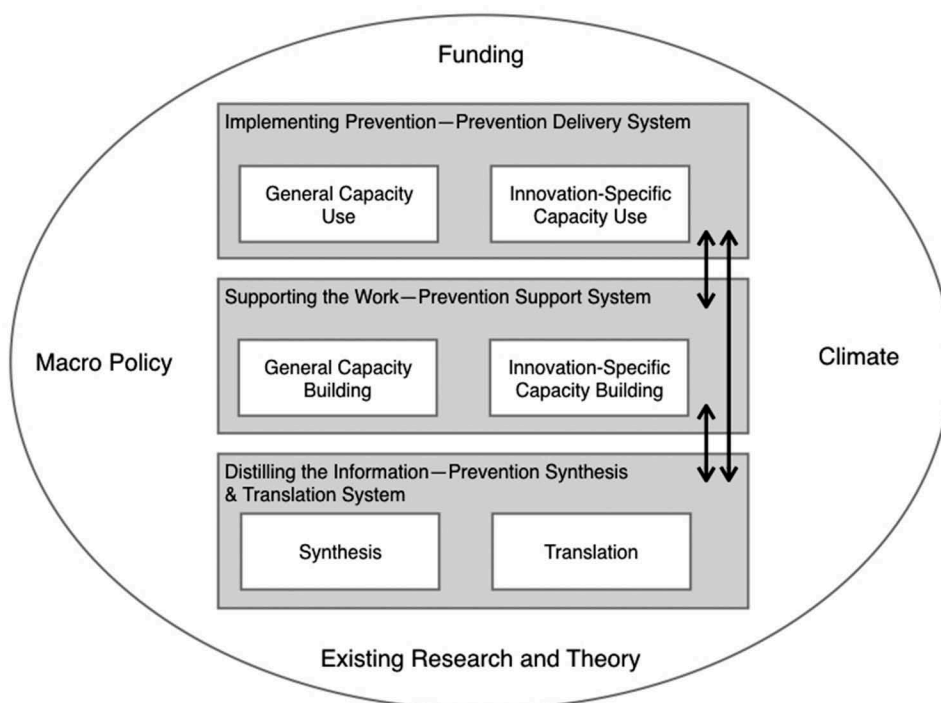


Figure 1. The interactive systems framework for dissemination and implementation. [Reproduced with permission from Wandersman et al., 2008]

prevention synthesis and translation system, (b) the prevention support system, and (c) the prevention delivery system (Figure 1). The prevention synthesis and translation system summarizes and disseminates research about an innovation. The prevention support system provides assistance to those implementing an innovation using technical support and training. The system that implements the innovation is the prevention delivery system. The barriers and facilitators to the prevention delivery system, primarily involving school- and district-level actors, in implementing the antibullying law are the focus of the investigation.

Qualitative interviews

A total of 47 semistructured, qualitative interviews were conducted with public and private school administrators (i.e., principals and district superintendents) across the state of Iowa to capture perceived barriers and facilitators for implementing the antibullying law.

The interviews were conducted from spring 2013 through spring 2014. A two-stage stratified random sampling approach was used in which Iowa schools were stratified by regions (1–5) using a five-region GIS overlay. Within each region, schools were further stratified by rural-urban commuting areas (RUCAs). RUCA codes classify U.S. census tracts using measures of urbanization, daily commuting, and density based on the 2010 census. Within each RUCA code, school districts were randomly assigned a number and contacted in numerical order. The aim was to interview a district-level administrator (i.e., superintendent) from each enrolled school district, in addition to a school-level administrator (i.e., principal or counselor) to create an interview dyad within each region and RUCA, producing a representative sample of Iowa school administrators. Private schools from each region were also invited; in the final sample there were five private school interviews in four of the five regions. Overall, 95 public schools were approached for interviews, and 17 of those schools (and

their district counterparts) completed at least one interview; 72 private schools were approached, and four of those schools (and one diocese administrator) completed an interview.

Interviews ranged in length from approximately 60–90 minutes. The interview included questions regarding administrator demographics, thoughts, beliefs, and experiences with bullying in schools; the school or district's antibullying policy; barriers to implementation and enforcement of the policy; and factors that facilitate implementation and enforcement. The interview guide also prompted for approaches to fostering a school environment that discourages bullying and recommendations for school administrators and policymakers.

A total of 42 interviews were conducted with public school administrators, with 17 complete interview dyads (34 interviews; both district-level and school-level) and 4 incomplete dyads (school-level interview only). Four of the completed dyads have an additional school level interview, due to a recruitment protocol involving contacting several schools within a district simultaneously. Five interviews were conducted with private school administrators, with two complete interview dyads (four interviews were conducted at the school level and one at the district-equivalent level, covering two schools in our sample). Overall, 30 of the interviewees were school-level administrators (i.e., principals, assistant principals, counselors, or site administrators) and 17 were district-level administrators (i.e., superintendents or dean of student services). Participants received \$25 donated in their name to their district or school fund.

Among the public school districts represented in the study, in the 2013–2014 school year, 51.3% of students were male, 39% were classified as non-White, 56.8% were eligible for either reduced price or free lunch, and 10.1% were classified as limited English proficiency students (Iowa Department of Education, 2016).

This research was approved by the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, grant number 70507. Informed consent was obtained verbally from the school and district administrators after being given the opportunity to review an invitation letter containing the elements of consent prior to scheduling the interview. The data from these interviews have already been used to produce a publication on the barriers and facilitators related to cyberbullying prevention in schools (Young, Tully, & Ramirez, 2016).

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Multistage inductive data analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method, a technique informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The first stage of analysis involved open coding of the transcripts over multiple readings by two independent investigators. Open codes were informed by the original research aim of identifying the processes by which Iowa schools implement the statewide antibullying law, the extant literature, and in vivo codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Using an iterative process, the codebook was continuously developed and revised through the subsequent stages of the analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Focused coding was used to build and expand categories by selecting the most useful codes and testing them against the data (Charmaz, 2006). During the focused coding process, a subsample of five transcripts was coded by both of the coding investigators to determine interrater reliability. Weekly coding meetings were held to discuss code development and prevent rater drift. Interrater reliability was calculated using a line-by-line analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) with a score of 0.84, considered a “substantial” interrater reliability value (Landis & Koch, 1977). This stage was followed by axial coding, where codes were collapsed into categories and subcategories so that related categories could be compared to one another to ensure saturation (Saldana, 2009). Lastly, selective coding was used to reassemble the data to identify themes. Coding discrepancies were resolved by consensus.

Once thematic coding was complete, the first author mapped conceptual relationships among the themes. A search of the implementation science literature was used to verify and structure this conceptual mapping, and the ISF was chosen as the organizing framework. The prevention delivery

system of the ISF was used to structure the qualitative themes in this analysis (Wandersman et al., 2008). This system is defined by the activity of implementing an innovation “in the world of practice” (Wandersman et al., 2008, p. 178). In the current analysis, the action of implementing the Iowa antibullying law (the innovation) in the school setting, and the factors affecting implementation, comprise the prevention delivery system and its contextual factors. Most of the interview questions addressed the implementation level; therefore, the prevention synthesis and translation system and the prevention support system of the ISF were not directly addressed in the current investigation.

In the ISF, the prevention delivery system’s ability to implement an innovation depends on the system’s general and innovation-specific capacity (Wandersman et al., 2008). General capacity relates to an organization’s overall functioning, resources, leadership, and connections with other community entities. Innovation-specific capacity entails the ability to gather, interpret, and act upon information about possible innovations and to sustain implementation over time. Here, themes about factors affecting the implementation of the antibullying law at the school level are categorized by level (i.e., individual and organizational) and general or innovation-specific capacity. In the current analysis, the focus was on administrator perspectives on implementation within the school and district; the authors did not code for administrator-specific individual-level factors. Factors affecting implementation from outside of the prevention delivery system are categorized as contextual factors.

Results

The aim of the current analysis was to identify the perceived barriers and facilitators that school and district administrators encountered while implementing an antibullying law. The ISF categories, used in subheadings below, organized the identified implementation factors for analysis (Wandersman et al., 2008).

Individual-level factors

General capacity: teachers too overwhelmed to prioritize antibullying policy implementation

Teachers play a significant role in implementing the antibullying law. The primary theme impacting teachers’ general capacity was that too many demands are placed upon them. When asked about teacher perspectives on the antibullying law, one district administrator commented, “I think teachers ... are so overburdened that ... it’s like another thing that they have to do.” Administrators described a school climate of too many mandates and too little time that affected the staff’s overall capacity to take on new priorities.

Innovation-specific capacity: administrators report staff uncertainty about their role

Teacher and staff attitudes toward antibullying policy implementation within schools varied, according to the administrators. A few administrators described some non-teaching staff as having a “maybe that’s not my job” mentality, not feeling responsible for reporting problem behavior to school officials. Others suggested that teachers are sometimes unsure of their role in enforcing the school’s antibullying policy and what procedure to follow. Once antibullying practices were established, some administrators noted that teacher buy-in increased because they had fewer behavioral problems to address in the classroom: “Our teachers feel it’s important. ... They have a whole lot less to deal with ... when kids know there’s an accountability for their behavior.” Overall, staff reactions to each school’s implementation efforts were mixed.

Organizational-level factors

General capacity: schools have limited time and resources for policy implementation

Administrator concerns about their school or district's general capacity largely centered around staffing, funding, and climate. Several administrators expressed frustration that they could not hire staff specializing in social, psychological, and behavioral intervention. If they had the opportunity to hire such personnel, administrators imagined that they "would really change the behavior of a kid" [district administrator]. Administrators primarily pointed to cuts in mental health funding as the root cause of these staffing limitations.

Capacity in terms of time was also a concern for some. One district administrator encapsulated the issue as, "time is probably the most limited, even more than money, commodity that we've got," so schools have limited ability to incorporate new responsibilities into already stretched workloads. Two school administrators felt that the push toward academic achievement diverted "a lot of [their] resources, energy, and effort" away from the "social, emotional pieces." Limited staffing, funding, and time emerged as inter-connected factors restricting general capacity in schools and districts.

Innovation-specific capacity

Limited funding for implementation. Although funding may be considered a feature of general organizational capacity, several administrators tied the issue of funding to the antibullying law specifically. These administrators faulted the law for not providing funds to schools and districts to carry out its requirements. Specifically, school administrators spoke of the "burden on the schools" to implement the law without financial support:

Do you just have a policy, or do you actually bring in a program for it? Everybody has a policy ... big deal, but if you don't have a way to support it ... it may not get done ... that's a, a failure I think on the part of the legislators. [School administrator]

These administrators viewed funding as the key to implementing the law's recommended activities—training staff, volunteers, and students in the school's antibullying policy and providing bullying prevention programming for students.

Difficulty finding and selecting bullying prevention programs. In addition to difficulty funding bullying prevention programs, administrators had mixed success locating support for finding and implementing such programs. Several praised their local area education agency (AEA) for providing training on prominent bullying prevention programs, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus & Limber, 2010; Sugai & Horner, 2006). Many others expected the state to provide guidance on bullying prevention activities but had difficulty obtaining it: "Well, the information from the state and the AEA ... it would be nice to know what they have available for us to use" [school administrator]. The actual extent of support provided by the AEAs and the state was unclear from the interviews, but comments from administrators suggested that many did not know where to find guidance on bullying prevention programs.

Uncertainty in applying the law's definition of bullying in schools. Many school- and district-level administrators expressed frustration with the definition of bullying in the law. When they confronted suspected bullying in their schools, many found, as did one school administrator, that, "[The definition] seems clear, until you're embedded in a situation and then all of the sudden, like the policy is like ... that doesn't really apply to the situation but the situation sure looks like it's bullying to me." A few administrators were troubled that the definition of bullying in the law, along with the consequences, could apply to young children where "it's developmentally not appropriate to call it bullying" [district administrator]. Overall, there was an undercurrent of uncertainty about how to identify bullying behavior. Although one school administrator found answers to questions about the

bullying definition by contacting the state Department of Education, no other interviewees identified a source of support for applying the law's definition of bullying aside from their colleagues.

Difficulty obtaining information on how to use the state reporting system. Another problematic area of innovation-specific capacity was using the state reporting system for bullying incidents. Many school and district administrators from across the state had a common concern, that the reporting system did not consistently capture the same data across districts. Some districts reported all suspected bullying cases, whereas others reported only those that were founded. Those who erred toward more reporting sometimes had concerns about the consequences for their district:

When we submit our data to the state ... we're kind of concerned that, okay, are we gonna get flagged from the state because it says we have a hundred reported cases of bullying but then when we said we founded it was really two?" [District administrator]

Absent from most of these discussions was an indication of where administrators could turn for support or guidance.

A few administrators raised concerns about the state government's intended use of the reported bullying data and duplication of effort with double data entry. For two of the administrators, a primary concern was that the reporting system required student identification numbers for those involved in the incident. The administrators did not explicitly name the consequences they feared for students. In addition, several school- and district-level administrators felt that the requirement to enter bullying data into the state system put a "huge burden" on school administrators who already enter such data in school-wide information systems.

Overall, the issues raised by administrators about the reporting process indicate a limited capacity of many schools and districts to obtain guidance on reporting.

Challenges of understanding the school's jurisdiction in the enforcement of the law. Many school and district administrators expressed difficulty determining their jurisdiction for enforcing the antibullying law. Several questioned the extent to which they needed to address bullying behavior outside of school, including online and in the community, finding the boundary ambiguous. Some administrators also expressed concern that the state legislature had handed schools a problem that was bigger than they could address. One district administrator said:

They [legislators] seem to want to give ... administrators ... so much responsibility for everything. ... including the kitchen sink, relative to bullying. It happened outside of school, so we need to address it at the building level. And that troubles me, because ... we can't fix all of those things.¹

In general, there was concern that the state legislature not only has given schools a complex task, namely to adjudicate and prevent bullying among their students, but that schools may have to "address things that are more outside the school day" in the future [district administrator]. None of these concerned administrators mentioned accessing outside assistance to clarify their role in enforcing antibullying policies.

Organizational and leadership commitment to antibullying policy communication and training. A narrative that emerged from many interviews was the idea that fully implementing an antibullying policy requires bringing teachers, staff, parents, and students from their pre-existing attitudes and misperceptions to a place of shared understanding. Administrators spoke of promoting "a common language" about bullying. Across interviews, the challenge for administrators was "changing mind-sets ... getting beyond the boys will be boys, girls will be girls thing" [district administrator] so that "everybody has the same information and everyone's implementing it in the same way" [school administrator]. Administrators were uniformly positive about the benefits of communicating about bullying and their policies; they found that teachers, staff, and students began to work together to proactively report and address bullying behavior.

Organizational climate of safety and trust in reporting bullying. A few administrators reported a trend of “more kids reporting incidents that they see . . . more kids concerned for their peers because they see . . . kids that hurt themselves or see kids that hurt others . . . and they don’t want that to happen in their school” [school administrator]. One explanation that some administrators offered was that they had created a climate of safety in reporting, facilitated by anonymous reporting systems for students (e.g., “They can send me a message and nobody knows that it’s them that sent it,” [school administrator]), comfort in communicating with teachers and school officials, and perceived effectiveness: “Now I think they know if they tell, somebody’s gonna look into something” [district administrator]. Third-party student reporting was also tied to a sense of shared responsibility for the school culture.

Contextual factors

In addition to the individual-level and organizational-level factors that influenced implementation of the antibullying law, themes emerged regarding factors outside of the school or district as organizations. These included prevailing student perceptions about bullying and their responsibilities, parent attitudes, the community’s capacity to address the problem of bullying, the increasing use of social media technology, and media messaging about bullying.

Student over- and under-reporting of bullying complicates investigations

The response of students to the antibullying law acted as a contextual factor (i.e., the social climate surrounding the bullying issue) on the activities of the prevention delivery system to implement the law. Several administrators mentioned that students may over- or under-report bullying incidents in which they are the victims, interfering with the school or district’s ability to investigate, because of preconceived notions about bullying and their responsibility for dealing with bullying. Overreporting, according to some administrators, was often due to student “overidentification”—a misunderstanding of the criteria for bullying—and increased the amount of time administrators spent investigating bullying claims. As one school administrator noted, this overreporting may sometimes result from school-level efforts to educate students about bullying, requiring student retraining and additional time investment: “So then you have conversations with the kid to help them understand that just because somebody says something mean to you doesn’t mean that they’re being a bully to you.” On the other hand, a few school administrators had observed underreporting of bullying behavior among students who feel they should be old enough to handle bullying themselves, that “it’s going to get worse” if they report, or that school officials will not respond. Managing these student perceptions leading to over- and under-reporting of bullying behavior was a challenge for several administrators as they implemented the antibullying law investigation requirement.

Administrators encounter challenges communicating with some parents about bullying

Parents as an overarching theme loomed large across the interviews. Many administrators spoke of negative interactions with parents about suspected bullying incidents, but administrators pointed out that these negative interactions occurred with a small minority of parents. Still, a sense of frustration with parents’ attitudes dominated in many of the interviews. Specifically, the difficulty of getting information about the school’s antibullying efforts to parents, parents’ resistance against the school’s application of the definition of bullying, and some parents’ willingness to falsely report bullying were the three major themes.

Some administrators lamented that their communication efforts with parents typically reached the few, “the ones that are already supportive” [district administrator]. Just as administrators emphasized the importance of consistent communication about the antibullying policy within the school, so too did several administrators express a need to “get the word out” [school administrator] to hard-to-reach parents. As one school administrator remarked, “I don’t know how many people

are even aware ... that we have a bullying policy ... I'm guessing not very many." Communication with parents was important to these administrators because they reported spending time and effort addressing "conflicting perspectives" [district administrator] between parents and school staff on the definition of bullying and its application to student behavior. One school administrator described attempts to educate parents on the definition of bullying:

Probably the biggest ... thing we run into with parents is if I ever have to sit back and explain what truly, it's not bullying. And then they have a tough time with that, because they have ... they have a perception of what bullying means. And until they understand the definition of bullying, everything is bullying to them.

These misaligned definitions sometimes spurred contentious interactions between administrators and parents in which parents were "in the office screaming" [district administrator] about their child having been bullied, in their view. In only a few cases, some administrators reported that a parent had falsely claimed that their child had been bullied at school because they wanted the child to have access to a new school or a spot on the neighboring district's football team. This spectrum of misunderstandings and conflicts with parents emerged as a major barrier to administrators' efforts to efficiently investigate bullying reports, a mandate under the law.

Communities have limited capacity to address bullying

Community and societal norms and capacity to deal with bullying were prominent contextual factors for administrators implementing the antibullying law. Many administrators articulated the problem of bullying as larger than the school or district. They noted that parents, community members, and society at large model bullying behavior, limiting schools' ability to address bullying: "I really am a true believer that schools are, are somewhat of a reflection of society in general and, you know, unless you're gonna ... totally eliminate bullies in society, you know, that's gonna infiltrate into the schools and we're gonna have to deal with it" [district administrator]. Some administrators questioned why the law did not hold community organizations, law enforcement, and parents responsible for adjudicating and preventing bullying. Throughout many interviews, administrators conveyed a sense that the community was not—or could not—do enough to prevent bullying outside of school, which inevitably would affect student behavior within school. Furthermore, a few administrators expressed concern that the near absence of consequences for bullying outside of school impeded their efforts to protect students from retaliation for reporting bullying: "we're the knight in shining armor from ... 8 to 3, but outside of that we can't help [students] much" [district administrator]. Overall, many administrators conveyed a sense of consternation that community and societal influences either ignored or even promoted bullying behavior to the detriment of the schools' efforts to prevent it.

Schools encounter difficulties following the evidence trail in cyberbullying

The increasing use of social media among students was another contextual challenge for administrators, not only because it could occur outside of school and influence student behavior in school, but also because it could hamper investigations of suspected bullying. A few administrators mentioned that students deleting communications from their online accounts or claiming that someone else used their account to generate bullying messages could complicate evidence gathering in bullying cases:

When things are happening on Facebook or Twitter those are, those are difficult to catch and those are difficult to punish. ... A kid will come in and say well they've been tweeting, they've been on Facebook and they've done it. Okay show me, show me your Facebook so I can see it, well they've erased all of it.

Electronic communication can be ephemeral, making investigations of cyberbullying especially difficult to resolve for some administrators.

Media portrayals of bullying are in conflict with school and district definitions

The majority view among the administrators who commented about the role of the media in their work to implement the antibullying law was that the “media wants to say everything is bullying” [school administrator]. Several administrators noted that media “misinformation” [school administrator] about what constitutes bullying—a “rude comment,” for instance—was often reflected in the beliefs of parents, students, and other members of the school community. The difficulty, as one school administrator conveyed it, was that if someone reports an incident as bullying that does not meet the legal definition, they “still have to respond to it as bullying” [school administrator] by going through the investigation process, using time and resources. Only one administrator felt the media’s influence had a positive effect, namely in increasing awareness about bullying.

Discussion

The themes from this qualitative analysis point to several barriers that oppose the work of schools and districts—the prevention delivery system—to implement the Iowa antibullying law as intended. Staff members sometimes resisted taking on a new role in bullying reporting and prevention because of existing demands on their time and uncertainty about their role. These and other factors were identified in a recent qualitative study of teachers’ responses to antibullying programs (Cunningham et al., 2016). At the organizational level, lack of funding, time, prioritization, and appropriate staffing to implement the law were substantial barriers. Previous survey studies of school principals and psychologists identified these same barriers to implementing antibullying programs (Dake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2004; Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). Applying the Iowa antibullying law’s definition of bullying to real cases was another challenge for administrators, and others have commented upon such problems for enforcement and programming that may result from overly broad or ambiguous definitions of bullying included in many recent antibullying laws (Cascardi, Brown, Iannarone, & Cardona, 2014). More specific to the Iowa antibullying law, many administrators reported difficulty finding and selecting bullying prevention programs, determining their jurisdiction for investigating bullying reports, and obtaining guidance on how and what to report in the state bullying reporting system.

Within the community and societal context other barriers impeded implementation of the law. Conflicting definitions of bullying among students, staff, and community members hampered many administrators’ implementation efforts, echoing previous literature showing wide variation in perceptions of bullying among students and teachers (Maunder, Harrop, & Tattersall, 2010; Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Students who perceived little value in reporting bullying also complicated bullying investigations for administrators, in line with DeLara’s (2012) findings about students’ perceptions of reporting. Furthermore, negative parent attitudes toward the school’s antibullying efforts, limited community capacity to prevent or resolve bullying incidents, and opposing messages about the definition of bullying from the media emerged as prominent challenges to implementation of the law.

Facilitators for implementing the antibullying law emerged from our research as well. Administrators in the current study identified clear, consistent communication as the best strategy to unify perspectives on bullying, an approach that conforms with other findings showing greater consistency in students’ judgments of bullying when the “official” definition of bullying is readily available (Kert, Coddington, Tryon, & Shiyko, 2010). Additionally, creating conditions within the school conducive to student reporting was a facilitator to the bullying investigations component of implementation. Previous work has indicated that a supportive school climate encourages students to report bullying (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010).

Taken together, these findings promote a uniquely holistic understanding of the challenges and adaptations undertaken by school and district officials implementing an antibullying law. This analysis spans multiple levels, from the individual (administrator) to the organization (school/district/community) of the prevention delivery system of the ISF, and also has implications for the activities the

Table 1. Recommended actions for prevention synthesis and translation and prevention support systems to support antibullying law implementation in schools and districts.

Interactive Systems Framework system	Examples of relevant organizations	Recommendations for supporting antibullying law implementation
Prevention synthesis and translation system Prevention support system	Universities, nonprofit organizations State Department of Education, Area Education Agencies	Disseminate toolkits and research summaries directly to schools and districts Provide funding for bullying prevention and policy implementation Assist with prioritizing antibullying law implementation relative to other mandates Provide and market ongoing technical assistance, training, and quality improvement assistance for implementation

prevention synthesis and translation and prevention support systems could engage in to support antibullying efforts (Table 1). The prevention synthesis and translation system, which comprises activities to summarize and communicate research findings to the support and delivery systems, could fill the gap in the prevention delivery system's information about effective bullying prevention programs by directly disseminating toolkits and research summaries to school and district officials. Researchers, universities, and nonprofit organizations could all contribute to synthesis and translation. Strong partnerships between academics and practitioners in public health and education are essential to ensure proper understanding of evidence-based approaches to bullying prevention.

The prevention support system, which is responsible for building the general and information-specific capacity of the prevention delivery system to implement the antibullying law, could also play a role in facilitating the work of schools and districts. For instance, to mitigate the problem of limited funding and staff time to implement antibullying efforts, the prevention support system (e.g., the state department of education, AEAs, and others) could consider ways to provide funding and help schools re-prioritize other activities to make space for bullying prevention activities. The Iowa Department of Education and the AEAs, for instance, could also consider providing and marketing ongoing technical assistance, training, and quality improvement assistance for schools to interpret the antibullying law's mandates, including how to apply the bullying definition to individual cases, how to define the school's jurisdiction, and how to use the state data reporting system effectively (Wandersman, Chien, & Katz, 2012).

The current analysis, which spans multiple levels of the socio-ecological context of bullying within the ISF, could also be interpreted in light of recent theoretical work on the context of school antibullying efforts (Hawley & Williford, 2015). Hawley and Williford note that antibullying policy and intervention efforts that do not actively create a favorable organizational and community environment for implementation may encounter great obstacles:

When policy makers do not understand the behavioral and contextual principles underlying an event, we find ourselves struggling to comply with an ill-informed policy. Schools and communities then find themselves struggling to uphold a policy that wasn't created with them in mind. Logistical failures and a lack of resources, to name a few, result in unintended consequences: little to no training and resources for administrators and teachers to address this complex and pervasive problem, little to no connection to research (what are best practices?), conflating bullying with other behaviors thus leading to penalizing undeserving kids, and the list could go on and on. When we set up systems through the enactment of a reactionary policy we create an educational environment that makes it difficult, to say the least, to effectively protect children. (p. 11)

Proactive work to address the kinds of organizational barriers that emerged in the current study (e.g., time, staff, and funding) has the potential to significantly ease implementation; however, some barriers at the community and contextual level, including parent and child resistance and divergent definitions of bullying, could remain even with proactively crafted legislation. The challenge for the prevention research and translation and prevention support systems is to provide evidence, best practices, and support for schools, districts, and communities to work together to implement antibullying laws and develop a common understanding of how to prevent bullying.

Limitations

The results of the current study were based on the perspectives of school and district administrators in Iowa who were asked about challenges and opportunities in implementing the Iowa antibullying law. The resultant themes give an indication of the individual-level, organizational-level, and contextual factors surrounding the prevention delivery system that may impede or facilitate implementation of the law, but these factors are ultimately inferred from the administrators' point of view and may not be representative of the views of other school and district staff. Additionally, the current findings may not be transferable to other U.S. states or other countries in which antibullying laws and local norms and practices may differ from those in Iowa.

Future research

This is the first study that focused on the prevention delivery systems of the ISF to evaluate the implementation of an antibullying law. Future research is needed to evaluate other elements, including the prevention synthesis and translation and prevention support systems. Also, more research is needed to examine challenges and opportunities surrounding antibullying law implementation as viewed by other parties in implementation, including teachers, staff, students, and parents. Finally, research conducted in other geographic settings would help to determine the transferability of the current findings and potentially reveal new contextual factors that affect antibullying law implementation.

Note

1. This illustrative quote also appears in Young et al. (2016).

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