

APA is front and center at White House bullying conference

Psychologists' research plays prominent role at a
March 10 conference on preventing bullying.

BY CHRISTOPHER MUNSEY • *Monitor* staff

Acknowledging the key contributions that psychologists have made in understanding and preventing bullying, federal education officials invited top psychology researchers and APA CEO Norman B. Anderson, PhD, to the White House Conference on Bullying, on March 10.

Hosted by President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama, the conference gathered more than 100 educators, parents, students, federal officials and researchers for a one-day session exploring the prevalence and impact of bullying, and ways to prevent it.

Following opening statements by President and Mrs. Obama, the conference turned to a panel discussion led by four experts, including psychologists Susan Swearer, PhD, of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Catherine Bradshaw, PhD, of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Three additional psychologists and bullying experts, Dorothy Espelage, PhD, and Philip Rodkin, PhD, both of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Susan Limber, PhD, of Clemson University, participated in the conference's discussion sessions.

In his interactions with fellow participants, Anderson emphasized the need to prevent bullying in schools because hostile school environments undermine learning. "We know from other research that meeting the social and emotional needs of children in school serves to boost academic performance," he said.

The psychologists emphasized several key points from the research:

- Estimates vary on the percentage of students involved in bullying, either as perpetrators, victims or both. Bullying peaks in middle school in the early teen years. Bullying is often perpetrated by more than one student, and a majority of students report witnessing bullying.
 - Bullying via electronic messages can occur at any time and spread quickly to more students.
 - Students who bully, particularly physically while in elementary school, are more likely to experience academic and behavior problems in school and have more encounters with law enforcement as adolescents and young adults.
 - Students who experience bullying are at greater risk for depression or anxiety and some may have suicidal thoughts. They are also more likely to skip school and can fall behind academically. Those effects are moderated by relationships with peers and family and the overall school climate
 - Anti-bullying interventions need to address the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning students, who experience higher rates of bullying.
- The psychologists also cited several research-tested ways to prevent bullying:
- **Improving school climate.** Schools that give students a greater sense of connectedness to teachers and peers have lower levels of bullying. Students need to learn how to interact with



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APA CEO Dr. Norman B. Anderson (behind President Barack Obama, at right) at the White House Conference on Bullying.

one another in healthy and respectful ways. Special efforts need to be directed at schools with higher rates of violence and disorder. Students who are traumatized by familial and community violence need help developing emotional regulation and conflict resolution skills.

- **Surveying students on bullying.** Yearly surveys that anonymously ask students about whether, when and where they've been bullied can give administrators information on the prevalence of the problem and help them develop strategies to reduce bullying, such as identifying bullying "hotspots" on school grounds. Stationing adults in those areas can reduce bullying incidents.

- **Training for teachers and staff.** These professionals can benefit from specific training in recognizing and responding to bullying. A National Education Association survey last year found that less than half of teachers and school support staff said they had received adequate bullying response training.

- **Teaching students how to respond to bullying.** All students should receive instruction in understanding what bullying is and advice on how to respond when they witness it or are victimized by it.

"Something we've found from our research is that the vast majority of kids feel sorry for bullied kids, but the challenge is to empower these kids, and adults, to help change that climate and culture," Limber said.

Policies on handling bullying need to be clearly explained

to students, parents, teachers and staff. Specific interventions should be in place to work with students who bully by bringing in family members and teaching the youngsters how to interact with fellow students in more respectful, friendlier ways. Help should also be available for students victimized by bullying.

- **Making interventions manageable.** Given the demands on teachers' time and pressure to increase academic performance, researchers need to help schools implement programs that are feasible, Bradshaw says.

"We can go in and build a Rolls-Royce program, but can they implement it, and sustain that?" she asked.

The conference grew out of a federal task force called the Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention Steering Committee, formed in 2009. The task force is exploring how federal agencies can help state and local education officials respond more effectively to school-based bullying and identify research gaps in the study of bullying. The Department of Education's first-ever bullying summit was held on Aug. 11–12, in Washington, D.C.

The White House conference may give some hope to families struggling to help children cope with persistent bullying, Swearer said.

"I think it was huge in terms of pushing the conversation on bullying prevention and intervention into the national spotlight," she said. ■