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Danville school will be part of UI research on effectiveness of anti-bullying programs

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DANVILLE – Starting this school year, South View Middle School will launch a new program aimed at preventing bullying, sexual harassment and substance abuse as part of a University of Illinois research study.

The three-year study is being funded by a \$1.3 million grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and will examine whether the Second Step Middle School: Success Through Prevention program decreases bullying and improves academic outcomes and, if so, under what conditions.

"We have 67 bullying prevention programs available in the country," said Dorothy Espelage, the principal investigator. However, she said there's little or no scientific evidence to show whether they actually work.

"Two recent meta-analyses showed that nothing is really working," said Espelage, a UI educational psychology professor and a bullying expert. "We think that as opposed to just teaching kids, 'This is bullying, you shouldn't do it, and if you see it happening, you need to tell someone,' we need to give them basic social-emotional skills to make good decisions. That should be the foundation of any bullying prevention program."

To conduct the study, Espelage and her team – including Sabina Low, an assistant psychology professor at Wichita State University, and John Elliott, a project coordinator – are partnering with 22 middle schools in Illinois and 12 in Kansas. South View is the only school in East Central Illinois.

Seventeen schools, including South View, were randomly selected to implement the Second Step program. The others will implement another program, called Stories of Us.

As an implementation school, South View will receive free of charge the Second Step curriculum and program kits, valued at \$6,000. It also will receive free training and support, \$1,000 for completing the study and valuable data on school climate and bullying at the school.

Second Step is a comprehensive, researched-based program from the nonprofit Committee on Children, which has developed other prevention programs.

"The one we're evaluating is brand new," Espelage said, adding it took five years to develop. Besides learning to recognize bullying, students learn anger management, impulse control, conflict-resolution, communication, listening and negotiating skills, as well as how to empathize with others, so that they can make good choices and achieve academic success.

"Kids are lacking in those skills," Espelage said.

The program will follow this year's sixth-graders through middle school, Espelage said. This year, sixth-grade teachers will launch a 15-week program covering bullying. In the 2011-12 school year, seventh-grade teachers will teach a 13-week program that introduces sexual harassment and drug and alcohol prevention. And in the 2012-13 year, eighth-grade teachers will teach a 13-week program that builds on previous lessons and introduces bullying and dating relationships.

South View staff are eager to be involved although it requires a "great" commitment from teachers, Principal Brenda Yoho said. Teachers will be trained before school starts, spend 50 minutes a week teaching the program and must complete a log describing their implementation. Researchers also will observe them at random.

"Second Step will build a strong foundation for the kids and teach them how to respect themselves and others," she said. "And we're excited to be involved in a study that will help determine whether this program will work and help us reach our students and make their lives better. Bullying has been around for years, and recently, it's taken different avenues with cell phones and computers. If we find this is successful, we'll be on the ground level to provide an initiative to help stop this."

At the beginning of the study, all sixth-graders will be given a baseline survey. Researchers will then measure those results against surveys taken in the following three springs. They also will compare the students in schools that implemented Second Step to those in the "low dose" control schools.

"We hope to show this is an effective program," Espelage said, adding that 42 states now have anti-bullying legislation, which will increase the demand for prevention programs.

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