Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships
School Policy Strategy Memo

Background
This memo accompanies the Model School Policy and Appendix documents to highlight the rationale for this policy approach and to offer a framework for how Start Strong communities can approach policy change in their local schools and school districts. The outcome for this strategy is adoption and implementation of teen dating violence prevention policy in targeted middle schools that contain the core elements outlined in the model policy. The model policy and appendix were developed with the input and guidance of a national policy work group, consulting policy experts and local Start Strong leaders.

The objectives of the model policy are:
- To codify primary prevention of adolescent dating abuse in a policy framework for schools
- To prioritize positive school climate as a systems change strategy for prevention
- To delineate the roles of students, parents, educators and other school personnel in establishing an environment that promotes positive relationship behavioral supports to academic achievement.

Many Start Strong projects are embedded in organizations that have extensive experience in policy and systems change. The purpose of this memo is to establish a consistent approach within the Start Strong initiative and to advance the essential role of policy and systems change in lasting achievement of Start Strong goals.

Policy and Systems Change Framework
Policy change is a core program element of the Start Strong initiative and represents a critical pathway to the goal of creating community environments that foster and support healthy adolescent relationships. While system change is difficult and long term, it is also a way to ensure durable sustainability and long term impact for Start Strong.

In order to make real and lasting progress, practices and programs must become institutionalized, first through changes in policies and then by changes in system practices. “New” practices required through policy change reinforce a change in norms and behavior, which in turn leads to ongoing support for the policy and the practice. While policy adoption is an essential element of systems change, it is not by itself, enough to realize institutionalization of new programs and practices to prevent teen dating violence. To accomplish change in the systems we want to impact, policy change must be nested in a strategy that includes implementation support, monitoring of adherence to the policy and evaluation that seeks to improve practices over time.

---

1 Emily Austin (Peace Over Violence), Stefanie Boltz (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy), Ellen Fern (Washington Partners), Susan Frost (Education Priorities), Colleen Gallop (Break the Cycle), Diane Hall (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), Amanda Karhuse (National Association of Secondary School Principals), Carrie Mulford (National Institute of Justice), Eric Pliner (New York City Department of Education), Kate Reilly (Sojourner House), Barri Rosenbluth (SafePlace), Ann Rosewater (consultant), Dr. Jeffrey Sprague (University of Oregon), Nan Stein (Wellesley Centers for Women), Lori Vollandt (Network for a Healthy California), Kelly Young (Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence),
Research and Review
The NPO conducted policy research to assess the status of adolescent dating abuse prevention policies in middle schools and identify promising approaches to this issue and other peer-to-peer aggressive behaviors such as bullying to strengthen prevention policy. Initial assessment provided a baseline of information about existing teen dating policies in Start Strong communities, mapped this against state policy mandates and identified promising school policy elements. Following the policy assessment, an expert advisory group convened to inform the development of a school policy. In particular, the group offered input about how primary prevention might be strengthened; the advisability of stand-alone adolescent dating abuse policy versus policy embedded in related topics such as sexual harassment; and emerging practice in the field such as data driven measures on school climate.

Findings:

- An assessment of current school policy on adolescent dating abuse in Start Strong communities indicates teen dating policy has been adopted only in those communities with state-level policy mandates.
- Even in those schools with specific teen dating policy, the majority do not call for mandatory training of school personnel or parental awareness.
- Most schools have a district policy related to sexual harassment and bullying.
- Policy and education to promote prevention should be developmentally appropriate and link dating abuse to other forms of interpersonal violence such as bullying and sexual harassment.
- Policy for middle school should include a focus on primary prevention as well as early intervention and reporting guidelines.

Research demonstrates that dating violence places youth at a serious risk for a number of academic risks, including risk for truancy and drop out (National Youth Prevention Resource Center, 2000), substance and alcohol use (Molidor, Tolman, & Kober, 2000) which impairs student functioning, as well as barriers to educational attainment and sustainable employment (Center for Impact Research, 2000). The influence of school climate, or the social and physical environment which impacts student academic engagement, is widely researched and can positively influence health and learning for students (Freiberg, 1998). Studies also demonstrate that positive perceptions of school climate are protective factors and increase pro-social and academic achievement behaviors among high-risk students (Haynes, 1998; Kuperminc et al., 1997). Marshall (2002) suggests a number of methods for enhancing school climate including offering violence prevention curricula, peer-to-peer education, and promotion of safe and drug-free schools (Harris & Lowery, 2002).

Unique to New Mexico is the Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (YRRS)\(^2\), which measures both risk behaviors and protective factors which can be linked to student success and improved school climate. Included in the YRRS are questions assessing for protective factors that influence school climate, such as caring and supportive relationships and high expectations in the school, involvement in school activities, and behavioral boundaries in the school. Individual

---


**Obesity Prevention**: Suggesting that children get more physical activity is difficult when community violence and traffic patterns interfere with walking. Safe Paths to Schools works to change policy so that walking paths are criteria for choosing new school sites and to change norms by asking PTA volunteers to accompany student groups walking to school safely.
student risk factors which influence school climate include behaviors associated with violence, substance use, and positive peer and adult relationships in schools. In 2009, New Mexico conducted a legislative study\(^3\) using the 2007 YRRS data that indicated, in general, students with low levels of protective factors were more likely to experience dating violence than students with moderate or high levels of protective factors. Students who reported being victims of dating violence were \textit{significantly} more likely than other students to report multitude of risk factors, such as substance use, suicide, skipping school because of feeling unsafe at school or on the way to and from school, and being threatened or injured with a weapon or being in a physical fight on school property. Additionally, student victims reported higher rates of behaviors affecting academic success than other students, including low academic aspirations, disengagement in daily academic activities, and lack of academic motivation. This state study demonstrates strong connections between the presence of dating violence and academic risk factors, which may influence the general climate of schools.

Schools can play a key part in the prevention of dating violence and the promotion of safe, healthy school climates. Nationally, one study shows that half of teen dating violence victims experience some dating abuse on school campuses (Molidor & Tolman, 1998). The U.S. Department of Justice Office of Violence Against Women (2007) asserts that schools and the educational system are key stakeholders in teen dating violence prevention and have unique opportunities to access youth and their parents. School based teen dating violence prevention programs are shown to effectively reduce adolescents’ teen dating violence behaviors, particularly among male adolescents, where a 2% reduction in teen dating violence may result in savings of millions of dollars in long-term behavioral health, medical, and criminal justice costs (Odgers & Russell, 2008) through leveraging existing resources, such as teacher time and modifications to existing curricula, at an estimated cost of $16.00 per student (Odgers & Russell, 2009, and Wolfe, et al. 2008). It is recommended that school based prevention focus on improvement of school climate and occur through system collaboration where community youth serving organizations skilled in serving adolescents act as partners in providing services and families are involved when safe in prevention programs (Odgers & Russel, 2009).

**School Policy: Core elements and rationale**

There is a powerful rationale for focusing efforts on fostering healthy and respectful relationships among youth at middle school ages. Brain development of social emotional learning and empathy occur in this age range; parents and teachers remain key influencers and prevention can have a lasting effect on their relationships in the future. Conversely, poor school climate and violence stand in the way of students achieving their academic goals. Positive school environments promote understanding of the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships as well as teaching skills to navigate and promote healthy relationships while paving the way for student academic success. Establishing a positive school environment requires a concerted effort and school-wide commitment unlikely to be realized and sustained without policy that explicitly outlines and supports this approach.

In order to accomplish a school-wide approach to promote healthy teen relationships, policy that addresses prevention and response to adolescent dating abuse should be linked to other forms of peer-to-peer violence, particularly bullying/cyberbullying, sexual harassment and gender-based violence. While school administrators may see fights, bullying and sexual harassment as the presenting problems, the underlying context for the problem behavior may stem from emerging romantic or dating relationships.

The core elements of the attached school policy include:

- School-wide prevention education for students including the adoption of an evidence-informed curriculum on healthy relationships and teen dating violence prevention
- Identification of a Prevention Coordinator to ensure policy implementation and monitoring
- Training programs for school personnel
- Parent notification and engagement in supporting a positive school environment
- Strong partnerships with students, parents, staff, and community agencies
- Policy response that identifies and addresses early warning signs
- Innovative intervention strategies to respond to teen dating abuse
- Monitoring plans to assess and report data related to school climate and teen dating abuse.

Suggested elements of the attached school policy include:

- Adopt school-wide positive environmental supports and linking it with teen dating violence prevention efforts
- Engage youth in supporting the policy and creating youth leadership opportunities
- Provide peer support groups
- Provide positive after-school programs and environments to encourage healthy relationships

Investing in the prevention of violence in schools, and particularly teen dating violence involves defining and teaching core behavioral expectations; acknowledging and rewarding appropriate behavior (e.g., compliance to school rules, and safe, respectful peer to peer interactions); and establishing a consistent continuum of consequences for problem behavior. The focus of prevention is on establishing a positive social climate, in which behavioral expectations are directly taught, constantly acknowledged, and actively monitored.

**Policy and Systems Change Strategy**

Policy adoption requires intentional strategy based on local circumstances and knowledge balanced with flexibility to assess and revise strategy over the course of an initiative. Policy adoption can leap frog forward based on current events or unanticipated opportunities. Just as often, policy advancement may be stalled by the loss of a champion or the emergence of new priorities such as a budget crisis.

Strategy development should include the best thinking and input of a “kitchen cabinet” – allies who already believe in the importance of teen dating policy and have knowledge and experience of school systems and policy change. Before devising a comprehensive game plan for how to accomplish policy adoption, consider the following elements:

1. **Local assessment of existing school policy**: review related middle school policy to articulate which core elements of the model policy are already in place; find out when
these policies were adopted and what strategy was used to accomplish current policy; determine the elements required for a comprehensive approach.

2. **Identify or develop champions inside the school system:** interview policy makers, school administrators and others to gauge their views about the importance of policy adoption and carefully understand their priorities. Ensure that these priorities are linked intentionally to research, communication tools and strategy. Inventory the self-identified champions and allies.

3. **Gather relevant research:** establish how teen dating violence prevention policy adoption can improve academic achievement, reduce bullying or improve school climate with attention to local priorities and challenges.

4. **Develop a case for change:** Create compelling communication that supports the need for policy change by identifying how improved school climate can contribute to local priorities for students.

5. **Identify key constituents:** organize youth, parents, teachers and residents in support of policy change; train them as spokespersons for your change and promote their leadership of the issue as a key strategy.

6. **Map out the steps in your strategy:** Who are the key decision makers? What is the right timing for policy adoption? What can local leaders do to increase momentum and urgency to accomplish policy change? How will media be used?

7. **Scan for opportunistic events and incorporate them into strategy:** acknowledge both positive opportunities as well as any setbacks and revise strategy.

8. **Evaluate progress:** by measuring the successful accomplishment of each step along the way such as identification of champions, increase in media attention to the issue in a way that supports policy change, an increasing constituent base; briefings held for policy makers and influencers.

9. **Implementation support:** continue the momentum after policy adoption to cheer and support implementation. Obtain media attention for intermediate steps like training of teachers. Report positive changes in school environments through student and parent stories. Offer to organize parents to show up at budget time to support administrators.

10. **Monitor what happens:** establish an annual review of policy implementation based on data collection and reporting. Are parents informed of the policy? Are teachers trained? Is school climate improving as evidenced by reductions in bullying over a period of time?

**Policy Memo**

By October 31, 2010, each community will submit a short memo that reports to the NPO the results of local policy analysis and proposes a plan for adoption of improved school policy. The desired outcome is adoption and implementation of teen dating violence prevention policy in targeted middle schools that includes all core elements of the model school policy. The policy plan should incorporate consideration of the elements listed in the section above and should incorporate local circumstances. Technical assistance will be provided by the national program office.