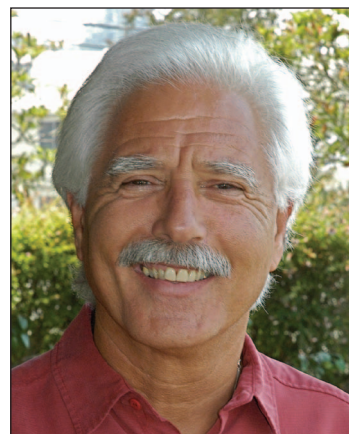


The Financial Cost of *Bullying, Violence, and Vandalism*



by Rick Phillips

During times of economic crisis, school climate issues, such as bullying, violence, and vandalism, can grow more intense and frequent as economic and family stressors worsen.

At the same time, budget cuts leave many schools with less money to address these issues as well as fewer counselors, school resource officers, administrators, and teachers. Staff members have more responsibilities and less time to handle problematic situations. It's a recipe for disaster.

School climate is an important determinant of a school's ability to deliver on its mission; however, the impact of school climate on a school's budget is often largely ignored or underestimated, chiefly because there is no standardized way to track and assess the losses and costs associated with negative student behaviors. But that doesn't mean that the financial impact is insignificant.

School Climate Loss and Cost Calculator

Community Matters has developed an auditing tool, called the School Climate Loss and Cost Calculator, to help administrators more accurately identify the cost of behaviors associated with a negative school climate. The calculator is available at no cost to all schools at www.community-matters.org/safe-school-ambassadors/documents. The calculator uses data that most schools routinely track to make reasonable assessments of the financial losses and costs that schools incur each year because of students' negative behaviors and assess their financial impact. Although the example in this article is based on averages and statistical trends in a fictional high school, the online calculator can be adjusted for any level by ignoring any unneeded categories or adjusting figures to match an actual school's data. For this purpose, the calculator includes an active spreadsheet for the user to input a school's actual or estimated data.

We all know that data drive decisions, especially at times when every dollar's use is hotly contested. The data from this calculator will help administrators make a solid financial case for investments in preventing bullying, violence, and vandalism and fostering a more positive school climate.

Loss and Cost Drivers

As school bullying and violence increases, so do suspensions, expulsions, and alternative education placements as schools are compelled by policies and safety concerns to take disciplinary action. In addition, when students feel emotionally or physically unsafe, attendance and grades can fall because of actual or psychosomatic illnesses, elective

truancy, or dropping out. An increasingly negative climate can also lead to more vandalism as students look for an outlet to express their frustration, powerlessness, despair, anger, or fear.

Truancy/Low Attendance

A recent study noted that 8% of middle school students reported skipping school at least once due to fear of bullying. In addition, one out of four middle schoolers reported taking other actions, such as skipping class or going home sick, to avoid encountering a bully (Perkins, Perkins, & Craig, 2009).

There is a financial consequence associated with students missing school. One way to calculate this loss is to look at truancy rates. Truancy is generally defined as an unexcused absence of at least one day per month per truant student (each truant student is absent at least nine times in a nine-month school year). Truancies can then be multiplied by a school's reimbursement rate—in most states, this is defined as the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) rate—to compute the average financial loss due to truancy.

For example, if a school has 1,000 students and a truancy rate of 6% (lower than most sources estimate the national average to be), there will be 60 students absent at least nine times per year, resulting in at least 540 days of lost ADA funding. The approximate national average ADA rate is \$40/day (Phillips, Linney, & Pack, 2008); multiplying that rate by the 540 missed days, the sample high school would experience a loss of at least \$21,600 per year because of truancy.

Suspensions

When negative behaviors, such as fighting, bullying, or harassment, increase, so do suspensions. There is both a cost and a loss associated with suspensions and a formula for estimating this amount (Phillips, Linney, & Pack, 2008). On the basis of conversations with school administrators nationally, we calculated an average cost of approximately \$170 of combined staff time per behavioral incident that leads to a suspension. In addition, assuming that each suspension results in three days out of school (the average length of one suspension), there is a \$120 loss of ADA funds per suspension (\$40 ADA multiplied by 3 days). Combining the \$170 cost with the \$120 loss leads to an average negative financial impact of \$290.

For the sample high school with 1,000 students, a 6% suspension rate

(the 2006 national average) (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009) gives 60 suspensions, which is then multiplied by \$290 (financial impact per suspension). This results in an annual loss plus cost of \$17,400 due to suspensions.

Expulsions

As with suspensions, there are both administrative costs and ADA losses from expulsions. If the average administrative cost is the same for expulsions as it is for suspensions (\$170) and the 1,000-student sample school has a 2% expulsion rate (lower than the 3.06% average for 2006) (NCES, 2009), multiply 20 expulsions by \$170 to get an annual cost of \$3,400 for expulsions.

In addition, assuming the midpoint of the school year as the average expulsion date, multiply 90 days (180 student attendance days is the average length of a school year) by the ADA rate (\$40) by the number of expulsions (20) to show an annual ADA loss of \$72,000 due to expulsions for an average high school.

For the sample school, therefore, the total annual losses and costs due to expulsions are estimated to add up to \$75,400.

Dropping Out

Academic problems and a fear of going to school can lead to a student's decision to leave school prior to graduation. Drop-out rates vary widely and are not derived consistently. The national drop-out rates as of 2009, therefore, range from 7% to 55% (Barton, 2005) for students who leave without completing high school. Because most students who drop out leave in the middle of 10th grade, the average school would have a total of 450 days of missed school per dropout.

Looking at the sample high school of 1,000 students, if the dropout rate is in the low part of the range, 12%, multiply 120 by the ADA rate (\$40) by 450 days. The total annual loss, therefore, could total \$2,160,000 as a result of students dropping out.

Alternative Educational Placements

When violent or negative behaviors (being in possession or under the influence of drugs or alcohol, possessing weapons, or engaging in fights or assaults) dictate that a student must be placed in a continuation or pre-expulsion secondary school, it can be costly to a school or district. For Clear Creek Independent School District in Texas, for example, the cost per student per year for one mandatory disciplinary alternative educational placement (MDAEP) was \$2,500 in 2008–09.

Using this figure for the sample high school of 1,000 students, if 1% (10 students) require MDAEP, the cost is \$25,000.

Vandalism

Students who don't feel connected to their school are more likely to commit vandalism. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) Feelings of powerlessness, despair, anger, or fear related to social status and school experiences lead students to vandalize school property. Perceptions of physical and emotional safety and belonging go hand-in-hand.

The estimated average cost for an incident of vandalism (the combination of staff time, materials, and replacement equipment or repairs) is \$400. Assuming a conservative vandalism rate of one incident per week, 38 weeks in a school year, and an average cost of \$400, the sample high school would incur an annual cost of \$15,200 because of vandalism.

Putting it All Together

When we add up the losses and costs for this sample school, the totals are staggering:

	LOSSES	COSTS
Truancy/Low Attendance	\$21,600	
Suspensions		\$17,400
Vandalism		\$15,200
Dropping Out	\$2,160,000	
Mandatory Disciplinary Alternative Education Placements		\$25,000
Expulsions	\$72,000	\$3,400
Total	\$2,253,600	\$61,000

**Total annual financial impact of both losses and costs:
\$2,314,600**

How does your school compare? What are your losses and costs due to bullying, violence, and vandalism? Can your school actually afford to cut violence-prevention and early-intervention programs and staff members?

If the sample school was able to reduce its suspension rate from 6% to 3%, it would save \$8,700 in one year alone. If the sample school also reduces its truancy rate from 6% to 3%, it would save an additional \$10,800. In this way, many violence-prevention programs more than pay for themselves.

Conclusion

Using the data compiled and analyzed through the School Climate Loss and Cost Calculator, administrators and school districts will have a clearer choice: pay the costs and incur the losses from bullying, violence, and vandalism or invest in fostering a more positive school climate and thereby reduce financial losses and costs.

Having more specific information about actual costs and losses due to negative student behaviors can help school leaders make more-informed choices when faced with difficult budget decisions. Information is power, and I hope that this information will help decision-makers see that violence-prevention programs and social-emotional student services are not merely a line-item expense. Decreasing negative student behaviors is ultimately a cost savings measure that helps schools accomplish the overall mission of ensuring that all students are given the chance to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Author's note: To calculate your school's own annual losses and costs due to bullying, violence, and vandalism, download a free School Climate Loss and Cost Calculator at www.community-matters.org/safe-school-ambassadors/documents.

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