

Safe School Design Task Force

OBJECTIVE, RESEARCH, & TRENDS FRAMEWORK

Welfare: ANTI-BULLYING

A. Objective Statement

Our AIA NJ Safe School Design Task Force is focusing attention on the timely and important topic of “**Anti-Bullying**” and how it relates to the framework of designing safe and secure schools in New Jersey. Our Task Force objective is to share national best practices in K-12 school designs and to show how to apply these practices to local New Jersey communities to help meet our schools’ *health, safety, and welfare* needs. The strategies used by NJ Architects to design and renovate schools shall not only protect building occupants but also create highly successful learning environments by applying innovative design solutions integrated with facility management, physical security, and wellness practices.

AIA New Jersey
414 River View Plaza
Trenton, N J, 08611
P: (609) 393-5690

www.aia-nj.org

GOAL: “Building Out Bullying” by designing Learning Environments to impact behaviors, improve mental health, and create K-12 safe school culture

Bullying is defined as unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived imbalance of power, with the behavior repeating, or has the potential to repeat, over time. Bullying is a widespread issue in the United States as well as internationally. It negatively impacts those being bullied, the bullies, the bystanders, and others in the community. Bullying can threaten students’ physical and emotional safety at school and adversely impact their ability to learn. It is linked to many negative outcomes including long-lasting impacts on mental health, increasing rates of substance use and suicide, and in some instances can play a contributing role in severe acts of school violence.

In the U.S. a recent survey about bullying noted 22% of students ages 12-18 reported being bullied at school. The survey also found that 16% of grades 9-12 students reported being bullied electronically. Peer bullying and aggression are key contributors to mental illness among children, contributing to loneliness, distress, and poor academic performance. Statistically almost 1 in 6 students ages 7 to 17 years are bullied at least once a week, with victimization peaking around the ages of 10-12 with many incidences associated with school transitions. While most schools have intervention programs in place intended to prevent bullying, research has shown these efforts cease to be effective with older children, and some may inadvertently result in increased bullying behavior in later years.

Bullying Prevention Strategies:

*While there is not one singular approach to addressing bullying, there are several prevention strategies which staff can implement to make schools safer. First step is to properly identify bullying and to take actionable steps to prevent it. Reducing bullying behavior requires a multi-faceted approach which includes immediate responses followed by appropriate consequences and support for serious incidents. School environments must be places which champion gender equity, diversity, and inclusivity. Access needs to be barrier-free and universal. Designs need to respond to the worldwide shift towards creating immersive environments which actively engage learners by celebrating culture, community connections, storytelling, and civic outreach. Being safe means feeling safe and this can manifest itself differently in different regions of the country and world as **Safe Communities = Safe Schools**. Everyone at school can work together to create an environment where bullying is not acceptable. WWW.SchoolSafety.Gov highlights research on how to prevent bullying and cyber-bullying and offers strategies contributing to a positive school climate. The following bullying prevention action steps can be taken by schools to make them safer:*

Develop and Implement an Assessment Survey – Assessment surveys can help schools determine the frequency, locations, types of bullying behavior and experiences to help understand current scene and determine suitable responses.

Build a Safe and Supportive Environment - Studies have shown that a positive school climate reduces bullying behaviors and can improve outcomes for those who have been bullied. A culture of inclusion and welcome sets a tone of respect in classrooms while monitors in corridors, bathrooms, playgrounds, and cafeteria enforce the message that bullying is not acceptable.

Implement Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) – SEL involves processes through which children acquire and apply knowledge and skills to understand and manage emotions, set goals, feel empathy for others, maintain relationships, and make responsible decisions. Effective SEL programs can significantly improve attitudes about self and others plus help students develop their anti-bullying skills.

Set School Policies and Engage Parents and Youth – School policies should clearly outline how students are expected to treat each other and the consequences for violations. Training should give staff the tools needed to respond to bullying consistently and appropriately. Parents and students should be taught how to contribute to a positive school climate through volunteering and leadership roles.

Engage Community Stakeholders – Schools, their communities, and local public agencies should adopt policies and pledge to work together to help prevent and root out bullying and cyberbullying. Contributing to a positive climate of safety, support for digital citizenship, and positive character development should be made a top priority and valued by schools and community leaders. Procedures monitoring student behavior in school and online can help schools identify at-risk behaviors and provide appropriate interventions before they create safety issues.

B. Design Innovations & Creative Solutions

The “Building Out Bullying” Research Project & Checklist:

Research is helping to assess, “*How can school environment designs and layouts be enhanced to prevent bullying behavior and promote student wellbeing?*”

Research in Western Australia examined ways to improve the sense of safety and security for every child. Studies investigated how children interact with built elements, not only with moveable furnishings and classroom products, but also with playground equipment and activity zones which have high instances of bullying or aggression. Australia has teamed its educators with *Heathway’s* corporate researchers to generate evidence-based policies intended to guide intervention programs and alter the design of school facilities. Research indicated how important it is to embed anti-bullying features within school corridors, restrooms, locker rooms, and other places where children learn and play including greenspaces and social areas. The efficacy of interventions must be measured, and results shared to help schools find ways to reduce stress, prevent bullying, and end isolationism. *By questioning how learning environments can be designed to have positive influences on K-12 student behavior and mental health, researchers have published findings and produced a helpful Anti-bullying Checklist Tool:*

1. Share with communities **critical knowledge** about how built environments and social policies impact K-12 bullying and mental health outcomes.
2. Informed educators about **how to influence the design of schools to reduce bullying behavior** and improve students’ mental health.
3. Utilize an **audit tool for schools** to measure current environments and then apply the “**Building Out Bullying Checklist**” to enable staff and consultants to make changes with positive impacts on mental health.
4. Disseminate research and **translate findings into action steps**.

The “*Building Out Bullying*” Checklist Tool is organized into three strategic areas which make a difference when the recommendations are applied to designing safe places for children to play and learn. These strategic guidelines include:

MAXIMIZE VISIBILITY in schools to promote supervision.

OPTIMIZE COMFORT to promote a sense of wellbeing.

IMPROVE SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES for all.

The concept of “**Maximizing Visibility**” is rooted in the belief and understanding that supervision and early interventions by staff are necessary steps to prevent an escalation of toxic behavior associated with bullying, aggression, or isolating tendencies. The earlier the intervention, the more impact it can have on influencing outcomes. *It is important for children to be observed, seen, and heard when and where bullying problems can develop.* The following “**Building Out Bullying**” **Checklist** includes suggestions to maximize visibility, supervision, and wellbeing.

Maximize Visibility in Schools to Promote Supervision & Prevent Bullying:

- Locate toilets and common areas centrally in schools to increase accessibility.
- Provide multiple and adequate escape routes in all confined spaces.
- Incorporate large windows in classrooms, particularly overlooking outdoor areas.
- Include clear pathways and clear signage to support wayfinding.
- Include glass viewing panels in classroom doors to facilitate observations.
- Ensure indoor and outdoor spaces contain adequate lighting; use sensor lighting to detect movement and to turn on automatically upon entrance to a space.
- Include shatterproof mirrors to supervise any hidden corners or blind spots.
- Keep windows clear of visual obstructions, such as posters or art displays.
- Maintain trees and vegetation; carefully trim plantings to keep sightlines open.
- Use cameras, surveillance monitors, and active supervision to help track student activities, movements, areas of congestion, and visual records of interactions.
- Use layouts to support and encourage passive supervision of students by locating staff rooms/break areas near student commons, seating areas, or places of play.
- Provide supervisory staff with distinctive clothing or forms of identification.

Optimize Comfort in Schools to Promote Student Wellbeing:

- Regulate noise, temperature, lights, and ventilation to reduce irritations or stress.
- Distribute locker areas throughout the school to reduce overcrowded conditions and to maximize supervision and connections with nearby, assigned staff.
- Arrange layout to avoid queues and crowding in lunch areas and other common spaces; stagger recess and playground breaks to assist with crowd control.
- Provide a wide range of break-time activities and equipment to expand appeal and choice and to counteract feelings of boredom or frustrations.
- Provide diverse break-time spaces to reflect students' diverse interests including support of sports, games, performances/arts, reading/libraries, labs, gardens, etc.
- Provide diverse seating and spaces for dining and student socializing areas.
- Provide diverse equipment, seating, and tables for activities enabling positive peer interactions including paints, puzzles, designing and gaming activities.

Improve Social-Emotional Competences to Promote Feelings of Safety:

- Consult students, staff, and parents when designing environments; design with users in mind and incorporate resources catering to their daily lives and needs.
- Design layouts which facilitate proximities and encourage staff to engage with students during break times to build trust and rapport via time spent together.
- Provide collaborative workspaces for students which promote interactions.
- Provide collaborative workspaces for teachers which are private and secure.
- Include moveable furniture in classrooms and outdoor areas to encourage peer interactions, open-ended discoveries, imaginative play and placemaking.
- Use signage, graphics, branding images, multimedia screens, and message boards to create positive behavioral expectations and convey aspirational affirmations.
- Create calm areas of quiet and refuge including spaces for reflection and sensory refreshment within classrooms, group areas, and throughout the school.
- Provide access to all-gender and sex-segregated toilets to accommodate choice.

- Remove graffiti and maintain school grounds and equipment to reflect a positive school culture and sense of respect for students, staff, and communities.
- Create a welcoming yet secure front entry and office to strengthen cultural safety.
- Use a sensitive palette of colors and textures to project a unifying sense of place integrated with surrounding communities and landscapes; use design to foster a sense of identity and connection with nature, legacy history, and regional context.
- Provide spaces which welcome the presence and contributions of the community.
- Provide access to books, literature, storytelling, and resources which reflect the lives and experiences of a broad and very diverse range of students and staff.
- Represent and celebrate students' different religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds via diverse teaching, activities, mentors, and community inclusion.
- Display student work and showcase a diversity of ability and expression in arts, sports, performances, and neurodivergent ways of communicating and thinking.
- Use seasonal displays to build and increase a sense of community and belonging.
- Practice and exemplify virtues every day in classrooms and on school grounds.
- Support a sense of joy, wonder, and service to others by providing hands-on project spaces where students can think, create, lead, make, and serve others.
- Support built environment interventions by implementing school-based antibullying programs and policies which are regularly revised and updated.
- Provide teachers with manuals explaining classroom design and functions to maximize choice, change, adaptability, and suitability to meet student needs.

The design of “antibullying” environments shall elevate ways to promote student supervision, respect, self-esteem, and support. By adding features and furnishings which expand choice, social interactions, and autonomy, school environments shall work hand in hand with staff to actively reduce stress, promote a sense of fair play, increase feelings of safety, and improve mental health with the goal of reducing bullying and isolationism. *As always, Architects need to find a “balance” between designing open and welcoming spaces and providing for security. This shall involve the strategic placement of security doors, gates, and lock systems as well as prudent use of laminated or bullet-resistant glazing, window coverings, signal alarms, and other deterrents geared towards limiting building entry or controlling movement.*

It is important not to stifle students' feelings of joy and wonder occurring when they lead their own learning and explore the unknown through imaginative thinking, collaborative play, and risk-taking. *Students learn best when engaged in open-ended investigations with no correct answers, but at the same time they need to be shown what safe is, what inclusive experimentation looks like, and how diverse perspectives can benefit all.* To promote playful learning, schools shall be designed to engage the body and the senses by equipping spaces with flexible furnishings needed to facilitate movement, decision-making, and the ability to rearrange rooms. Maximizing choices on where to sit and how to learn helps to increase comfort, relieve stress, and imbue students with a sense of ownership and belonging, vital aspects of good mental health and safeguards against bullying.

Design Innovation & Creative Solution – Case Example:

Teaching Civility & Character-Building Traits to the Next Generation:

Administrators from the Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District in Carrollton, Texas recently used corridor renovations and floor replacement work as opportunities to improve school climate and advance character development in neighborhood facilities. They brainstormed ways to improve wayfinding, add a meaningful impact to young lives, and expose students to character-affirming traits by using bold graphics, coordinated color selections, and new lighting.

*Each principal provided a list of character traits or virtues they wanted their students to keep in mind, and these word or concept associations are reinforced through educational instruction, announcements, and awards. One elementary school is a STEM-focused school, and they chose words from Stephen Covey's, "7 Habits of Highly Effective People." Adding words to floors and walls helps spread the message and helps smaller-size, younger, or neurodivergent students, who tend to look downwards, navigate spaces. The words provide connection points to the focus virtues via small visual reminders or "nudges" throughout the day. **Replacing dark corridors with positive, inclusive messaging and with brightly lit spaces have been shown to help connect students and reduce instances of bullying.***

It took a collaborative design process to obtain staff's input and for the architects at *LPA Design Studios* to creatively interpret district's needs as well as work with manufacturer Shaw Contract to supply the flooring and to connect the flooring contractor to Waterjet Works for the wall graphics. It is expected that the effects of this effort will show up in the character-building traits of the next generation of citizens. The architects noted there are numerous possibilities for word-choice which can be carefully selected to reflect and express aspirations of a community.





Photographs provided by [Philip Einsohn](#) Principal at LPA Design Studios

C. Resource Reference Links

A4LE Members Forum Digest for Tuesday June 13, 2023.

Photographs and content posted by [Philip Einsohn](#) of LPA Design Studios in the A4LE Online Forum on Character Building Embedded into Design

Association for Learning Environments (A4LE)

<https://www.a4le.org>

A4LE is dedicated to enhancing the educational experience and is an international and interdisciplinary association of members and contributors comprised of educators, facility managers, architects, futurists, and planning professionals working at the cutting-edge intersection where “learning and place drive the evolution of learning” and shape the forms and expressions of responsive and student-centric learning environments.

Reference Information & Research White Papers:

Through the Lens of Trauma Informed Design (A4LE White Paper);

By the Cunningham Group

https://www.a4le.org/A4LE/Resources/Resource_Center/White_Papers/Trauma_Informed_Design.aspx

Trauma informed design is an approach to the built environment rooted in equity and empathy. As the concept gains traction in the design industry and beyond, the Cunningham Group is working to show how educational environments can incorporate trauma informed design concepts into a project's vision, goals, and inclusive design process.

Neuroarchitecture: Health, Happiness, & Learning (A4LE White Paper);

By Dr. Parul Minhas, Prakash Nair, AIA, and Louis Sirota, AIA

https://www.a4le.org/A4LE/Resources/Resource_Center/White_Papers/Neuroarchitecture.aspx

Neuroarchitecture is the study of how the built environment impacts the nervous system and it interconnected with other bodily systems, ultimately affecting our overall well-being, including cognitive and emotional health. With the growing awareness about the impact of built environments on our mental and physical health, there has been a rising need to consider neuroarchitecture when designing schools. Designing learning spaces based on insights from neuroscience research for architecture can have a significant positive impact on students' academic performance, emotional well-being, and physical health. Neuroarchitecture is about designing schools that are inclusive, stimulating, and supportive of learning in ways which promote a sense of purpose, belonging, and well-being, leading to more positive and productive experiences for all students.

Resource – “Building Out Bullying” Program in Australia

The Built Environment Checklist for School Staff – excerpts taken from:

<https://www.telethonkids.org.au/projects/building-out-bullying/>

The Building Out Bullying Project at Telethon Kids Institute was funded by Healthway and was supported by numerous organizations and educational institutions.

Building out Bullying Primary Investigators:

Jacinta Francis, Donna Cross, Erin Erceg, Gina Trapp, Natasha Pearce

Building out Bullying Project Collaborators:

Healthway (government health promotion agency dedicated to improving health)

Western Australia's Departments of Education, Finance, and Health

Western Australia Catholic Education Office

Associations of Independent Schools and Primary Principals of Western Australia

Resource – U.S. Federal Campaign to Support School Safety

www.SchoolSafety.Gov highlights how to prevent bullying and cyber-bullying as well as provides strategies to contribute to a positive school climate. Members of the school community can also download this [SchoolSafety.gov infographic](#) for an overview of bullying, strategies to consider to help identify, prevent, and address bullying, tips on best practices, and a sampling of resources.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in partnership with the U.S. Departments of Education (ED), Health and Human Services (HHS), and Justice (DOJ), has launched a 2023 public awareness campaign to highlight federal school safety resources and evidence-based practices available through SchoolSafety.gov. The resources available at this federal website provide sound starting points for learning about bullying and cyberbullying plus a wide range of school-safety topics. The public is encouraged to help implement anti-bullying initiatives.

Additional Resources – Bullying and Cyberbullying

The federal government identified additional resources that highlight strategies for school safety. Use these resources to learn more about bullying and cyberbullying.

[Prevent Bullying](#) Department of Health and Human Services

This website provides information to the public on bullying, such as definitions of bullying and tools to prevent bullying in schools. <https://www.schoolsafety.gov/sites/default/files/2023-04/Bullying%20Prevention%20Resources.pdf>

[StopBullying.gov](#)

Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice, 2023

This interagency website provides information from various government agencies on what bullying is, what cyberbullying is, who is at risk, and how schools and individuals can prevent and respond to bullying.

[Tips for Teachers on Cyberbullying](#)

Departments of Education, Health Services, and Justice, 2023

This webpage provides information for teachers, school personnel, and staff to identify warning signs a child is being cyberbullied or is cyberbullying, as well as strategies to prevent & address it.

[Stronger Connections Grant Program: Frequently Asked Questions](#)

Department of Education, 2022

These downloadable frequently asked questions document is designed to assist state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs) in guiding effective use of Stronger Connections funds to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments and to respond to inquiries the Department of Education has received from SEAs, LEAs, and students and families, about program implementation. The Stronger Connections Grant Program competitively awards subgrants to high-need LEAs to establish safer and healthier learning environments, and to prevent and respond to acts of bullying, violence, and hate that impact school communities at individual and systemic levels, among other programs and activities.

[Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment in Our Nation's Classrooms](#)

Department of Education, 2018

This training for teachers, administrators and school districts is made up of two modules to address bullying in classrooms. Specifically, it is designed to assist teachers in cultivating meaningful relationships with students while creating positive CR climates.

[What Do the Data Reveal About Violence in Schools?](#)

Department of Justice, 2020

This report reviews the trends in school violence from the most often cited sources of school safety data and discusses how it can be explored further through additional studies on school shootings and a federal effort to improve federal data and its implications for school safety.