Texas Team Survey Shows Progress in Implementation of Texas Teen Dating Violence Law

Results indicate need for more programming and resources

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Teen dating violence (TDV) is an epidemic in the United States. Statewide surveys of 16 to 24-year old Texans by the Texas Council on Family Violence show that 75 percent have either experienced dating violence or know someone who has, and 50 percent have personally experienced dating violence.

On May 18, 2007, Governor Rick Perry signed into law House Bill 121, mandating that each school district in Texas adopt and implement a dating violence policy. This policy must

(1) Include a definition of dating violence that includes the intentional use of physical, sexual, verbal, or emotional abuse by a person to harm, threaten, intimidate, or control another person in a relationship of a romantic or intimate nature, regardless of whether that relationship is continuing or has concluded; and
(2) Address safety planning, enforcement of protective orders, school-based alternatives to protective orders, training for teachers and administrators, counseling for affected students, and awareness education for students and parents.

Survey

As part of its efforts to strengthen and support teen dating violence prevention efforts, the *Texas Teen Dating Violence Prevention Team* (the "*Texas Team*") conducted an anonymous survey to assess the implementation of the Texas Teen Dating Violence Law in Texas school districts.

The survey was sent to administrators of more than twelve-hundred public school districts and charters in Texas, and the state's regional educational service centers managed by the Texas Education Agency. The invitation to participate in the survey was issued in December 2009, asking about the status of current efforts and soliciting information on additional resources needed. The survey closed on January 20, 2010.

One hundred eighty-five respondents from school districts across Texas completed the survey.

- 62% of respondents (N=86) were district level employees, among them 58 district superintendents; 38% of respondents represented individual campuses
- 65% of respondents (N=91) represented rural, 20% (N=28) suburban, and 15% (N=21) urban schools or districts.

While the survey results may not be considered representative for public school districts and charters across Texas, the Texas Team offers these findings to stimulate discussion about the implementation of the law and possible next steps.

Results

Results indicate that the primary objectives of the law passed in 2007 are partially being met and that districts are using a range of curricula and partnerships to build awareness and address the issue.

Dating violence policy. 80% of respondents (N=148) stated that their school or district had a policy addressing TDV. Most commonly the policy included a definition of TDV (79%) and procedures for responding to incidents (72%). Student complaint forms and safety planning were implemented by 43% of schools/ districts. 46% enforced protective orders. A school-based alternative to protective orders was provided by 30% of schools/districts. 27% of respondents reported having a prevention coordinator with duties addressing teen dating violence.

Counseling for affected students and awareness education for school personnel, parents, and students. The vast majority of respondents reported providing counseling for affected students (80%), followed by awareness education for students (78%). Significantly fewer schools or districts offered training for teachers (48%) and awareness education for parents (28%) as required. Educational activities for students were primarily guest speakers (55%), classroom-based curricula (45%), and fact sheets and brochures (47%). Slightly less than one third of schools or districts conducted school-wide awareness campaigns or used video presentations and posters.

Classroom-based curricula. Forty-five respondents provided information on the curricula they used for TDV prevention.

- 7 stated that they integrated TDV prevention in health classes and developed their own materials
- 11 stated that they addressed TDV through curricula such as *Worth the Wait* (abstinence based sexual education, published by Scott and White)
- 3 named the *p.a.p.a.* curriculum (Parenting and Paternity Awareness, produced by the Texas Attorney General's office) as addressing TDV prevention.
- Other specific programs or curricula for TDV prevention were cited by 14 respondents, including *Love is Not Abuse, Love is Respect*. These TDV prevention programs appeared to be provided with an average of 1 - 3 sessions, sometimes to coincide with TDV Week.

Collaboration with community organizations. About one third of the respondents stated they had received assistance from their local police department or sheriff's office; 27% worked with local domestic violence centers and 15% with local rape crisis centers. The results indicate that schools are utilizing local law enforcement agencies to assist youth victims and may also be relying on them for prevention education, particularly in rural areas where domestic violence and sexual assault centers are spread thin.

Requested resources. The majority of respondents indicated that websites for youth (78%) and school personnel (68%) would be useful resources, followed by requests for print materials and videos (slightly above 60%), and classroom curricula (52%). Training and technical assistance for school personnel was not a top priority (40%). Materials in Spanish were requested by 50% of schools/ districts. Materials and videos were requested primarily for high school students (more than 90%), yet also for middle schools (more than 70%).

Discussion

The Texas dating violence law mandates that school districts in Texas adopt and implement a dating violence policy. The intent of this legislation is to increase safety for youth victims and increase awareness among school personnel, students and parents. The information obtained by this small sample of school districts and charters in Texas indicates that the Texas TDV law is being partially implemented. A few findings provide areas for potential improvement:

Increasing Safety for Youth Victims. Despite passage of the law in 2007, only 4 out of 5 districts have a TDV policy, procedures for responding to incidents, and provide counseling for affected youth. Less than half address safety planning, enforcement of protective orders, or school-based alternatives to protective orders, all provisions mandated by law. Given that 50% of TX youth report having experienced dating violence, policies, procedures, and interventions are still needed to increase safety and support for affected youth.

Awareness Education. Districts and schools appear to place relatively little emphasis on awareness education for teachers and parents, which may be a missed opportunity, given the important role of adults in modeling healthy relationships and, if needed, in recognizing warning signs of abuse. If educators are knowledgeable about dating violence and are prepared to talk about it openly, they will be more effective in delivering curricula and materials and be able to help prevent dating violence from occurring.

Classroom Curricula. The primary delivery means appears to be integrating TDV prevention into health classes and specifically into sexual health education. This may be a good strategy as healthy relationships and sexual health are clearly related. Research indicates that girls who are victims of dating violence are 4 to 6 times more likely than non-abused girls to become pregnant. However, the primary focus of the curricula used is not teen dating violence, but paternity and healthy parenting (*p.a.p.a.*) and abstinence (*Worth the Wait*). These curricula also rely on guest speakers, recommending that domestic violence personnel be brought in for the 1 to 3 lessons involving teen dating violence. There is some question about how effective these curricula may be as teen dating violence interventions.

Resources. Schools and districts appear to be unaware of existing on-line resources for youth and adults, including websites, evidence-based curricula, such as *Safe Dates*, and other research-based materials, such as *Choose Respect, Expect Respect* or *Break-the-Cycle*.

Collaboration. Schools/districts report more often collaborating with police departments and sheriff's offices than with SA/DV shelters, which may reflect an emphasis on criminal justice interventions and/or a reliance on law enforcement officers to deliver prevention education. The over-representation of rural districts in this sample may account for fewer partnerships reported between schools and SA/DV centers. In light of the high level of collaboration between schools and law enforcement agencies regarding this issue, training and leadership development on TDV intervention and prevention for law enforcement officers may be an important strategy for school districts.

Conclusions

This survey shows that Texas schools are taking a first step toward responding to dating violence and raising awareness among students, school personnel and parents. However, school-based interventions including procedures for responding to incidents, safety planning, enforcement of protective orders, school-based alternatives for protective orders, and counseling for affected students are being implemented inconsistently in Texas schools. Awareness education primarily consists of guest speakers and lessons on dating violence being integrated into related curriculum.

While these are important first steps in addressing dating violence and raising awareness, they are not considered effective for preventing dating violence before it occurs. Recent reports on a sharp drop in bullying at US schools credit comprehensive bullying prevention programs with the success (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, 2010). Unfortunately, the same study finds increases in dating violence among teens. Bullying prevention programs that engage teachers and parents through training, educate students with classroom curricula, and develop leadership and bystander skills may offer models for effective prevention of teen dating violence before it starts. Schools and policy makers should take steps to increase safety for youth victims and to support comprehensive prevention programming for teen dating violence.

The Texas Team works to strengthen and support teen dating violence prevention efforts at the local, state and national levels, and serves in an advisory capacity on the issue of teen dating violence for the state of Texas. Founded in 2005 by the Texas Governor's Commission for Women, the Texas Team aims to increase safe and healthy relationships and reduce dating and sexual violence among Texas youth. For more information, visit www.healthyteendating.org.