"TROUBLED WATERS" SURVIVAL GUIDE

FOR OREGON SCHOOLS

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Embrace Civility in the Digital Age

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In schools across Oregon, staff and students appear to be experiencing increased levels of anxiety and stress, bullying, harassment, aggression, disruption, and violence in classrooms, hallways, and other school spaces, as well as online.

Based on reports, the rate at which students are attempting suicide has exploded across Oregon during Spring 2018. This author has heard reports of a 400% increase in youth suicide attempts in some regions (that is not a typo). A recent study released in Pediatrics found that youth suicides are most prevalent during the school year.[1]

Nationally, there have been 22 school shootings in 2018--once a week. The most recent Santa Fe shooting holds some significant lessons. This student was not on anyone's radar. If someone had reported that he was distressed and potentially violent and a threat assessment had been conducted, this concern likely would have been dismissed because he was not considered a student who was otherwise "at risk." This appeared to be a situation of murder and attempted suicide, triggered over distress related to rejection of his advances by a girl.

There is an understanding in suicide prevention of the concerns of contagion--that news of someone who has ended his or her life by suicide or knowing someone who has suicided can cause an increase in suicide, because distressed others then see suicide as an option they could consider.[2]

It is this author's belief that what we are seeing nationally, with a clear potential of coming to this state especially next fall, is school shooter contagion. Politics nationally have become fraught with contention over race, national origin, LGBTQ issues, and sexual harassment/assault issues. Regardless of which side someone is on, simply the focus of attention can be a trigger to some form of an overreaction.

It is also clear that gun control and school shootings will have a major focus in the election. Based on research into the contagion of violence, there appears to be an increased risk that students who are distressed and angry at other students could think that killing them, and then themselves, is an option they should consider.

In an excellent workshop report from National Academies Press, entitled Contagion of Violence: Workshop Summary, this statement was made:

While it is commonly accepted knowledge that violence begets violence, many workshop speakers emphasized that epidemiological research methods can reveal the ways in which violence spreads, both from one act of violence to many and as a spillover from one type of violence to others.

The primary findings of this workshop were:

- Violence is contagious both within and across types of violence, including suicide.

- Social norms contribute to the contagion of violence. Changing those norms has the potential to interrupt such violence.

- Media can both facilitate and prevent the contagion of violence. However, the role of the Internet in the contagion process is not well understood.

- Increased, repeated, and dramatic coverage of violence can lead to increased rates of violence, including suicide.

- Youth decision making and impulsivity might be one reason why young people may be more susceptible to contagion through media reporting and other peer and social networks.

- Understanding how the contagion process works inform the development of violence prevention interventions.

- Changing social norms and increasing protective factors are two key intervention strategies. Successful interventions require an evidence-base, an implementation system, and the political will.

While the research literature is sparse, one review of the literature has demonstrated that news of mass shootings and murder suicides may be contributing to contagion, and thus further incidents of violence or threats of violence.[3] Certainly, prior to this Spring, our society has not experienced the level of school shootings that have occurred.

Research has also reliably found that there is a connection between suicide and mass shootings. One study demonstrated that 31% of school shooters died by suicide during the incident.[4] Certainly many of the recent school shooters also have expressed suicidal thoughts after the fact. Most murder-suicides involve intimate partner relationships. Some have suggested the term "suicide preceded by mass murder" for the mass shooting incidents.

As there are undoubtedly a wide range of potential motivations, nevertheless, it is considered that efforts that are directed at suicide prevention and intervention should also help to address concerns of school shootings.

In 2016, the Oregon Health Authority completed the Youth Suicide Intervention and Prevention Plan, 2016–2020.[5] This plan notes that Oregon's youth suicide rate has been nearly twice the national rate for many years. There is no single reason for or cause of suicide and it is known that suicide is multidimensional, involving many factors at many levels of influence. However, being bullied and engaging in bullying is a known risk factor. In the Oregon Plan, bullying is the first of two risks noted.

A study of school shootings by the Secret Service conducted in *, demonstrated that bullying is associated with these shootings.[6] As noted:

Almost three-quarters of the attackers felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked or injured by others prior to the incident (71 percent, n=29).

In several cases, individual attackers had experienced bullying and harassment that was long-standing and severe. In some of these cases the experience of being bullied seemed to have a significant impact on the attacker and appeared to have been a factor in his decision to mount an attack at the school. In one case, most of the attacker's schoolmates described the attacker as "the kid

every one teased." In witness statements from that incident, schoolmates alleged that nearly every child in the school had at some point thrown the attacker against a locker, tripped him in the hall, held his head under water in the pool or thrown things at him. Several schoolmates had noted that the attacker seemed more annoyed by, and less tolerant of, the teasing than usual in the days preceding the attack.[7]

A recent study in Pediatrics documented that students who are bullied are twice as likely to bring guns to school. https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/Pages/Victims-of-Bullying-Twice-as-Likely-to-Bring-Weapon-to-School.aspx.

This is the 2016 Oregon Student Wellness Survey data on weapons at school.

So 7.6% of high school students has brought a weapon to school in the 30 days before the survey in 2016. In a 1,500 student high school, that is 118 students who brought a weapon to school. And 1.4% of them brought a gun. That is 21 students brought a gun to school in the 30 days before the survey. It only takes one student to kill many students and staff. This was 2016. The 2018 Student Wellness Survey data will not be available until next fall or winter. Does anyone want to make some predictions for this data in 2018?

Here is witnessing bullying data from SWS:

Here are 2 items from the Positive Youth Development questions -- this is also asked on the 2017 OHT and showed ever greater concerns related to emotional distress.

Note that 1 in 4 Oregon middle and high school students does not think that at least one teacher or other adult in school really cares about them! Both SWS and OHA have asked this question for years and there has been no change.

If a correlation was conducted between these two data points, I would lay odds that the students who do not report positive mental health -- those who are experiencing greater emotional distress and are at greater risk -- are also the ones who do not have supportive connections with school staff.

Here is the data from questions on supportive school environment:

Clearly, improving staff-student relations must have a huge priority as we move into the new year! If roughly 40% of students do not think they can talk openly and freely about their concerns to school staff, how can we expect that we will tell someone they are distressed or someone they know is distressed and have an opportunity to intervene when serious situations emerge?

We also have to focus on increasing student resilience. COSA has been providing excellent leadership in promoting trauma informed care. I have found the insight on this site to be exceptionally helpful: https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/. This from the site:

Research has identified a common set of factors that predispose children to positive outcomes in the face of significant adversity. Individuals who demonstrate resilience in response to one form of adversity may not necessarily do so in response to another. Yet when these positive influences are operating effectively, they "stack the scale" with positive weight and optimize resilience across multiple contexts. These counterbalancing factors include

1. facilitating supportive adult-child relationships;
2. building a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control;
3. providing opportunities to strengthen adaptive skills and self-regulatory capacities; and
4. mobilizing sources of faith, hope, and cultural traditions

The other issue that is imperative address is the effectiveness of school staff in responding to reports of bullying, hurtful incidents, distress, etc. Based on the research, school staff are woefully ineffective in responding to reports of bullying. It is my opinion, this is because they are treating these incidents as potential violations of the disciplinary code, they have not been taught about the different natures of bullying behavior, and they have not learned more positive approaches that have a greater likelihood of success for a positive resolution for all involved students.

Based on conversations with several mental health professionals in my community, they have many young patients who are experiencing bullying and the school response has not helped -- or has made things worse. Frequently, these students are the ones who have been punished -- because after ongoing bullying that the school had not responded to effectively, they triggered and retaliated. I have been told that when the counselors contact the school, the response is "very frustrating." (exact words)

Mental health professionals who are receiving this email, if what I have described is the case in your regions, would you please reach out to your local school leadership and tell them of this. It appears that there needs to be a high priority on establishing a process whereby local counselors, physicians, or special education advocates who know of a bullying situation that has not been effectively addressed can report this at the district level and efforts are then implemented to better address this concern. The professionals who have reported should remain engaged to ensure successful resolution, reporting back to the district if this is not the case.

The reason this is so important relates to the concerns of suicide and violence prevention. **It is essential that we increase the likelihood of student reporting.** If students do not think

reporting bullying or other distress situations to school staff will make things better or could make things worse, then they are less likely to report other concerns.

I have produced 2 videos that seek to explain these issues related to bullying and harassment. These videos explains what is not working and why -- and research-based positive strategies that hold promise for greater effectiveness. My apologies for focusing on the negative at the start. I do not know how to help educators improve practice without helping them understand what is not working and why. This is not for the purpose of blame. This is for the purpose of understanding what the challenges are so that new approaches that have a greater probability for success can be implemented.

The actions that I suggest are the most important going into next fall are:
- Concerted effort to improve student-staff relations.
- Increased efforts in trauma informed care -- especially implementing mindfulness, problem-solving, and strengths-focused activities in every school.

- Provide suicide/violence gatekeeper training to all school staff -- and middle and high school students.

- Establishing student-leadership efforts to promote resilience, acts of kindness, and gratitude.
- Improve the effectiveness of staff interventions when hurtful incidents are witnessed or reported.

- Establish a process whereby local counselors, physicians, special education advocates and other professionals serving youth can approach the district in situations where a bullying or harassment situation has not been effectively addressed.

The 2017 Oregon Healthy Teens survey documents these concerns. The percentage of students who do not meet the Positive Youth Development Benchmark has increased. The significant most contributing factor to this appears to be the increase in students reporting poor emotional and mental health. The percentage of students feeling sad and hopeless every day for more than two weeks has increased. The rate at which students report being bullied has also increased.

Unfortunately, Oregon's education system is like a huge ship that has been proceeding in one direction for too long--a focus on test scores. This ship has been deprived of necessary funds that parts have become destabilized and all of the cabins have become overfilled. Oregon school leaders are striving mightily, against great odds, just to keep this ship afloat. And now the waters have become significantly more treacherous and troubled.

It must be understood that students who are stressed cannot effectively learn and staff who are stressed cannot effectively teach. The priority for Oregon schools, given these troubled waters, clearly must be on ensuring the the safety and emotional well-being of students and staff in an environment that is inclusive and welcoming to all. Only upon making this a priority, can effective learning occur.

Some school leaders may be trying to respond to these increased behavior challenges with increased authoritarian demands and responses to the disruption and upset. This is not an effective way to respond.

Research has clearly documented that schools that rely on authoritarian practices have higher levels of bullying and violence.[8]

The title of this document, "Troubled Waters Survival Guide," reflects the perception that we are well into the 2017-18 school year and most significant district and school directions have been set. The approaches suggested in this document should not be viewed as major new initiatives. These are strategies that are relatively easy to implement that, based on the research, are most likely to have a relatively rapid positive impact.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

POSITIVE STAFF-STUDENT RELATIONS

The Making Caring Common project at Harvard Graduate school of Education states this in the opening description for its relationship mapping tool:

> *There may be nothing more important in a child's life than a positive and stable relationship with a caring adult. For students, a positive connection to at least one school adult–whether a teacher, counselor, sports coach, or other school staff member–can have tremendous benefits that include reduced bullying, lower drop-out rates, and improved social emotional capacities. Rather than leave these connections to chance, relationship mapping invests time in making sure that every student is known by at least one adult.[9]*

Children who have more fully internalize the regulation for positive school-related behaviors are those who feel securely connected to, and cared for by, their parents and teachers.[10]

It is essential to focus on building more positive staff student relations. In Oregon, on the 2016 Student Wellness Survey, students provided the following responses to these four questions:

- My teachers notice when I am doing a good job and let me know about it - 6th grade--79%. 8th grade--68.8%. 11th grade--64.7%.

- I can talk to my teachers openly and freely about my concerns - 6th grade--68.9%. 8th grade--56.6%. 11th grade--61.1%.

- In my school, teachers treat students with respect - 6th grade--88.6%. 8th grade--77.1%. 11th grade--76.6%.

- There is at least one teacher or other adult in my school that really cares about me - 6th grade--73.5%. 8th grade--66.1%. 11th grade--71.2%.

Essentially, one-third of Oregon students apparently are not being noticed and do not have a connection with a school staff member who really cares about them. Changing this situation must have the highest priority. School leaders are strongly encouraged to present this data to their staff and engage their staff in problem solving, using the above questions, to develop strategies to achieve an improvement in these numbers--with the knowledge that this survey will be administered Spring 2018. It is possible to obtain school district specific data on the Student Wellness Survey.

Start with the Harvard Relationship Mapping tool or any other similar tool.[11] Make sure every student has an assigned adult mentor. Provide regular opportunities for staff discussions about how their mentoring relationships are going. If there are any challenges in any mentoring relationships, investigate and problem solve to find a better path forward.

Encourage a significant increase in staff praise of student effort and strategy using growth mindset language.

- Make praise specific, noting accomplishments. Offer praise when a student deserves it, so that the praise has meaning. Praise efforts to achieve success even if those efforts did not achieve success--the efforts are what should be praised. Offer encouragement when the student is struggling.

- Do not praise a student in a way that sets him or her up as "better" than others. Do not use a rewards approach that rewards students who have few challenges and publicly shames or excludes the students who have greater challenges.

- Pay attention to the students known to be at higher risk and praise their efforts very regularly.

- Provide written notes offering praise of effort, strategy, and accomplishments. Regularly send a notes to parents or guardians, especially of students who are at higher risk.

- If a correction of student behavior is necessary, ensure that a positive acknowledgement of the student's change in behavior is provided.

- Make expressions of gratitude when student behavior has been helpful to the school community, staff, or to other students.

Enunciate clear standards for how staff are expected to treat each other and students. Significantly increase staff positive acknowledgement and praise of students. Ensure that every student has at least one school staff member who has made a commitment to be a supporter. Identify those students who are at greater risk and ensure that every teacher knows to be attentive to making a positive connection with these students every day.

SCHOOL-WIDE MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

The practice of mindfulness helps people achieve calmness and focus—to self-regulate.[12] Research has documented effectiveness of mindfulness training and practice in addressing stress-related concerns of students, with documented positive results in students' physical health, psychological well-being, social skills including emotional regulation, and academic performance.[13]

Students who are treated badly often fail to self-regulate and respond to being treated badly in a way that appears to perpetuate the hurtful behavior—or they engage in impulsive retaliation. The daily practice of mindfulness can assist in reducing the potential of an impulsive overreaction.

Helpful resources are available through a number of programs, including Mindfulness in Schools Project, Mindful Schools, Center for Mindfulness, and MindUP.[14]

This effort does not need to be really complicated to start. Glitter jars are an amazing approach, especially at the elementary level. Get started by leading a brief period of mindful breathing and reflection during morning announcements and an announcement after lunch break.

These are some recommended reflection statements: Something that happened that you are thankful for and why you are thankful. Something you did that you are proud of. A goal of yours and one action you took today or recently to accomplish this goal. How you reached out to be kind to someone today. Who you connected with today in a positive way and how this made you feel. A challenge you addressed and how you successfully thought things through. How you used a personal strength of yours.

PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

When students gain interpersonal relationship problem-solving skills—that is learn how to think of their own solutions to problems, consequences to their actions, and how they and others feel about things—they are less likely to engage in risk behavior and are more resilient in figuring out how to respond if someone is hurtful to them.[15]

The Collaborative and Proactive Solutions or Collaborative Problem Solving approach can be used by a teacher or principal seeking to resolve a behavior problem with a student.[16] Students can be encouraged to use problem solving if they have been treated badly to identify a positive response and for conflict resolution.

A problem solving approach that has been fully incorporated into student instruction in Embrace Civility in the Digital Age's student program, *Embrace Civility,* is to ask these questions: What is the situation? (If this is a stressful situation, the discussion about the situation may be extensive and require reflective thinking.) What are your objectives? What possible strategies could you implement that use your strengths? For each, what challenges might you face and how could you best meet these challenges? Is each strategy in accord with your values? For each, what might happen? What is your best first choice? What else could you do if this does not work? How will you determine success?[17]

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

A groundbreaking book, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, identified 24 character strengths.[18] Every person possesses all 24 character strengths in different degrees, giving each person a unique character profile. When people understand and can use their character strengths effectively, this can have a significant positive impact on their lives.

The character strengths identified include: creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective and wisdom, bravery, perseverance, honesty, zest, love, kindness, social intelligence, teamwork, fairness, leadership, forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-control, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality.

The VIA Institute on Character has a free strengths inventory on its web site that secondary students and school staff can complete.[19] The Institute also has extensive additional resources for schools to support the development of these character strengths.[20] A brief version of this character strengths inventory, developed with the Institute's permission, is provided on the Embrace Civility in the Digital Age web site with resources for Oregon educators.[21]

An emphasis on character strengths can help schools focus on student strengths, rather than current challenges and what they lack. It is recommended that schools have all students and staff complete the VIA Character Survey to identify their personal strengths. These strengths can be celebrated by presentation and creation of artwork displaying such personal strengths. This provides a way to celebrate a different kind of "differences" and focus on building important strengths.

Each week, schools can use the resources from the VIA site to focus on how to build a different character strength. Reflections in morning announcements can include quotes related to the specific character strength. When any challenges emerge, in the context of problem-solving, students can be encouraged to think about their personal strengths and identify strategies to pursue that use their personal strengths.

STUDENT LEADERSHIP TEAM

The best way to motivate students to foster a positive and inclusive school climate and reduce hurtful behavior is to give them the responsibility to help to make things better. Shifting responsibility to students also requires giving them a strong voice in deciding what the school community will do to ensure a positive school climate for all students. There are excellent resources online to support increasing student voice.[22]

Establish a Student Leadership Team that is diverse and includes those students who have a well-established reputation for treating others with respect and reaching out to help those who are treated badly. Strive to avoid including "popular" students who have been hurtful to establish social dominance.

ACTS OF KINDNESS AND THOUGHTS OF GRATITUDE

The highest priority activities for the Student Leadership Team should be on school wide activities to promote acts of kindness and thoughts of gratitude.

Being kind to others has many positive benefits.[23] Research has documented the positive benefits of kindness, including the fact that kindness is contagious—witnessing kindness leads other people to be kind and that being kind helps people feel stronger, more energetic, calmer, less depressed, and leads to increased feelings of self-worth.[24] One key study in a school demonstrated that students who were instructed to perform three kind acts for others every day experienced significant increases in peer acceptance.[25]

Students who have positive feelings about themselves and are happy are less likely to demonstrate perceived weakness that could lead to their being targeted and better situated to avoid thinking badly of themselves if this occurs. The Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania assessed a number of positive strategies to determine their effectiveness in promoting happiness.[26] One key strategy that was found to have the highest success in generating happiness writing down every evening three things that went well or what they were grateful for.

The Student Leadership Team should be encouraged to investigate possibilities and to be creative in envisioning and implementing kindness and gratitude projects in their school.

The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation has excellent resources.[27] Also search for "kindness, schools" online for creative ideas. Creating a Gratitude Tree is a common activity for Thanksgiving. Seek to extend this kind of activity throughout the school year and into the community.

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP SKILLS AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Provide instruction to assist students in gaining a greater understanding of differences and that addresses how people can foster better relationships and resolve hurtful situations.

The Teaching Tolerance web site has excellent instructional resources to support cultural competence.[28] The National Education Association's Diversity Toolkit focuses on these five basic cultural competence skill areas: Valuing diversity. Being culturally self-aware. Dynamics of difference. Knowledge of students' culture. Institutionalizing cultural knowledge and adapting to diversity.[29]

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) strives to make SEL an integral part of education from preschool through high school.[30] CASEL has identified five interrelated sets of social emotional competencies: Self-awareness. Self-management. Social awareness. Relationship skills. Responsible decision making.[31] Embrace Civility in the Digital Age's student program *Embrace Civility*, focuses on reinforcing positive social norms held by the majority of the students and teaching effective relationship skills.

INTERVENTIONS IN HURTFUL SITUATIONS

It is imperative to shift away from a disciplinary response in hurtful incidents to a response that holds students accountable. A disciplinary response usurps the role of the targeted student and turns the situation from a harmful offense against that student, which should require remedy, to a violation of a school rule—the consequence of which cannot even be disclosed to the targeted student. Disciplinary consequences teach nothing and often generate anger, which can lead to retaliation.

The restorative practices research insight is excellent. However, the restorative "circles" or "conferences' approaches present challenges in situations involving bullying, because often there are imbalances of power between the students and the outcome may not provide the ongoing support some students may require.

Hurtful incidents will occur along a continuum. It will be helpful for all staff to know their responsibilities when a hurtful incident is witnessed or reported. Tier I Level Incidents are minor incidents that participants are able to resolve by themselves or students are able to resolve with a low level of assistance by general school staff. Tier II Level Situations are more serious or chronic situations involving students or staff that require resolution by a designated staff person—a counselor or the principal. Tier III level situations involve students on either side who are at a much higher level of risk—frequently students who are both targeted and who are hurtful.

At the Tier II or III level a comprehensive investigation must identify how frequently hurtful acts are occurring, how many students are involved, and whether retaliation is involved. Challenges experienced by all involved students must be identified and a plan developed to address. Students who have been hurtful should be required to engage in problem solving to identify how they will remedy the harm to the one they treated in a hurtful manner and to the community, as well as how they plan to stop themselves from engaging in such harmful behavior. Aspects of the overall school environment that are hostile to any groups of students must be identified and a plan developed by a school leadership team to address these concerns.

A new resource for school leaders, entitled *Empower Students to Embrace Civility*, will be released by Embrace Civility in the Digital Age in early 2018. This resource provides in-depth guidance on an approach to better investigate and intervene in hurtful incidents.

Given the troubled waters we have entered, school leaders must place a high priority on ensuring the safety and well-being of students in an environment that is inclusive and welcoming to all. Hopefully, these suggested strategies will help.

EMBRACE CIVILITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age focuses on the identification and development of research-based strategies to support positive school climate, foster positive relations between students and between students and staff, and support the effective resolution of hurtful incidents and situations. Embrace Civility in the Digital Age's new positive norms-based student program is *Embrace Civility*. A new resource for school leaders, *Empower Students to Embrace Civility*, will be released in mid 2018.

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