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# Teacher Involvement with the Dignity for All Students Act

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Teacher Involvement with the Dignity for All Students Act

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## Table of Contents

Title Page.....	1
Acknowledgements.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
List of Tables and Figures.....	5
Abstract.....	6
Introduction.....	7
Review of Literature.....	8
A Background on Bullying.....	8
Perceptions and Experiences of Bullying.....	12
Prevention Efforts.....	16
Legislation.....	20
Method.....	24
Participants.....	24
Instrumentation.....	25
Procedures.....	26
Results.....	27
Descriptive.....	27
Inferential Analyses.....	28
Qualitative.....	29
Discussion.....	29
Implications for School Counseling.....	31
Limitations.....	32

Future Research.....32

Conclusion.....32

References .....34

Tables and Figures .....40

Appendix.....44

List of Tables and Figures

**Table 1:** Marshall et al.’s (2009) Two-Dimensional Model of Teacher Responses to Bullying Incidents.....40

**Figure 1:** The percent of respondents that found out about a bullying incident compared with those who have used DASA reporting forms.....41

**Figure 2:** The percent of teachers that found out about bullying/harassment incidents in various ways.....42

**Figure 3:** The percent of teachers responding to bullying/harassment incidents in various ways. ....43

### Abstract

Bullying and harassment concerns are increasing in schools and causing significant problems for students, school staff, and families. The Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) is New York State legislation that targets bullying in schools. This mixed methods study examined how well teachers implement DASA. A survey was administered to teachers of grades 6 – 8 in a small school district. While most teachers have implemented the various parts of DASA, there is still room for improvement. Most teachers found out about a bullying or harassment incident, but few completed the DASA report form. While all teachers included DASA information in their curriculum, some included it minimally. Teachers with more experience in the district were less likely to witness a bullying incident than teachers with less experience in the district. The researcher recommends a comprehensive program to support DASA initiatives in this district.

### Teacher Involvement with the Dignity for All Students Act

Bullying is a significant issue that has been occurring in schools for generations. With technology such as social media Internet sites, online gaming, and cell phones in the hands of children and adolescents, the problem not only occurs throughout the school day but also follows students home. This problem has been gaining attention over the past several years as students are increasingly affected by bullying, sometimes to the point of committing suicide. Students who are bullied may experience a range of significant effects including emotional concerns and behavioral problems (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt, & Arseneault, 2010; Brendgen et al., 2013; Reijntjes et al., 2011, Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010). Bullying also has an effect on a school's climate; an increased prevalence of bullying could impact the school's overall academic performance (Brendgen et al., 2013, Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013; Lacey & Cornell, 2013).

States have been passing laws over the past several years that attempt to prevent bullying in schools and promote a school culture of respect (Kueny & Zirkel, 2012). For example, New York State recently passed the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA). This new law promotes dignity and respect for all students. The law specifically protects students against harassment based on "race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practice, disability, sexual orientation, gender, or sex" (Dignity for All Students Act, 2013). Since DASA recently went into effect (July 2012, amended for July 2013), no studies examining DASA implementation have been published.

There are several different parts of the DASA legislation; one section requires all school personnel to report incidents of harassment. Teachers spend a significant amount of time with students and are thus in a role in which they can address bullying behavior they witness.

Therefore, this study seeks to find out how well teachers are implementing DASA. Specific research questions are (a) “How many bullying/harassment issues are teachers encountering and in what ways (witnessing, student report, etc),” (b) “How are teachers responding to harassment and bullying incidents,” (c) “How many incidents are teachers reporting,” and (d) “Are teachers including DASA information in the curriculum?”. More information about the research questions will be detailed in the Method section. Through learning more about how teachers are implementing DASA, students, teachers, parents, school staff, administrators, community members, and lawmakers will have a better understanding of teacher involvement in bullying response and prevention, post DASA implementation. This greater understanding has the potential to help all of these stakeholders continue in their work toward effective bullying response and prevention. The remaining sections will review the literature related to bullying, bullying prevention and intervention, and anti-bullying laws. In addition, the current study will be explained in depth including method, important results, and a discussion of implications and recommendations for schools.

### **Review of Literature**

The following review of the literature will provide a background on the issue of bullying, definitions of bullying, and effects on individuals and the school climate. Key persons in the problem of bullying are students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Each group tends to have different perceptions and responsibilities as they relate to bullying. These different roles and experiences are explained through relevant literature. Various primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention efforts are described followed by a review of anti-bullying legislation across the United States. Finally, the Dignity for All Students Act is described in detail.

### **A Background on Bullying**

**Definitions.** Bullying can be defined in many ways. However, the United States government resource (Stopbullying.gov) defines bullying as “unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time” (United States Department of Health and Human Services, n.d., p. 1). Throughout the literature, Olweus’ (1994, 2010) definition is often used to define bullying. As one of the original researchers on the topic, he has published numerous articles on the topic of bullying. He describes negative interactions as bullying if the situation meets three general criteria of intention, repetition, and a power imbalance (Olweus 1994, 2010). There are several types of bullying including physical, verbal, gesturing, and purposeful exclusion. Bullying occurs by a single person or group of people, typically to a single targeted student (Olweus, 1994).

Through an analysis of data from a 1997-1998 World Health Organization survey that included a representative sample of American middle and high school students, Barboza and his colleagues (2009) found several factors that correlate with bullying behavior. On an individual level, bullies are more likely to be male than female and white than African American or Asian. In addition, students who are bullied are more likely to bully others. This study also showed that other factors associated with increased bullying behaviors may include strong friendship connections, little parental support, more television watching, and low self-confidence (Barboza et al., 2009).

**Effects on individuals.** Bullying can significantly affect students in various ways. First, students who are bullied experience more emotional and behavioral problems than students who do not experience victimization by their peers (Bowes et al., 2010; Brendgen et al., 2013; Reijntjes et al., 2011; Reijntjes et al., 2010). For example, students who are victimized often

show aggressive behavior or other externalizing problems such as misconduct or attention difficulty (Brendgen et al., 2013; Reijntjes et al., 2011). This may be a cycle because those externalizing problems are also linked to later increased victimization (Reijntjes et al., 2011). This cycle is also reflected in the internalizing experiences that students have when victimized by peers. Reijntjes and colleagues (2010) conducted a meta-analysis on students' experiences with peer victimization and internalizing problems such as anxiety, depression, and withdrawal. They found that psychological maladjustment was predictive of higher rates of peer victimization (Reijntjes et al., 2010). Furthermore, students who are physically victimized at school are more likely to complain of various health ailments such as sore throat, cough, nausea, low appetite, or worry about going to school (Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2001).

Bullies, victims, and bully-victims (those that sometimes bully and are sometimes victimized) all experience negative outcomes related to health, social life, finances, and behavior later in life (Wolke, Copeland, Angold, & Costello, 2013). Furthermore, students who bully others are significantly more likely to have a criminal record. For instance, approximately 55% of the criminal register is made up of people who acted as bullies in school (Olweus, 2011). The negative outcomes in adulthood experienced by those involved in bullying incidents still exist for victims and especially for bully-victims after controlling for risk factors such as family troubles and childhood psychiatric disorders. While there are especially negative outcomes for bully-victims, the number of students in secondary settings who are bully-victims is relatively small when compared to students who are primarily in the victim or bully role (Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007). In addition, students who are victimized chronically have more negative outcomes in adulthood than those bullied just once (Wolke et al., 2013). It is important to note that not all students who are victimized experience significant negative consequences. Some

students have higher resilience and experience positive life outcomes despite negative bullying experiences. Various factors affect a student's resilience, including maternal warmth, sibling warmth, and a positive atmosphere at home (Bowes et al., 2010).

**Effects on school climate.** Acts of harassment and bullying impact more than just the student who bullies and the student who is victimized. Bystanders and friends of the students involved are impacted as well; the effects can reach the entire school community. Male students who are victimized often display aggressive behavior; if the student's friends are also victimized, the aggressive behaviors increase. This could mean that friends learn reactive aggression from each other, want to defend a friend who is victimized, or spread anger to friends (Brendgen et al., 2013). However, many students tend to display low amounts of aggression when peers that are not friends are victimized. This could mean that students fear victimization by the bullies and avoid involvement unless a peer identified as a friend is the target (Brendgen et al., 2013).

Bullying that occurs in a school can also make an impact on all students' academic performance. The prevalence of teasing and bullying in a school, as rated by both teachers and students, can predict the dropout rates of that school (Cornell et al., 2013). In addition, the prevalence of teasing and bullying affects scores on academic tests. For example, schools with low prevalence of bullying passed at rates 2.8% - 6.6% higher than schools with a high prevalence of bullying (Lacey & Cornell, 2013). It seems plausible that students who frequently observe teasing behaviors would perceive the environment to be less supportive and positive, contributing to a negative view of the school climate. These perceptions could lead to lower scores and higher rates of drop out.

### **Perceptions and Experiences of Bullying**

**Students.** The information above discussed the impact that bullying and victimization have on students and the school climate. Considering bullying from the perspective of the students themselves can provide a unique insight into the issue. In a longitudinal study examining students' perceptions and understanding of bullying, Frisen, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson (2008) found that self-reported number of bullying incidents seem to decrease with age (from age 10 to 13). This could be explained by student definitions of bullying also changing with age. At younger ages, students include many mean or unpleasant actions from peers as bullying, whereas at age 13, students have a clearer understanding of the concept of bullying. The definitions students write at age 13 more often include the repetition of action and indirect forms of bullying than at age 10. In addition, there are sex differences among student definitions of bullying. Girls more often discuss the victim's negative experience when defining bullying than boys do. Boys are more likely to discuss the imbalance of power and repetition associated with bullying in their definitions. Students most often describe appearance as a reason someone is bullied. The bully's personality or motives to feel a certain way (tough or cool) were stated as main reasons for bullying by 36% of 13-year-olds (Frisen et al., 2008).

The literature has focused on the experiences of students within specific groups who are bullied. First, students placed in special education programs at school who are identified as having mild disabilities (mild intellectual disability, learning disability, behavioral disorder, speech impairment) were more likely to be viewed as bullies by their peers. Teachers rate students with mild disabilities as more likely to be bullied than their peers in general education (Estell et al., 2009). Students with disabilities also self-report higher rates of victimization than general education students (Rose, Espelage, Aragon, & Elliott, 2011). Rose and Monde-Amaya (2012) assert that teachers (and any support staff) can encourage students with disabilities by

helping them learn self-determination in handling bullying situations. This will help students fight any learned helplessness. In addition, teachers can help students develop age-appropriate social skills by engaging in meaningful conversations with them.

Another group who experiences significant bullying is comprised of students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). A large survey of LGBT youth in America found that over 90% of respondents often hear the word “gay” used in a derogative way in school. More than 60% of respondents indicated they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation and over 38% indicated feeling unsafe due to their gender expression. Forty-four percent of the group indicated being physically harassed (pushed) and 22% physically assaulted (kicked, punched, etc.) due to their sexual orientation (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008). Victimization of BGT (bisexual, gay, or transgender) boys mediates the effect of later mental health concerns such as depression and suicidality. In other words, victimization that occurs in schools may cause poor mental health later in life for GBT men (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011). These findings indicate a significant need to address the harassment of LGBT students.

**Parents and guardians.** Parents and guardians are often indirectly involved with and affected by bullying. Most parents believe bullying has a negative impact on students and that schools should provide prevention and intervention efforts. However, about 33% of parents do not believe parents should be involved in the school efforts to decrease bullying. In addition, about 33% of parents believe children should fight back when they are bullied. This information shows that there is room for further parental education about their vital role in preventing and responding to bullying (Holt, Kantor, & Finkelhor, 2009). Parents often have different perceptions of the bullying within their children’s school than their children. For example,

students self-report significantly higher rates of bullying than their parents report are occurring with their children (Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002). In addition, those parents rate the school as seeming safer than their kids report. However, the parents tend to have a better understanding of the concept of bullying than their children. They report knowing bullying occurs in a larger variety of locations and forms (physical, verbal, social, etc.) than their children (Stockdale et al., 2002).

Parents whose children have been bullied in school may or may not report the bullying to school officials. Of those that do, Brown, Aalsma, and Ott (2013) found that they typically experience three stages. First is the discovery stage. During this time, the parent realizes their child is being bullied. Parents may recognize externalizing behaviors and inquire, or the student may share the information directly with the parent. Parents attempt to give advice and help their child. When they realize the bullying is continuing, they move into the reporting stage by alerting school officials. Most parents that participated in the study reported unhelpful experiences working with the school officials. Parents thought that the principals did not handle the incidents in a manner consistent with the school handbook or that would be likely to curb the bullying behavior. Finally, the parents move into the aftermath stage. At this point, parents start to believe they are on their own to deal with the problem. If they have resources, they may move their child to another school. If not, they may continue dealing with the aftermath of the bullying by taking their child to counseling or a doctor for anxiety, depression, or other internalizing behaviors. Parents often feel defeated and continue to live with the turmoil their child is experiencing (Brown et al., 2013).

**Teachers.** Since students spend the majority of the school day with teachers, teachers' perceptions of bullying are important in understanding the state of bullying within schools.

Understanding teachers' experiences in the classroom can help administrators with school policy making and enforcing, organizing professional development appropriate for teachers, and addressing any patterns that occur in the school. Most teachers believe teasing is a positive and prosocial behavior, while bullying is a negative, antisocial behavior. To decide whether an incident is prosocial teasing or bullying, the teachers look for several factors in each situation such as intention of or perceived harm to the target, whether the behavior is reciprocated, the relationship of the students, and if there is humor involved. Intended harm is the factor most used to decide an action is bullying rather than prosocial teasing (Harwood & Copfer, 2011; Smith et al., 2010). In addition to teachers' observing specific factors in a situation to determine if there is bullying involved, a teachers' past experiences with teasing and bullying have an impact on their perceptions. For example, teachers that had negative personal experiences with teasing in childhood tend to view teasing as antisocial behavior. Teachers with neutral experiences with teasing see some prosocial benefits as well as the negative potential of teasing. Since bullying and teasing are conceptualized differently it may be beneficial for teachers to help students understand the complex nature of teasing and to differentiate teasing from bullying (Harwood & Copfer, 2011).

While teachers differentiate between teasing and bullying, they may also have a difficult time recognizing certain harassment or bullying situations. In one study, teachers described situations they had witnessed that met the authors' definition of sexual harassment, yet the teachers themselves did not think the situation constituted sexual harassment (Rahimi & Liston, 2011).

**Administrators.** A survey of principals in several schools throughout a southern state showed that less than 1% of principals believe bullying is a nonexistent problem in their schools,

88% of principals view bullying as a minor problem in their school, and 10% view bullying as a significant problem in their school (Flynt & Morton, 2008). Based on the information discussed above, bullying seems to be more of a problem for students than principals are reporting. This could be a result of the nature of the administrative role being further removed from students than teachers and the students themselves (interacting with each other). It could also be a result of the teachers handling most classroom teasing on their own through proactive strategies and conversation (Harwood & Copfer, 2011). If that is the case, principals may only meet with students involved in the fewer, but most intense bullying cases. In addition, principals typically rate the extent to which bullying is a problem as higher in other schools in the United States than it is in their own school. The administrators rated response efforts such as calling parents after a student has bullied another student as most effective for prevention even though whole-school prevention approaches are found to be more effective throughout the literature (Dake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2004; Elinoff, Chafouleas, & Sassu, 2004).

### **Prevention Efforts**

Prevention programming is important for minimizing the amount of bullying in a school and for encouraging appropriate responses when bullying does occur. In addition, it is important to increase student knowledge of what bullying is, how to show respect for others, and the support students have from trusted adults in their life. The following sections explore prevention starting with primary prevention intended to include most students and staff in a school and leading to tertiary prevention which has a more limited audience.

**Primary prevention.** Primary prevention is intended for the whole population. This includes lowering the risk of any problems by promoting positive health (National Public Health Partnership, 2006). As it pertains to bullying, this involves including the whole school

community (teachers, administrators, students, staff, and families) in bullying prevention. Promoting a positive school climate, enforcing a specific code of conduct, implementing supportive legislation, and educating students are all primary prevention efforts. McCarra and Forrester (2012) recommend that teachers promote a positive atmosphere for students in the classroom and educate them about bullying. One study suggests that less than a third of teachers are devoting class time to discussing bullying, bullying prevention, or setting classroom rules about bullying with their students (Dake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2003). Dake et al., (2003) call for increased training for teachers and administrators about the effects of bullying and effective response techniques. Stauffer, Heath, Coyne, and Ferrin (2012) found that teachers indicate prevention is important for decreasing cyberbullying, yet 49% of teachers said they were unsure about instituting a formal prevention program. This could be a result of being unsure of the school's need for a formal program, not being sure as to the effectiveness of programs, or thinking that these tasks are the responsibility of parents instead of teachers and staff (Stauffer et al., 2012). It is important to educate all school staff about prevention programs prior to implementation to help stakeholders understand the importance, relevance, and effectiveness of the programs. Adequate education and teacher preparation also helps ensure program integrity (Stauffer et al., 2012). Supportive teacher behavior and classroom structure can influence the amount of bullying behavior. Specifically, teachers can decrease the probability of bullying by actively promoting the welfare of students, showing they are interested in students' needs, allowing students to express themselves, promoting cooperation, and acting equitably (Barboza et al., 2009).

A comprehensive program that engages students, staff, and community members and aims to shift the school climate has the potential to make an impact toward improving students'

relationships with one another, decreasing bullying that may be occurring, and preventing further bullying. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is one such program that claims success with such goals (Olweus & Limber, 2010; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Elinoff and his colleagues (2004) state that there are four other school-wide primary prevention programs that seem to be effective based on research available in the literature. These include the Second Step Violence Prevention Program by Grossman et al. (1997), Resolving Conflict Creatively by Aber, Jones, Brown, Chaundry, and Samples (1998), Providing Alternative Thinking Strategies by Greenberg and Kusche (1998), and the Peacebuilders Program by Embry, Flannery, Vazsonyi, Powell, and Atha (1996). The common attributes of these programs include parental involvement, training for all school staff, a shift in the school culture, and generalization of skills across environments due to the inclusion of parents and staff (Elinoff et al., 2004).

**Secondary prevention.** Secondary prevention is intended for people in the beginning stages of a problem. This would include a larger audience than those included in the more targeted tertiary prevention efforts. Identifying a problem early and intervening before it becomes worse is the main goal at this level of prevention (National Public Health Partnership, 2006). McCarra and Forrester (2012) recommend teaching students conflict management skills. This may be an effective secondary prevention tool because students that are at risk for bullying or being bullied can learn these techniques to better handle conflict. Students' successful use of these skills can be a powerful tool in preventing bullying or harassment incidents from happening during times of stress or conflict with each other. When rated by self, peers, and teachers, targets of bullying are typically rated as having social skills deficits. More specifically, students that are often victims of bullying incidents typically display vulnerability and non-assertiveness, reinforce the bullying by their response, act withdrawn, and annoy other children.

Social skills development or training programs could potentially aid students in developing skills that could positively impact their lives by decreasing their vulnerability to or reinforcement of bullying (Fox & Boulton, 2005). Elinoff et al., (2004) supports these ideas by recommending social skills or assertiveness training in small groups for students with beginning signs of peer victimization or past history of peer rejection. They also recommend the problem solving skills groups for those that show aggressive behavior (Elinoff et al., 2004).

**Tertiary prevention.** Tertiary prevention aims to manage a problem that is already occurring. For example, tertiary prevention should prevent recurrences, progression, or complications associated with the problem (National Public Health Partnership, 2006). Tertiary prevention measures as they relate to bullying are intended for students already involved in bullying incidents. These measures may include responding to bullying in the moment and intervening with the goal of stopping the bullying from continuing or progressing. Teachers respond to teasing and bullying incidents in various ways based on their past history and perception of what is happening in the situation (Harwood & Copfer, 2011; Smith et al., 2010). There are numerous ways in which a teacher could respond to bullying in the classroom. Marshall, Varjas, Meyers, Graybill, and Skoczylas (2009) introduce a model for conceptualizing these teacher responses to bullying incidents. The self-reported responses are categorized based on teacher intent as either constructive or punitive and teacher involvement as either direct or indirect. Table 1 shows this two dimensional model. This model can be helpful for understanding the various responses or interventions that teachers may employ as tertiary prevention. The top two responses to bullying incidents tend to be talking with the students and referring to an administrator. For instance, the majority (86.3%) of teachers report having discussions with

students involved in bullying incidents (Dake et al., 2003). Relative to cyberbullying, teachers tend to report the incident to an administrator (Stauffer et al., 2012).

While teachers employ various methods in responding to bullying incidents, their confidence in employing them is variable. Teachers report more confidence in recognizing the bullying incidents than in managing or responding to the specific incidents (Goryl, Neilsen-Hewett & Sweller, 2013). However, this confidence may not represent a skill in recognizing the incidents (Rahimi & Liston, 2011). The teachers report a need for training that covers responding to bullying incidents so they can feel more confident in handling tertiary prevention (Marshall et al., 2009). Especially when it comes to cyberbullying, teachers seem to feel a need to respond, but may not know how to best respond (Stauffer et al., 2012).

McCarra and Forrester (2012) set recommendations for teachers in how to address bullying. The tertiary prevention methods they describe include responding to the incidents with follow up and using bibliotherapy with younger students. Students that are already displaying serious aggressive behavior toward others could benefit from student, staff, and parent meetings to develop a functional behavioral assessment (FBA). The discussion of the FBA would include identifying specific strategies for intervening in situations with a particular student. In addition, the FBA could include a method for developing skills to help the student avoid disruptive behavior and display more positive behaviors in the future (Elinoff et al., 2004).

### **Legislation**

**United States of America.** Across America, states are implementing laws to help prevent bullying and harassment in schools. A study published in 2012 provides relatively up to date (2010) information about the key components of states' bullying laws (Kueny & Zirkel, 2012). In 2010, 43 states had laws that specifically addressed school bullying. Although most states had

anti-bullying laws, much of that legislation was minimal. However, a few states have begun implementing more comprehensive legislation. Twenty-seven states had legislation related to Cyberbullying in 2010. There is a broad range in what is included in these various state laws. Few include all aspects of the United States bullying definition discussed above (imbalance of power, repetitive, negative intention; United States Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). In addition, most states do not include a requirement for staff to report incidents of bullying and half of the states do not mention consequences for the students acting as bullies (Kueny & Zirkel, 2012). With regards specifically to prevention, Edmondson and Zeman (2011) found that 76% of states had specific laws that required bullying prevention in schools. Of the states with bullying prevention mentioned, 63% require primary prevention, 26% mention secondary prevention methods, and 63% discuss tertiary prevention measures. Kueny & Zirkel (2012) assert that the current state antibullying laws lack strength and incentive for school compliance.

**Dignity for All Students Act.** DASA is legislation put forth by the New York State Education Department that went into effect July 2012 and was amended for July 2013. The intent behind the law is to “afford all students in public schools an environment free of discrimination and harassment... to foster civility in public schools and to prevent and prohibit conduct which is inconsistent with a school's educational mission” (DASA, 2013, pp. § 10). This is important because issues of harassment impact students and a school climate in negative ways. It also asserts that students should not experience bullying from students or staff based on “a person’s actual or perceived race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practice, disability, sexual orientation, gender, or sex” (DASA, 2013, § 12). The several tenants of the law require schools to put forth various efforts to reduce bullying.

First, schools must address issues related to civility, character education, respect for all persons, and bullying prevention in their curriculum (NYS Education Law: Instruction in Certain Subjects, Article 17 Section 801a). Second, schools are expected to revise an existing or create a new student code of conduct that includes issues related to DASA such as the expectation of respect for all persons, the definitions of harassment, and the various protected group descriptions. Parents and students should be able to report incidents of harassment or bullying and all school staff members are expected to report any incidents of which they become aware. Staff must report the incident orally to a designated administrator within one school day of becoming aware of the incident, and in written form within two school days of the oral report. The administrator is expected to respond to the incident promptly and make strides to ensure the safety of those involved in the incident and reporting process. The administrator is also expected to inform law enforcement when the issue seems criminal, report trends to the superintendent regularly, and report incidents to the New York State Education Department each year (DASA, 2013).

According to the legislation, all students, staff, and parents should receive a copy of the policies related to DASA every year. Staff training related to DASA should include recognizing and reporting incidents of harassment, best practices in preventing and responding to bullying, and the effects of bullying and discrimination. At least one staff member in each school should be trained thoroughly in diverse human relations and is designated the school Dignity Act Coordinator. The school should implement strategies to prevent bullying. In addition, all school personnel should go through training on harassment and bullying response and prevention prior to certification (DASA, 2013). The 2013 amendment to the law added some of the requirements included in the description above; however, the major change is the addition of the words

bullying and cyberbullying to the law (in addition to harassment and discrimination that were previously listed). Cyberbullying that occurs online and off of school property is also prohibited if it would reasonably interfere with the student's school life. The classroom instruction, therefore, should also include instruction on safe Internet use (DASA, 2013).

The parts of DASA legislation that directly involve teachers include attending training related to DASA; recognizing, responding to, and reporting bullying and harassment incidents; including instruction on civility, tolerance, respect, diversity, harassment and bullying prevention, and safe use of the Internet. Therefore, these topics are the main interests of the researcher.

In conclusion, bullying is a widespread problem with far-reaching consequences. The problem is continuing to grow and the concern is rising. The accepted definition of bullying seems to include three traits, an intention of harm, repetition, and a power imbalance (Olweus, 1994). The literature is teeming with information on bullying, harassment, and victimization in schools. Effects of bullying on students have been explored widely. Students seem to perceive the highest rates of bullying over parents and teachers (Stockdale et al., 2002) which indicates an issue that is not fully addressed. Students are likely aware of bullying of which parents and teachers are unaware. In addition, students may not have a clear understanding of the meaning or definition of bullying to accurately report prevalence (Frisen et al., 2008). There is a need for further training for teachers and other school staff as it relates to recognizing and responding to incidents (Goryl et al., 2013; Rahimi & Liston, 2011). While various prevention measures exist, whole-school approaches to bullying prevention are most helpful (Elinoff et al., 2004). DASA legislation promotes a whole-school approach. For example, all teachers and staff are expected to be trained and to report any bullying incidents of which they become aware, administrators are

expected to investigate and respond to the incident promptly, students receive prevention instruction during classroom time and are made aware of DASA legislation and the school's conduct expectations. Parents and guardians have an opportunity to report any incidents and are also notified about DASA and the student code of conduct. Since teachers play a significant role in bullying prevention and DASA legislation, the current study aims to understand teachers' current level of DASA implementation. Since no literature has yet studied or reviewed the implementation of DASA, this study will begin to fill a much needed gap in the literature. In addition, the study can serve as a needs assessment for administrators and the DASA team to understand what training may be important and helpful to provide for teachers in this specific school district.

### **Method**

This section describes details pertaining to the method of the study, including the participants, the survey used, and all procedures involved. The research followed a mixed methods descriptive design. This approach allowed the researcher to ask questions of teachers via survey to gain a better understanding of how teachers are involved with DASA in a specific school district.

### **Participants**

The researcher chose a small school district in which she was an intern to perform the study. This convenience sample allowed her to study a current and prevalent concern (DASA implementation) within specific time and budgetary constraints. The survey was sent to all 53 teachers working in the 6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Of the 53 teachers, 23 responded. One did not fully complete the survey so that participant was not included in the results. Therefore, 41.5% of the surveyed population was included in the sample. Of the 22 participants, 17 (77.27%) were

female and 6 (22.73%) were male. A total of 31.82% of the participants worked in the middle level (grades 6 – 8) and 68.18% worked in the high school level (grades 9 – 12). The participants worked in the school district for an average of 9.95 years.

### **Instrumentation**

The instrument used in this study was a survey developed by the researcher. The survey questions are listed in the Appendix. The survey was distributed to all 53 members of the population using Survey Monkey. Questions on the survey focused on the bullying and harassment incidents that teachers have witnessed, heard about, and reported in the months of the school year prior to receiving the survey. In addition, the questions asked about involving information about civility and diversity in curriculum. Finally, the survey asked about teacher confidence with implementing DASA. Most scores on the survey were on nominal (categorical) scales. As seen in the Appendix, Question 1 asked for informed consent, therefore the results to that question are not considered in the results. Each participant provided informed consent. Question 2 asked for gender. Since all participants answered as either male or female, this scale was considered a bivariate nominal variable. Question 3 asked about grade level and gave options for middle (grades 6 – 8) or high school (grades 9 – 12); therefore, this variable is also bivariate nominal. Question 4 asked for years of experience in the school district, making this the only interval variable. Question 5 gave categories of responses for the number of times teachers were involved with bullying incidents per month so this variable is considered multivariate nominal. Questions 6 and 7 asked teachers to check all boxes that apply. Therefore, the results to these questions were considered as “yes” or “no” responses for each check box option, making these questions several individual bivariate nominal variables. Question 8 asked how many times the teacher completed the DASA report form. This question can be considered multivariate

nominal variable since there were specific number responses from “0” to “10+” or bivariate nominal variable with those answering “0” representing one category, and those answering anything other than “0” as the other category. Question 9 and 10 were open-ended questions. Question 9 asked about including DASA information in the curriculum. The open-ended responses can be broken down into “yes” or “no” answers, turning this question into a bivariate nominal variable. However, this process requires some interpretation by the researcher on some responses. Question 10 is a two-part question asking about confidence with DASA and anything that may be helpful for increasing confidence. This question could be categorized as a multivariate nominal variable into categories of “not confident/prepared,” “somewhat confident/prepared,” “confident/prepared” with some interpretation by the researcher.

The questions on the survey were original since there is currently no published research on DASA. The question asking teachers how they have responded to bullying and harassment incidents since the beginning of the school year had several response options. These options were based on research by Marshall et al., (2009) discussed previously. The questions were reviewed and revised by the High School Principal, the Middle School Counselor, and a supervisor of the researcher. The raw data is available upon request from the researcher.

### **Procedures**

The researcher acquired permission from the district Interim Superintendent, Interim Principal, and school counselors, and attained IRB approval. Prior to the survey being sent to participants, the researcher spoke briefly at a district staff meeting to encourage all middle level and high school teachers to participate in the survey. The survey was then sent to all teachers of grades 6 through 12 via email. Participants were allowed two weeks to complete the survey and a reminder email was sent to all participants three days prior to the survey closing. The survey

produced mostly nominal variables and one interval variable (years of teaching experience), as described above. Therefore, Chi-squared analyses and T-tests were performed on the results.

## **Results**

The following information details results of the study. The survey produced both quantitative and simplistic qualitative data; therefore, the results are reported as such. The research design is a mixed methods descriptive study. Quantitative results include chi square tests and t-tests.

### **Descriptive**

All 53 teachers of grades 6 through 8 were sent a survey invitation, with 23 responding. One survey was incomplete and was therefore omitted, making N=22 and the response rate 41.5%. As seen in Figure 1, over 60% of teachers said they found out about a harassment/bullying incident, yet just over 20% said they had filled out a DASA report form. As seen in Figure 2, the most common ways teachers reported finding out about harassment or bullying incidents included witnessing the event or a report from an administrator or counselor. In addition, confession or reports from the student who was targeted, a friend of the student or a bystander of the incident, were the next most common sources of finding out about an incident. The three most common ways of responding to incidents included pulling the student aside to talk, calling out the inappropriate behavior, and consulting other educators. The final question on the survey allowed respondents to write about feelings of confidence and preparedness in implementing DASA. Most responses were short “yes” or “no” answers. The researcher used discretion categorizing descriptive responses into “yes,” “no,” or “somewhat” categories. A total of 50% (n = 11) responded “yes,” 31.82% (n = 7) responded “somewhat,” 13.64% (n = 3) responded “no,” and one respondent’s answer could not be categorized.

### **Inferential Analyses**

The one interval (scale) variable represented in the data was years of teaching experience in the district. The relationships of years of teaching experience with key nominal variables were tested using paired samples with two-tailed t-tests. Years of experience teaching in the district had a significant relationship with whether or not teachers reported personally witnessing bullying and harassment incidents ( $t=6.251$ ,  $df=21$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $\alpha= .01$ ). As the number of years of teaching experience in the district increased, teachers were less likely to report witnessing bullying and harassment incidents. Those who reported witnessing a bullying incident had a mean of 8.67 years of teaching experience and those who did not report witnessing a bullying incident had a mean of 10.85 years of teaching experience in the district. Another interesting finding using a paired samples two-tailed t-test was that years of experience teaching in the district was significantly connected with whether or not the teacher had completed a DASA reporting form that year ( $t = 6.190$ ,  $df = 21$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\alpha=.01$ ). Those who had less experience were more likely to have filled out at least one report. The mean years of experience in the district of the group who filled out at least one report was 5.80; the mean years of experience in the district of those who did not fill out a report was 11.18.

Chi square analyses were run between the nominal variables. Gender, grade level (6-8 or 9-12), the various ways in which teachers found out and responded to bullying and harassment incidents, preparedness to implement DASA, and whether or not incidents were reported were entered into SPSS as nominal variables. No statistically significant relationships were found among the nominal variables.

These inferential statistics show that teachers may be implementing DASA to variable extents. The lack of significant findings among the chi square analyses show that there are not

any specific nominal variables that relate to one another. The strongest significant result from the inferential statistics shows that teachers with more experience in the district are less likely to witness a bullying incident. There are several possible reasons for this relationship which will be explored further in the discussion section.

### **Qualitative**

The one question on the survey that garnered significant qualitative responses asked teachers if they included DASA related information in their curriculum (such as civility, citizenship, character education, tolerance/acceptance, respect for others, dignity, or awareness and sensitivity in relations with diverse people). In reviewing the open ended responses, no teacher specifically said they did not at all address any of these issues in their classroom. Five respondents (22.73%) discussed including this information in the classroom rules. For example, one teacher said, “Yes the primary rule in our classroom is respect, respect for each other, to adults...” Two teachers (9.09%) said they bring in an outside presenter to discuss these matters in a special presentation. Three teachers (13.64%) said they discuss these topics through the literature selected for class. Six teachers (27.27%) stated they incorporate these issues into their class lessons (that they may already be teaching). A prime example of this, stated by one teacher was, “I teach tolerance and acceptance of other cultures as part of my curriculum.”

### **Discussion**

This study was conducted to explore teacher implementation of DASA in a small school district. Grades 6 – 12 teachers were surveyed about their experiences with bullying and harassment. The first research questions asked, “how many bullying/harassment issues are teachers encountering and in what ways (witnessing, student report, etc).” Over 60% of teachers indicated they had found out about bullying or harassment incidents since the beginning of the

year. Most teachers found out by witnessing an incident, followed by finding out from the administrator or counselor.

Teachers most frequently reported responding to an incident by pulling the student aside to talk to her/him, calling out the inappropriate behavior, and consulting other educators about the situation. These results are consistent with the literature which mentions talking to students and referring to administrators as top teacher responses to bullying (Dake et al., 2003). Whereas over 60% reported learning about bullying or harassment incidents, just over 20% reported an incident using the DASA reporting form. There are several potential explanations for this discrepancy. The first is that teachers did not report bullying and harassment incidents that they should have reported. Failure to report could be due to an existing relationship with or preconceived notions of the students involved or a misunderstanding of the reporting requirement. Another potential explanation is that teachers do not report incidents that they became aware of through someone who already reported the incident (administrator, counselor, other teacher, etc.). Most likely there is a combination of reasons.

No teachers explicitly said they do not include DASA information in their curriculum; however, the teachers described including this information to varying degrees. Many teachers incorporated these principles informally; for example, many mentioned incorporating these principles in class rules and addressing the problems as they become concerns in the classroom. This could potentially be very beneficial, but may be even more powerful when coupled with purposeful lesson plans about respecting diversity, civility, acceptance, and character education.

Another interesting finding is that there was a significant relationship between the number of years of teaching experience in the school district with the likelihood of witnessing a bullying/harassment incident. The more years of teaching experience the teacher had in the

district, the less likely they were to indicate personally witnessing a bullying or harassment incident. There are several potential explanations for this finding. It is possible that the teachers simply had less bullying and harassment issues happening in their environment. Another consideration is that the teachers may not be as aware of the current bullying and harassment trends as teachers with less experience. Another potential explanation is that teachers with more experience in the district are less apt to incorporate new legislation into the practices that may have seemed to work for them for years. The more experienced teachers may have different definitions of what constitutes bullying and harassment and may not view an incident as bullying that a less experienced teacher may define as bullying.

### **Implications for School Counseling**

There are several implications for school counseling from this research. Mainly, while teachers are somewhat implementing DASA, there is still room to more fully align practices with the intent of the legislation. School counselors should be fully aware of DASA and the specific procedures within their schools. Teachers may approach counselors with questions or the counselors may need to address concerns with teachers. In addition, counselors may be expected to present DASA and related information to teachers in various settings, including trainings or staff meeting reminders. Counselors should advocate for consistent education and training regarding bullying, harassment, respect, character education, diversity and acceptance, etc. to encourage and develop all students and staff in these areas. Counselors should use empathy and understand that change is difficult and that there may be resistance to new legislation, policies, or ideas regarding bullying and harassment. However, with empathic understanding can come a challenge to find the positive in the changes and therefore implement the changes to best serve the students.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this research. First, the sampling was convenient and therefore the results may not be generalizable outside of this school district. Although the response rate was acceptable the sample size was still relatively small, giving the statistical tests and the overall results less power. Since the survey was developed by the researcher, these questions have not been tested for reliability or validity. In addition, there was interpretation required for the open-ended questions, which leaves room for error and misunderstanding.

**Future Research**

Since this study is the first research on DASA implementation that the researcher could find in the literature, it is important to continue studying this topic. It would be helpful for a study to evaluate DASA implementation across multiple districts in New York State. This would be an effective way to study the effectiveness of the legislation and the effect it is having on schools. Finally, since harassment and bullying are significant concerns that may only increase with changes in technology, practical research that can aid schools and families in effectively addressing bullying and harassment could prove to be monumental and valuable.

**Conclusion**

Recommendations for the school district studied include further training and discussions about DASA. More clarity on what implementing DASA means for teachers will be helpful for teachers to grasp the various ways in which this legislation affects their role in the school. In addition, the DASA team might consider implementing a united, comprehensive bullying prevention program that includes the various aspects of DASA. Many of the parts of DASA implementation are happening, but different teachers are responding to DASA in different ways. It would be helpful to create a comprehensive program that includes all staff, and that was

disseminated in a way that created buy-in from every member of the school community. With a comprehensive program, training and discussions could be centered and focused through this program. A comprehensive program could also positively impact the school environment by increasing a sense of unity and consistency through the thorough nature of the programming. Overall, this study has provided data concerning DASA implementation among teachers in a small school district. While teachers are beginning to have an understanding of DASA and to implement DASA in their classrooms, there is significant room for improvement and a need to provide further professional development for faculty concerning bullying and harassment concerns.

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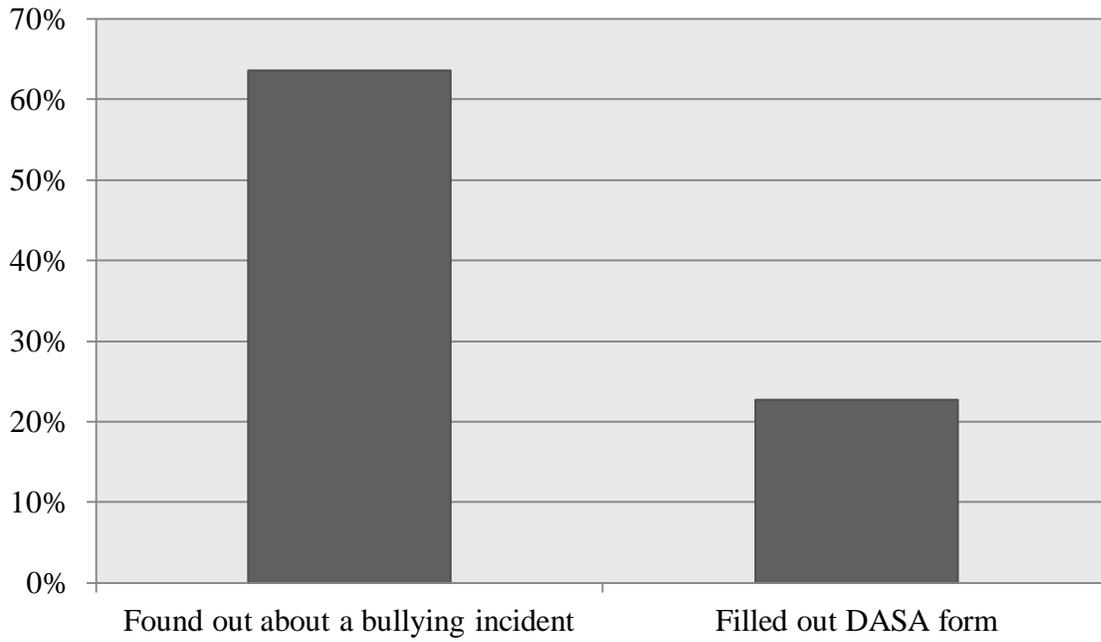
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Table 1

*Marshall et al.'s (2009) Two-Dimensional Model of Teacher Responses to Bullying Incidents*

		Teacher Involvement	
		Direct Response	Indirect Response
Teacher Intent	Constructive Response	<b>Constructive-Direct Responses</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pull aside and talk to student(s)</li> <li>2. Call out inappropriate behavior</li> <li>3. Protect the victim</li> <li>4. Make bully apologize</li> <li>5. Use personal experience with bullying</li> </ol>	<b>Constructive-Indirect Responses</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Send, inform, or refer student(s) to counselor</li> <li>2. Consult other educators</li> <li>3. Call victim's parents</li> </ol>
	Punitive Response	<b>Punitive- Direct Responses</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Remove or move bully in the classroom</li> <li>2. Punishment</li> <li>3. Physically get in the middle of students</li> <li>4. Yell</li> </ol>	<b>Punitive-Indirect Responses</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Call bully's parents</li> <li>2. Send, inform or refer bully to administrator</li> </ol>



*Figure 1.* The percent of respondents that found out about a bullying incident compared with those who have used DASA reporting forms. These questions reflect teacher’s responses based on the first three months of the school year.

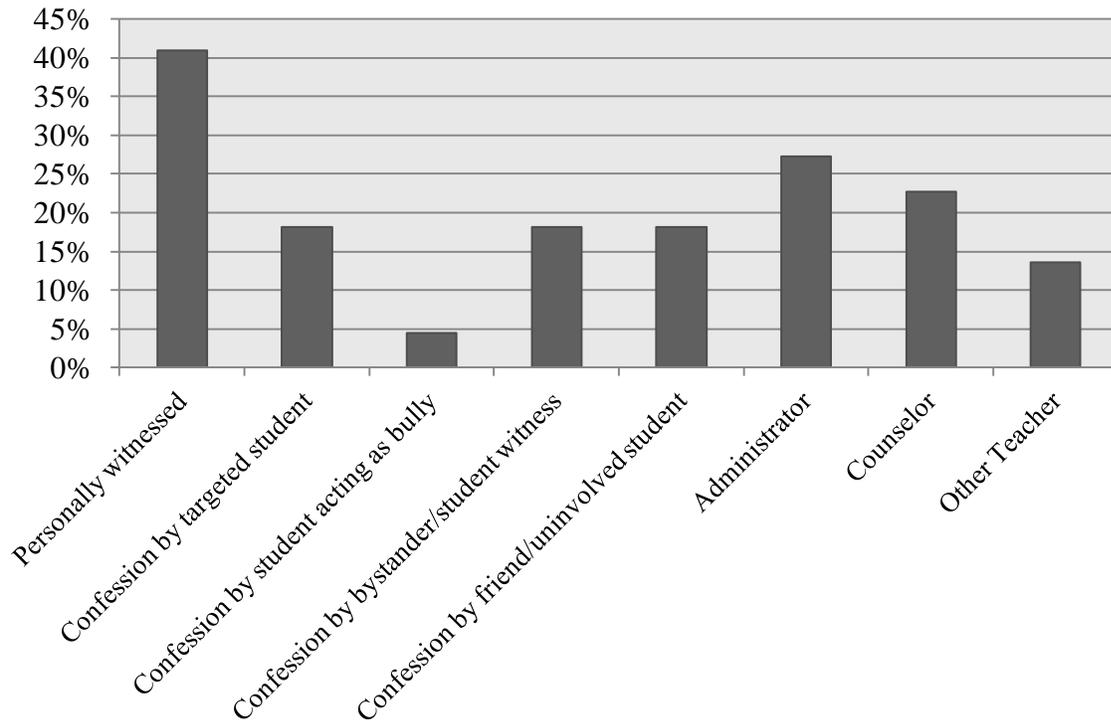


Figure 2. The percent of teachers that found out about bullying/harassment incidents in various ways.

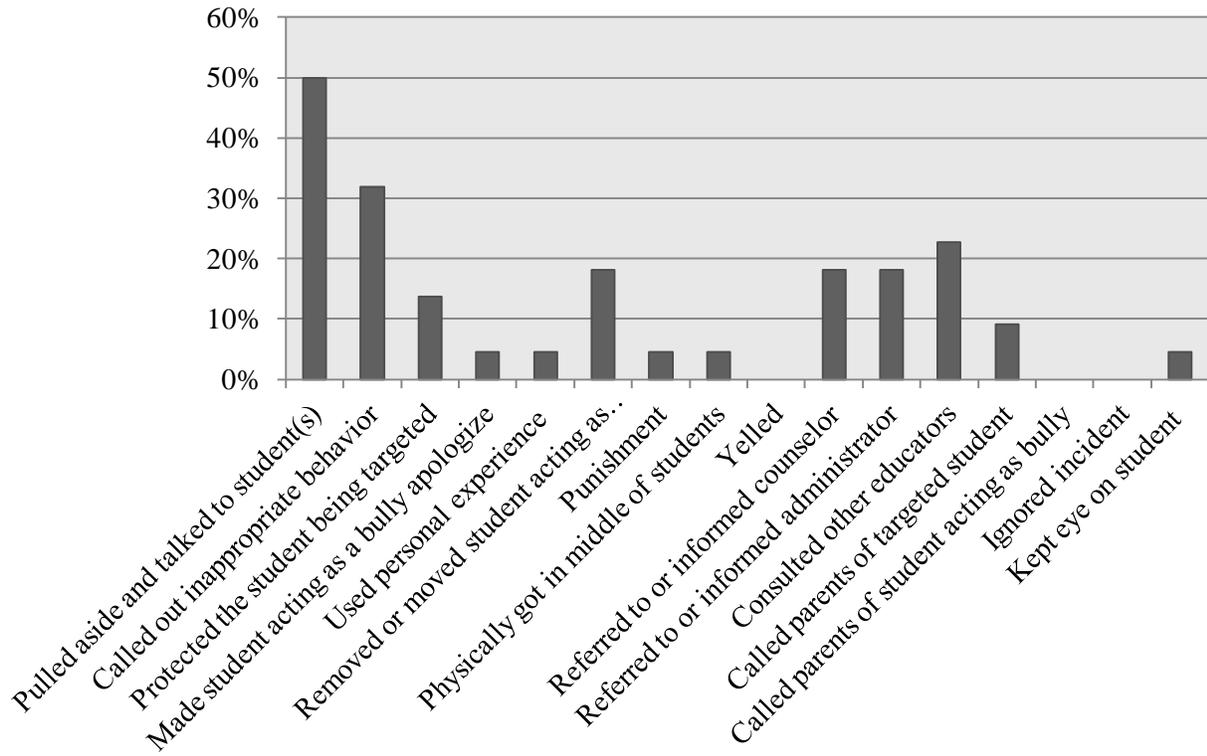


Figure 3. The percent of teachers that responded to bullying/harassment incidents in various ways.

*Appendix*

## Survey: Dignity for All Students Act - Teachers

## 1. Informed Consent Agreement

The purpose of this research study is to better understand how teachers are implementing the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA), how confident teachers feel with DASA, and what training teachers still desire and need for successful implementation. This research is being conducted as a thesis project required as a part of the researcher's master's degree program in the Counselor Education Department at the State University of New York, The College at Brockport. The information collected is completely anonymous and will be kept on a password-locked computer. The survey is ten questions (mostly multiple choice) and should take approximately 2 – 5 minutes to complete. Possible benefits and risks involved with this study are as follows. A potential benefit of this study is that participants have an opportunity to express their involvement and confidence with, and need for future training on the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA). Another potential benefit of this is that the school's Dignity Act Team, administration, and counselors will have an opportunity to better understand what additional training (about DASA) would be most beneficial for teachers. This may lead to future DASA trainings informed by the survey results. IP addresses and email addresses will not be linked to your survey, therefore results are anonymous. Potential risks include time to complete the study. In addition, administrators will be seeing the results of the survey (although they will be anonymous). Some teachers may perceive this as a risk. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, but protected. This project has been approved by the SUNY College at Brockport's Institutional Review Board. Approval of this project only signifies that the procedures adequately protect the rights and welfare of the participants. Please note that absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the primary researcher or her faculty research advisor. (Contact information for both listed).

- I consent to participate in this research study. I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older and that I have read and understood the above information.
- I would not like to participate in this study. If you are selecting this choice, please do not continue further in this survey.

2. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Grade Level

- Middle (Grade 6 – 8)
- High (Grade 9 – 12)

4. Years of Teaching Experience in this school district: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Since the beginning of this school year, approximately how many different harassment/bullying incidents have you been involved with (i.e., witnessing, responding, and/or reporting, etc.) each month?

- |                                   |                                  |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Less than 1 | <input type="radio"/> 9-10       |
| <input type="radio"/> 1-2         | <input type="radio"/> 11-12      |
| <input type="radio"/> 3-4         | <input type="radio"/> 13-14      |
| <input type="radio"/> 5-6         | <input type="radio"/> 15 or more |
| <input type="radio"/> 7-8         |                                  |

6. Since the beginning of this school year, how have you found out about harassment/bullying incidents? (Choose all that apply).

- I have not found out about any harassment/bullying incidents this year
- Personally witnessed the incident
- Student confession by student who was targeted
- Student confession by student who is acting as the bully
- Student confession by bystander of incident
- Student confession by peer/friend (who didn't directly witness the incident)
- Administrator
- Counselor
- Other Teacher
- Nurse
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

7. Since the beginning of this school year, how have you responded to the incident(s)? (Choose all that apply) (Choices based on research by Marshall, Varjas, Meyers, Graybill, and Skoczylas, 2009).

- I have not been involved in bullying incidents this year
- Pulled aside and talked to student(s)
- Called out inappropriate behavior
- Protected the student being targeted
- Made the student acting as a bully apologize
- Used personal experience with bullying
- Removed or moved the student acting as a bully in the classroom
- Punishment
- Physically got in middle of students
- Yelled
- Sent, informed, or referred student(s) to counselor
- Sent, informed, or referred student acting as a bully to administrator
- Consulted other educators
- Called the parents of the student who was targeted
- Called the parents of the student acting as a bully
- Ignored the incident
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

8. Since the beginning of this school year, how many times have you filled out a Dignity for All Students Act Incident Report Form?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10+

9. Do you currently include instruction on civility, citizenship, character education, tolerance/acceptance, respect for others, dignity, and/or awareness and sensitivity in relations with diverse people in your curriculum? Please explain.

10. Do you feel prepared to implement DASA? Please explain why or why not. What would be helpful for you to increase your preparedness and confidence in implementing DASA (recognizing, handling, responding to, reporting bullying incidents; including information on civility, citizenship, character education, tolerance/acceptance, respect for others, dignity, and/or diversity in your curriculum)?