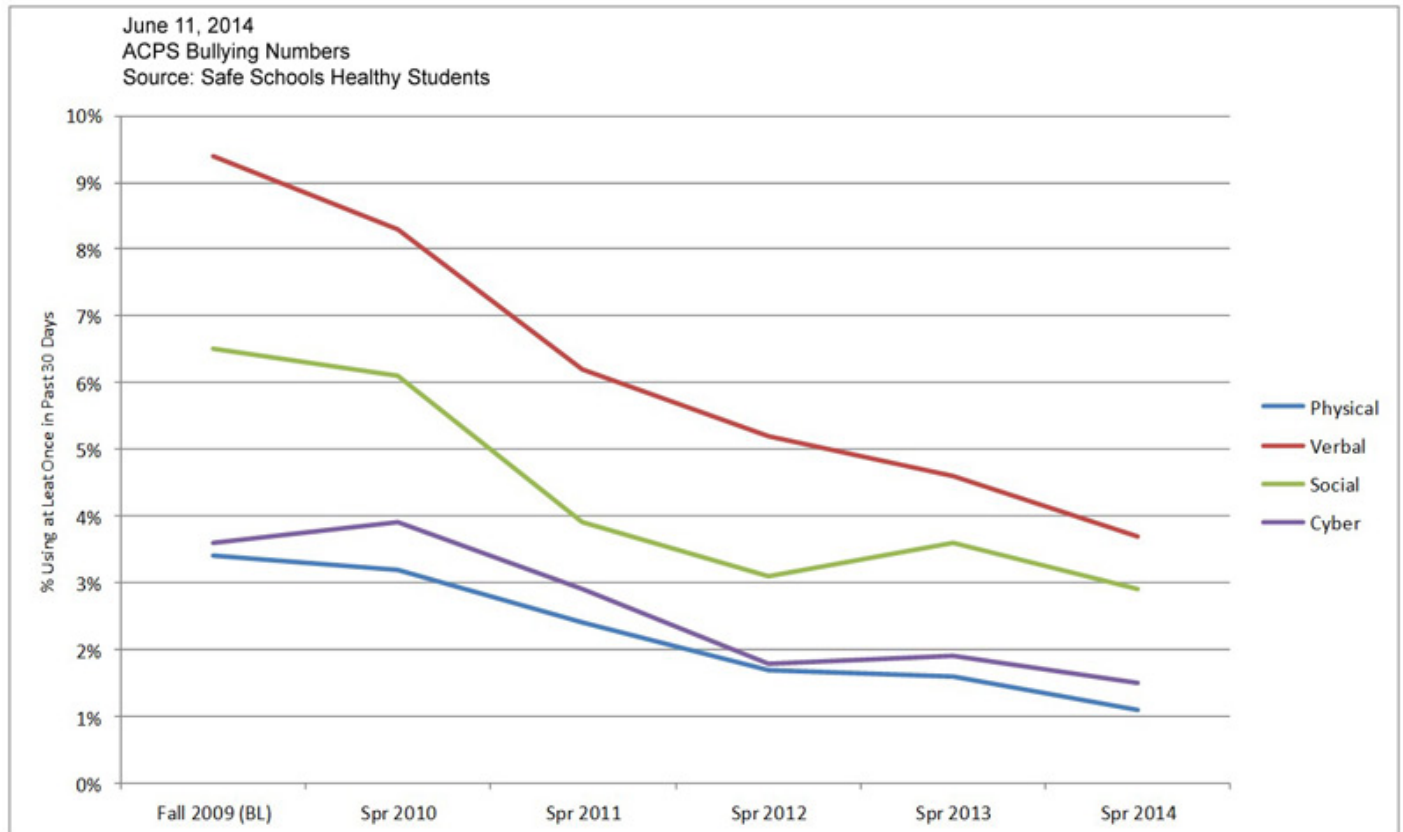


Impact of school climate grant's end unclear
written by Newspack Team | June 12, 2014



A federal grant aimed at improving student safety and school climate is ending, and the effect the program's absence will have on Charlottesville and Albemarle schools is unknown.

The Safe Schools Healthy Students grant, which ran from fall 2009 to this spring, spanned both school divisions and had five areas of emphasis: school safety, substance use, social and emotional learning, mental health and early childhood learning and family engagement.

"If nothing else, the legacy is that we've raised awareness of issues that can kind of be talked around," said June Jenkins, the project's director. "It allowed us to bring together all these major points of emphasis that allow us to educate the whole child."

The grant functioned in various ways. In addition to providing support staff who focused on social and emotional issues, the project also trained teachers to improve student-to-teacher and student-to-student relationships.

Prior to the grant, Albemarle housed two mental health counselors. However, faced with a \$3.9 million shortfall as the grant ended, the division could not add the additional six counselors the grant had covered since 2009 to its books.

Charlottesville was able to retain all in-school positions in their budget. The grant's administrative staff positions, however, are not being renewed.

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To improve school climate, elementary teachers utilized a method called Responsive Classroom, in which they held morning meetings to talk about student interests, as well as to set classroom expectations. In the middle schools, staff implemented a similar program called Developmental Design.

And the program paid dividends.

In Albemarle alone, the percentage of elementary students who reported being bullied about their race fell from 21.9 percent in fall 2009 to 16.7 percent in spring 2014.

In the same years, Albemarle’s middle schools saw a 35.2 percent drop in student reports of being bullied for any reason within the last month, and a 67.5 percent drop in students who bullied others in the last month.

Vernon Bock, principal of Walker Upper Elementary School, said the whole-child focus has led to similar trends in his building.

“I can say that this year alone ... our discipline referrals resulting in suspensions are down 60 percent,” Bock said of positive behavior reinforcement measures his team has implemented.

What’s more, Bock said, is that over the last five years the Safe Schools Healthy Students practices have become institutionalized in the schools.

However, while Jenkins is hopeful the in-classroom work will continue, she fears that the “accountability piece will get lost.”

“I’m concerned to not have that one department that is completely focused on these kinds of issues,” Jenkins said. “Yes we teach health classes, and the school nurses do great work, but not having one location raises a level of concern because the schools have so much to do.”

“I know if someone is going to ask me about it, I’m more likely to use those things,” Jenkins added.

Matt Haas, Albemarle’s assistant superintendent, said the division plans to handle that at the building level, through each school’s school improvement plan, as well as at the division level through the strategic plan.

With respect to in-classroom practices, Haas said Responsive Classroom has become a common practice that can be maintained, and that the division plans to continue distributing school climate surveys to students.

At the high school level, Haas said, the division is beginning to rethink out-of-school suspension.

“Suspension isn’t an effective tool, and we want to make sure that students restore themselves so they don’t keep repeating,” Haas said.

Despite the loss, Haas praised the Safe Schools Healthy Students staff.

"The grant impacted people's attitudes on school climate," Haas said. "You rarely have the resources and people to change attitudes and in this case we had both."

Albemarle School Board member Steve Koleszar said the data speaks for itself.

"We've had a tremendous improvement in school climate, and I think that's one of the things that has helped our graduation rates," Koleszar said. "I hope we don't forget the value of the lessons that we have learned."

Albemarle Superintendent Pam Moran said a significant loss will be no longer having project director June Jenkins to pool community resources.

To keep those community partnerships strong, Haas said he will continue to meet quarterly with a team of school, police and social services staff.

Moving forward, Bock said many schools across the commonwealth are transitioning to a Virginia Department of Education-supported program called Positive Behavior Intervention and Support.

"That's the next step, as I see it, to really transitioning our schools to that whole-child approach," Bock said.

Jenkins is sad to go, but hopes the work will carry on.

"It's been a great honor, and I've loved this job," Jenkins said. "We have great community schools, and one reason is that we have a good value system, but we know there are going to be kids who struggle, whether it's mental health or other external factors."

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