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A Community-Based Participatory Approach to Youth Development and School Climate Change: The Alignment Enhanced Services Project

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Abstract

Background: School–community partnerships offer an opportunity to promote positive youth development. However, there is a need for community-based participatory research (CBPR) models that leverage community and school resources to create environments that support youths’ success.

Objective: Describe the CBPR process used by Alignment Enhanced Services (AES) partners to develop and implement a strategy to promote a positive school climate, and to discuss factors that influence the AES process in the schools.

Methods: A committee of school and community members developed the AES process, which included an environmental scan that solicited input from internal and external stakeholders on the schools’ assets and needs related to youth development and school climate. AES coordinators, in consultation with school administrators, developed and imple-

mented action plans that leveraged each school’s existing strengths, while identifying and utilizing new resources to address systemic and individual needs.

Lessons Learned: To date, the project has produced encouraging results; however, the AES process resulted in numerous challenges for the coordinators, schools, and community partners.

Conclusion: AES offers a method for engaging the stakeholders in addressing critical issues related to youth development and school climate.

Keywords

Community-based participatory research, youth violence, youth development, school climate, school intervention

Structural and social problems, including poverty, violence, and family disruption, have contributed to low achievement in schools and to significant numbers of students who exhibit social and behavioral problems. Thus, there have been numerous school- and community-based approaches to promoting positive development and preventing youth violence. There has also been a long history of community-based youth service organizations engaging in interventions to promote positive youth development. Organizations such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters and the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts have collaborated with schools to pro-

vide preventive and ameliorative interventions for students at risk of poor outcomes. This complementary arrangement has been far from perfect, as illustrated by the persistence of these problems in some schools, despite the presence of intervention. However, it has provided a general model from which much of the work toward improving child and adolescent outcomes has emanated, and increasingly it has been recognized by local and national public health agencies (e.g., the Centers for Disease Control’s Urban Partnership Academic Centers of Excellence) as an important way to address the problems facing children and adolescents. The purpose of

this paper is to describe a case study of a CBPR model that one community has used to leverage school and community resources to improve the school environment and promote positive youth development.

Within Tennessee, the need for schools and communities to promote youth social and academic development is apparent. The US chamber of commerce gave Tennessee a “D” grade for academic achievement, and an “F” for workforce readiness.¹ The CDC reports that Tennessee has one of the highest rates of youth homicide.² Furthermore, Tennessee ranks 43rd among US states in education spending per student, and in recent years has frozen or cut spending for many education support programs.³ This suggests that Tennessee’s schools are faced with the difficult task of increasing achievement and reducing behavior problems with fewer resources to address the social, structural, and organizational problems affecting the students and the schools. Consequently, in Nashville, the largest public district in Tennessee, there was an urgent need

to maximize the collaboration between schools and community organizations with the goal of providing students with the support they need to be successful, both psychosocially and academically.

In a citywide effort to bolster the success of students attending public primary and secondary schools in Nashville, Alignment Nashville was created with support from the school district, city government, the chamber of commerce, multiple community agencies, and private philanthropy. Alignment Nashville’s mission is to bring community-based resources together to create synergy to facilitate positive educational outcomes, primarily by promoting students’ positive social and emotional adjustment. Although not explicitly initiated as CBPR, the agency’s process is consistent with several CBPR principles, including (1) building on the assets and strengths within the community, (2) facilitating participation and collaboration of community members, and (3) using knowledge and action to benefit each of the partners.⁴

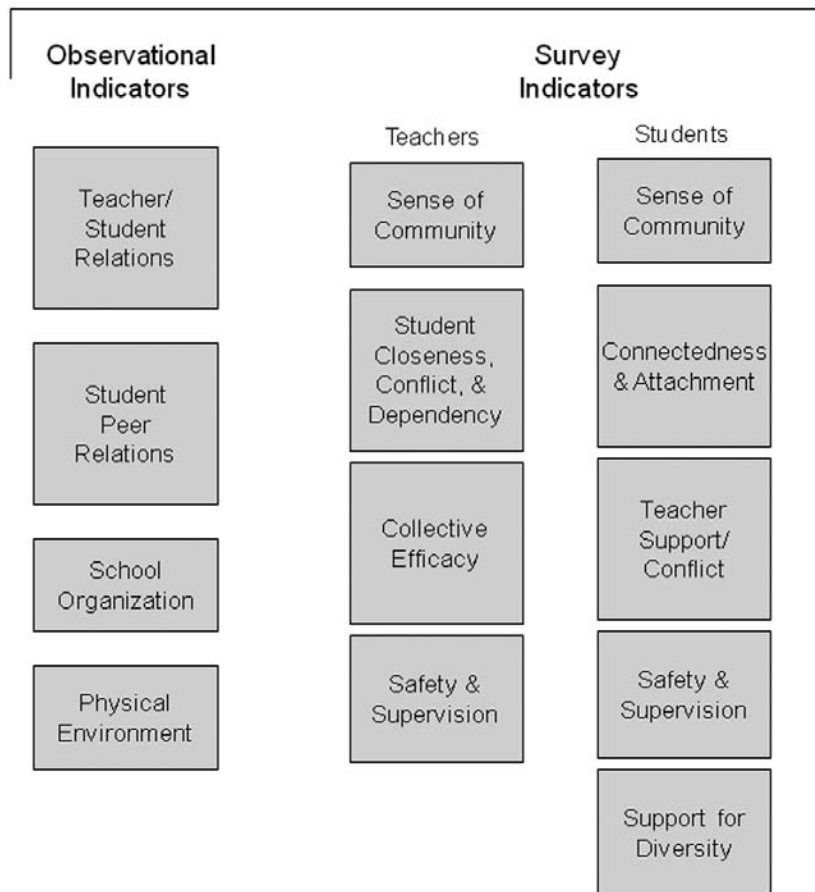


Figure 1. Assessing School Climate

METHODS

The Development of AES

Alignment Nashville’s community development efforts were organized by subcommittees that focused on tier levels (elementary, middle, and high schools), and other special needs (e.g., health care, mental health) within the district. The Alignment Middle School Committee was central to the development and implementation of the intervention described in this case study. The committee leadership was selected by Alignment Nashville and was shared between a member of the community and a leader within the school district. Participation in the committee’s work was open to all members of the community interested in addressing issues related to middle schools. Thus, the committee consisted of diverse stakeholders, including parents and school and district office leadership, as well as representatives from community organizations, local businesses, universities, and city government. After a year of monthly meetings, the committee agreed that the first goal for intervention was to promote youth positive development and decrease disruptive, aggressive, and bullying behaviors through systematically changing

the school climate. The proposed intervention, called AES, reflected the idea of synergy through cooperation. Previous research proposes many conceptualizations of school climate.^{5,6} Based on this research and local school context, the committee agreed on a multi-dimensional definition of school climate (Figure 1). The AES intervention (Table 1) focused on four processes that should be addressed to promote climate change and in turn promote positive student behaviors. These processes are school administrative functioning, school-wide support services/primary prevention, specific support services for high-risk student/secondary and tertiary prevention, and community and parent engagement.

The model suggests that if schools are functioning well in relation to these processes, they will be effectively meeting the needs of students. Consequently, the intervention was designed to assess the school in relation to each process, recognize and support each school’s strengths, and provide tailored, theory-based intervention to address areas that in need of improvement. Based on this model, the AES program results in a package of interventions that collectively are designed to address each process within the school. This approach also assumes that the effectiveness of intervention in each process

Table 1. Responsibilities of the AES Coordinators

Process	Goals	Activities
Administrative and Organizational Processes	Ensure that school has administrative practices that support positive school climate for students and teachers	Develop and enforce school rules related to behavior problem Develop the referral process for disciplinary problems Develop the referral process for support services Develop system for monitoring and feeding back referral data
School-Wide Support Services	Utilize evidence-based school wide programs to address target behaviors	Identify primary prevention programs that are effective with the schools’ population Provide training and technical assistance related to the implementation of the programs Develop plan for evaluating program outcomes
Specific Support Services	Provide appropriate support services for students who exhibiting behavior problems or at high risk of developing problems	Identify the types of specific support services that are needed Identify school and community resources to provide specific support services Connect specific support services to school’s referral process Develop mechanism for monitoring process and outcomes of specific support services
Community and Parent Engagement	Utilize strategies that promote the participation of parents and community partners in support of a positive school environment	Identify barriers to parental involvement Develop practices that facilitate parental involvement (e.g., signs for visiting parents, activities list for visiting parents) Develop incentives for teachers to pursue positive interaction with parents Identify strategic community partners who can support the school’s goals

will be enhanced by a holistic approach to intervention.

The development of AES was influenced by ecological theory and three, whole-school intervention strategies or frameworks: (1) Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports; (2) The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program; and (3) Student Assistance Programs (SAP). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of youth development suggest that children's wellbeing is influenced by numerous factors, ranging from characteristics of the immediate environments (the microsystem), the connections between these environments (the mesosystem), and the larger sociocultural and economic context (macrosystem).⁷ AES was designed to assess and integrate the array of resources provided within the schools and community into a common framework, and strategically align those resources to address more effectively the micro- and mesosystems that promote positive development. In the school context, the school climate construct captured many systemic characteristics. Furthermore, several studies suggest that school climate is related to a number of youth developmental outcomes, including students' behavioral problems.⁸

Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS), a comprehensive school-based program designed to address students' behavior problems, also informed the development of the AES model. At the core of PBIS is a three-tier support system. Most effort is focused on primary supports or school-wide, universal prevention strategies. Secondary supports focus on classrooms and emphasize strategies for classroom management. Finally, tertiary supports tend to be individual interventions for students who are exhibiting problematic behavior.⁹ Evaluations of PBIS have examined specific components as well as the whole program. Both kinds of evaluations indicate that the program is effective in reducing problem behaviors and promoting positive student outcomes.^{10–12} In contrast, the Olweus model was developed to reduce the incidence of bullying behavior. Major components of the intervention include developing and enforcing clear rules against bullying, having regular classroom meetings to discuss bullying, and having individual talks with students who are chronically involved in bullying.¹³ Evaluations of the program have consistently found reductions in bullying perpetration; therefore, the approach is widely considered a best practice for bullying prevention.^{14,15}

The AES intervention also was influenced by the field of Student Assistance. SAP provides a framework in which to

address students' social and emotional barriers to learning and school success.¹⁶ They typically offer a range of prevention, referral, intervention, and support services to students. Within the SAP framework, evidence-based prevention curriculums and programs are delivered to selected students or to the whole school. The specific models vary, but the program depends on a professionally trained coordinator and a core team that assess student needs and link students with appropriate services in the community. Research suggests that SAPs facilitate increased access to community-based services.¹⁷ Apsler and colleagues,¹⁷ for example, focused on students identified as high risk for academic or behavior problems. Their evaluation of the multicomponent SAP approach indicated that students who participated in the program for 2 academic years demonstrated improved attitudes toward school and fighting and engagement in school.¹⁸ Evaluation of an intensive residential version of SAP found lower rates of substance use, and reduction in substance use among participants who were using.¹⁹ However, evaluations of a range of student assistance models are scarce. Most have focused more narrowly on alcohol and drug use.

The AES intervention integrated aspects of each of these approaches to maximize the opportunity to promote positive outcomes. Yet, the model can be distinguished from each approach. For example, PBIS's three-tiered intervention is focused primarily on the microsystem, and on services that are primarily provided by the school. In contrast, AES is focused on both micro- and mesosystems and purposefully sought to engage in parent and community intervention, and to strategically engage services outside of the school that align with the school's goals. In comparison with Olweus, the AES is much more broadly focused on youth development and employs a variety of methods for influencing the school environment that may go well beyond defining and enforcing school rules related to bullying. Finally, although SAP and AES share many goals, AES focuses more on community-school partnerships and addressing the needs of the school population as a whole through those partnerships rather than actually delivering services to address the needs of individual, at-risk students or the school universally.

In summary, the AES seeks to build on ecological theory and existing school interventions to expand the ways in which the school social environment is engaged to support positive youth development. Toward that goal, the AES integrates the array of resources provided within the schools and community

into a common framework, and strategically aligns them to address more effectively the micro- and mesosystems that promote positive development and/or contribute to reductions in bullying and other aggressive behaviors. The interventions are based on the premise that promoting positive youth development is best done in the context of an ecological approach that seeks to improve school climate. Furthermore, interventions targeting at-risk students, including potential bullying and violence victims, will be more effective when embedded within a school-wide effort to promote a positive school climate.¹⁹ The effort to improve school climate includes staff development to engage principals and teachers in promoting positive adult/child relationships, and reorienting the services and resources already present in the school so that they were consistent with a collaboratively established vision and common values and language. In effect, this process asks all adults in the school to contribute to helping the school establish a positive environment (as defined by the school) and accomplish some youth development outcomes that are identified the school's leadership. Therefore, AES calls for school staff and school-based service providers to create stronger connections with the other members of the micro- and mesosystems that affect the students. School-based service providers may be asked to modify their services or add to their services interventions that address the targeted school and student outcomes. Collectively, these interventions help to create a critical mass for school climate change.

Stages of the AES Process

The Alignment Nashville Middle School Committee identified 12 schools with relatively high rates of behavioral problems. From these schools, the committee targeted 4 schools based primarily on their geographic location, and the presence of existing relationships with Alignment Nashville partners. The schools served fifth through eighth grades, and were located in urban neighborhoods. The schools served mostly low-income students, with the rate of students receiving free and reduced cost lunches ranging from 64% to 84%. The schools were ethnically diverse, with varying percentages of African American (24%–74%), Caucasian (22%–62%), and Hispanic (4%–36%) students.²⁰ In addition, the committee outlined the responsibilities for the coordinators (Table 1). Finally, the committee identified the specific outcomes that would be used to evaluate

the project. After the objectives and targets were established, the researchers were invited to participate in the process to assist with program development and evaluation. Committee members defined the constructs, and reviewed and approved the researchers' operational definition of the constructs and the instrument that would be used for data collection. The researchers sought and received institutional review board approval for the program evaluation, including de-identified district data and anonymous survey data to assess behavioral outcomes.

AES implementation involved a four-stage process. To date, the four AES Coordinators have accomplished each step; however, environmental scans, interventions, and action plans are continuously updated.

School Entry. The school entry stage was each AES coordinators' introduction to the school environment. Successful school entry was vital to the work of an AES coordinator. There were two main objectives within the school entry phase. The first was to develop and cultivate relationships within the school (faculty, staff, students, and community organizations inside the school) as well with potential community partners. The second objective was to raise awareness within the community about Alignment objectives and the role of the coordinator (i.e., marketing). To complete this stage, coordinators would attend faculty meetings, parent/teacher organization (PTO) meetings, and student activities (e.g., assemblies, sports events). In some cases, coordinators joined the school's leadership team, which included a principal, and teacher and student representatives from each grade level. One of the challenges in working with the public schools was the instability within the leadership. This instability included regular changes in leadership at the district level and at the individual schools. Thus, the coordinators paid particular attention to building relationships with students, teachers, and administrators in an effort establish a sense of continuity even if the principal was replaced.

Environmental Scan. Each AES coordinator was responsible for conducting an environmental scan of the school before developing an action plan. The environmental scan allowed the coordinator to gain in-depth knowledge of the school climate by collecting information about the school using several methods, including observational, interview, and survey data. The coordinator gathered information about teacher/student relationships, student–peer relationships,

school safety, school and classroom layout, and the nature of peer and student–adult relationships. In addition, they inventoried community-based services already offered within the school. This step was important in addressing some of the challenges facing the schools. In particular, the diversity in the schools’ populations and differences in the principals’ leadership styles made it important to tailor interventions to address the issues within each school.

Gathering information about each school’s climate on the various levels (e.g., student–peer relationships, teacher–student relationships, school organization, and physical environment) was a time-consuming and iterative process. Because all of the factors (Figure 1) influenced school climate in different ways, it was important to get as much information as possible about the many aspects from multiple sources including school staff and community partner organizations. Furthermore, the process required constant reflection on the data being gathered and necessitated frequent discussion with the schools’ principals to explain how school climate was being defined and get their feedback, to discuss the types of information that would be gathered, and to agree on how that information would be used. Every year, AES coordinators and project staff survey teachers and students about their perceptions of the schools’ climates, including students’ sense of community, attitudes toward violence, and teacher–student relationships. Along with the other information gathered through the environmental scan, the AES coordinators use their school’s survey data to develop a clearer picture of the climate of their schools.

Intervention Plan. The intervention plan is a written plan of action for the school developed by the AES coordinator and the principal or designated school representatives. The initial plan was developed using the information gathered from the school’s comprehensive environmental scan. Developing a school intervention plan is vital to the AES coordinator’s position and to achieving the goal of improved school climate for several reasons. First, the intervention plan defines the roles and responsibilities for the coordinator during that school period. Second, the intervention plan is a means of tracking the activities of the AES coordinators and the progress of climate change in the school. Third, it is a way to validate the strengths of the school while also serving as a roadmap to address areas of school climate where the school may be struggling. Fourth, it provides the staff with an informed, well thought out approach

to improving school climate. Finally, the process of developing the intervention plan is a paradigm shift in the way that the school and community agencies address school violence. The plan is ideally integrated into the school’s overall improvement plan required by the school district.

The intervention action plan consists of four primary components: Objectives, strategies, action steps, and timeline. The objectives are the broad overarching goals of the school. Strategies are ideas and methods the AES coordinators implement to achieve objectives. Action steps are the particular steps required to enact the strategies within the school. The timeline included target dates and approximations of the amount of time for achieving each of the goals.

Intervention Plan Implementation. Once the intervention plan is developed, reviewed, and approved by the principal, the AES coordinator enacts the action plan. Most action plans include efforts to retain existing services, recruit new, needed service providers, and coordinate service providers within the school and other activities that promote climate change. In an effort to avoid duplication of services and large gaps, service providers were selected based on their strengths and consistency with school needs through an “invitation to participate” and vetting process. New and existing providers were asked to participate by submitting a proposal describing the services they would provide and how. The Alignment Middle School Committee was responsible for matching services providers to identified school needs. Currently, AES coordinators recruit new services providers as necessary.

Challenges and Lessons Learned From the CBPR Process

A formal evaluation, including measurement of the students’, teachers’, and community partners’ engagement with and perceptions of the AES process, is underway. The outcome evaluation will address the impact of the intervention on several student outcomes, including the perception of school climate, bullying and victimization, student attendance and disciplinary referrals, and student achievement. To date, the process evaluation suggests that the intervention has improved the connections between the schools and the surrounding the communities. These indicators include:

- Collaboration with community-based organizations to acquire and coordinate services for students and staff

within the school, including mentoring, tutoring, social skills building, and increased access to basic needs (e.g., required school attire and school supplies). Coordinators were responsible for scheduling and meeting with community agencies to communicate the policies of the school and to determine the needs of the organization, reviewing services to make determinations about appropriateness for students, and coordinating logistics (e.g., times, space in school, student times, and parental permission).

- Coordination with the school counseling department to select and implement school-wide bully prevention campaigns. Coordinators also assist in the implementation of interventions with targeted students (e.g., perpetrators of bullying or victims of bullying). Their efforts include identifying appropriate students to participate, acquiring referral forms to make determinations about students who require specific services, and tracking students' progress through the process.
- Working with community-based agencies to facilitate regular PTO meetings away from the school and closer to where parents live. The students are often bussed to school; therefore, holding community-based meetings makes them more accessible to parents.

Nevertheless, there have been several distinct challenges and lessons learned during the development of the AES process for each of the stakeholders, especially for the coordinators, schools, and community agencies.

Challenges for the Coordinators

In addition to the challenges mentioned, the coordinators have had to address two primary challenges: Accountability and process ambiguity.

Accountability. The AES coordinators had to learn to navigate and mediate three supervisory structures to accomplish their goals. Although Alignment Nashville has managed the day-to-day operations of the AES coordinators, the Middle School Committee is still heavily involved with oversight of the coordination process. Thus, the coordinators have found themselves having to answer to two separate entities. Both the direct supervisor and the Middle School Committee have provided direct and occasionally conflicting feedback on the coordinators' work. In addition, the coordinators work closely with school administrators (primarily principals) to accomplish the goals. They represent the schools in which

they work to community agencies and are accountable to the schools' principals.

For the most part, the school–agency–committee collaboration has worked well. However, there have been some tensions in the oversight of the AES personnel, the determination of the roles of the AES coordinators, and basically the chain of command for AES coordinators. Modifying the chain of command for the AES process has alleviated some of the tensions around accountability. Additionally, regular accountability meetings with the school administrators in which the coordinators convey their activities regarding the school have also been helpful.

Process Ambiguity. The AES project was designed to initiate climate change at the levels and in the populations mentioned, taking into account the specific climate of the schools with which it was engaged. Each school's culture was distinctive to the student body, faculty, and staff population, the unique organizational structures, the nature of relationships within the school, school policies, and the procedures and practices of the school. The Middle School Committee chose to ground the AES process by providing a very general framework, which the schools and coordinators used to develop a more specific and strategic change process. As a result of the fluidity of the process, the committee's and staff's initial descriptions of the project and its objectives about the project were ambiguous. Additionally, this process presented challenges for researchers in establishing consistent processes and practices between the schools. The regular meetings to hear coordinators' perspectives and actions within the schools, combined with monthly activity logs, revealed some common patterns and a consistent way of intervening in the schools. The process is captured in the intervention plan.

Challenges for the Schools

Challenges in implementing the AES intervention at the schools occur at two levels. At the school level, the hurdles to the AES intervention have involved protecting instructional time and the limitations of space and bussing.

Protecting Instructional Time. Providing services during the school day often means removing students from their classes. The tremendous amount of pressure placed on teachers and students to meet the standards set by No Child Left Behind combined with the structure of the middle school day

have made protecting instructional time a priority. In fact, in some instances teachers were reluctant to refer students for services if it increased the possibility that they would be pulled from their classroom to receive the services. Therefore, coordinators have had to find creative ways to introduce services into the school while minimizing the loss of instructional time, including utilizing homeroom, related arts, and other periods when students do not have core courses.

Space and Busing. Coordinators also have been faced with a challenge that is beyond the control of everyone in the school—space. Many service providers also require separate and private spaces during the school day to provide the service. Thus, schools with limited space have had difficulty integrating these services. In addition, agencies that offer after-school activities are challenged with transportation barriers for children who are bused across town and their families. Community agencies may in turn avoid these schools. Furthermore, busing affected parental connection to the school and parental involvement. In several cases, the children were attending schools that were significant distances from their neighborhoods, thus making parents' ability to participate in meaningful ways (e.g., attend school functions, volunteer at the school, interact with teachers, or participate in the PTOs) difficult.

The coordinators' environmental scans and resulting intervention plans for the schools have served as a way to address some of these issues. Early in the process, AES coordinators distributed a survey to community-based organizations to get a better understanding of their needs, services, and school perceptions. Knowing the schools' limitations has allowed the AES coordinators to recruit suitable agencies and assist agencies in rethinking their implementation strategies so that services are provided in ways that are more school friendly. This means that the schools have become more savvy consumers by challenging the organizations to accommodate the school instead of the school accommodating the service. This benefits the agencies because they are becoming more creative in their school intervention approaches. Furthermore, AES coordinators have developed intervention strategies that include having community-based parental involvement activities, such as holding PTO meetings within the neighborhoods of the students and their families.

Challenges for Community-Based Organizations

Existing Services. Community agencies providing services to the schools before the project had previously established relationships with school personnel. Some of these school staff and community organizations did not see the usefulness or utility of the alignment process. Community agencies have expressed some frustrations and resentment about going through the Alignment Committee to provide services that they already have been providing.

Funding. Funding has been a source of hope and a bone of contention in the AES project. Limited funding for local community agencies initially impeded the coordinators' attempts to find services for the schools. However, the Middle School Committee partnered with several community-based agencies and has invited a major funding organization to become a part of the committee. As a result, the agency has changed their funding requirements to give attention to agencies that are providing interventions in schools, particularly those with coordinators. Another community funding foundation has offered a large amount of grant money for agencies who are participating in the AES project.

CONCLUSION

Preliminary evaluation suggest that the AES intervention may be an effective way of having communities meaningfully contribute to schools' efforts to promote positive youth development and prevent youth violence. Also, this approach is consistent with recent research findings. For example, a systematic review of school-based bullying prevention programs found that whole-school approaches were more likely to demonstrate positive outcomes than stand alone curricular-based interventions.²² Without some sort of unifying framework or approach to offering services, prevention programs often are isolated and fragmented and do not reflect the reality that student risk factors as well as protective factors are not specific to specific problems or resiliency, respectively. In other words, violence, substance use, pregnancy, truancy, and dropout prevention focus in large part on the same risk and protective factors. Research has also shown that collaboration and coordination among service providers is associated with improved students' social and emotional well-being.¹⁹

Despite the issues and challenges encountered, the development and implementation of the AES process has helped to clarify and address the needs of the middle schools in metropolitan Nashville. By using CBPR, the process remained grounded in the experiences of students, teachers, and staff, and the interventions were tailored to address the unique climates of the participating schools. Although the specific interventions

may be unique to Nashville, the AES process provides a model of school–community collaboration that could be utilized in other communities. Further, this process suggests that there is a benefit to and a need for schools to develop a strategy that addresses the social and emotional climate of the school, optimizes use of internal and external resources, and cultivates its connection with parents and the community.

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