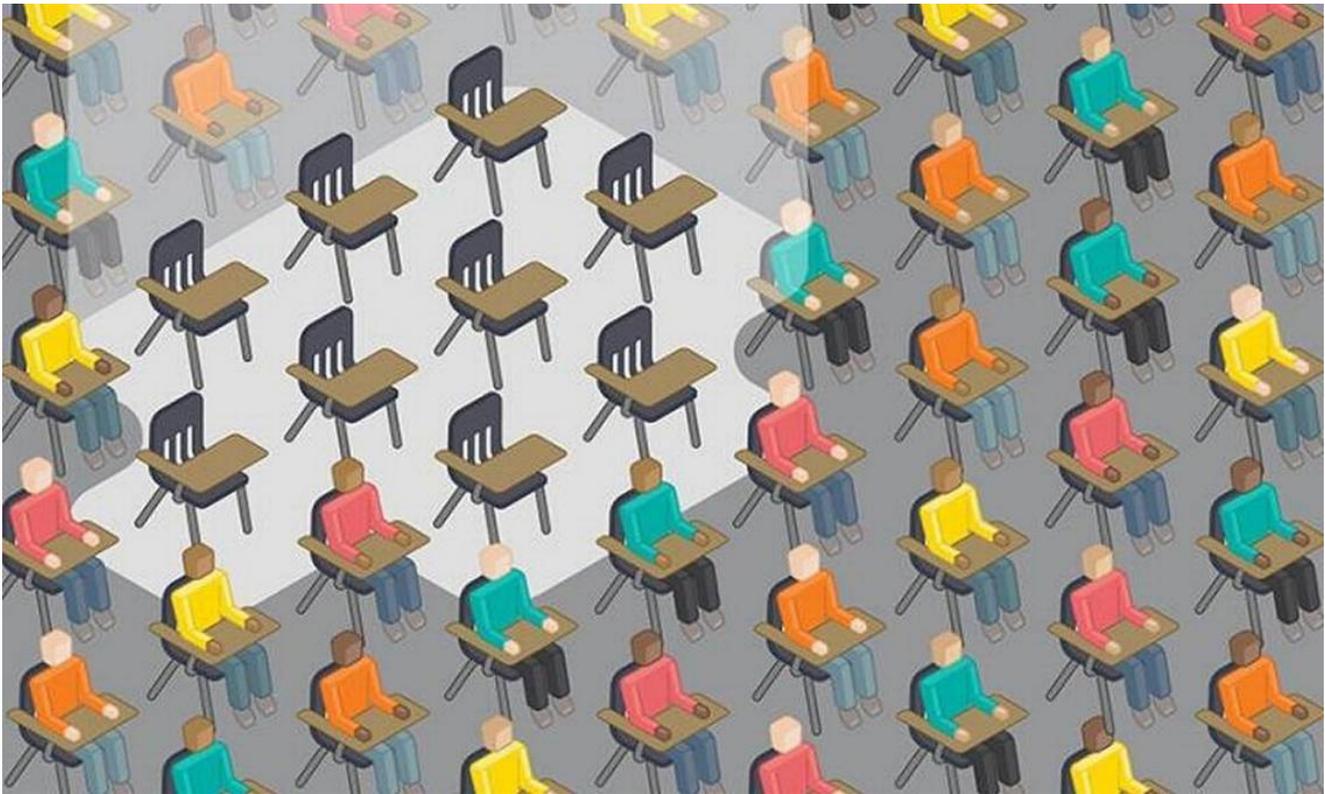


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LOCAL

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Why does bullying cost California schools \$276 million every year?

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While school bullying has been widely condemned for harming students' emotional health, a new study calculates the financial cost to school districts: \$276 million annually in California.

The study published in June in *School Psychology Quarterly* is the first to count the direct losses caused by bullying-related student absences.

"If we think about the climate of bullying in schools, we actually see differences in overall achievement," said Stephen Russell, a professor of child development at the University of Texas, Austin, and one of the study's authors. "That tells us there's a social cost to bullying."

Russell and his co-authors focused on California because of extensive state data tracking student well-being. In particular, they analyzed the results of the 2011-2013 California Healthy Kids Survey given to 780,000 seventh-, ninth- and 11th-grade students in almost half of California's middle and high schools. Students answered questions about harassment, bullying and whether they felt safe in school.

"We just have to get all this stuff out of the way so students can learn," Russell said.

The authors used the data to estimate the total number of absences for seventh-through 12th-grade students statewide, roughly 631,000 per month. Because California allocates funding by the average number of students in classrooms, absenteeism cuts into funding when students skip.

According to the survey, 10.4 percent of students statewide reported missing at least one school day in the last month because they felt unsafe. Roughly half of the students also said they experienced bullying because of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability.

The researchers found that \$77.9 million of the overall cost could be tied to bullying based on race or ethnicity, \$62.7 million for sexual orientation, \$54.5 million each for gender and religion and \$49 million for disabilities. The numbers add up to more than \$276 million because some students reported being picked on for multiple reasons.

For individual school districts, losses can amount to tens of millions of dollars. For example, Los Angeles Unified, California's largest district, loses an estimated \$60 million a year, while Fresno Unified loses around \$7 million. The study didn't calculate losses at Sacramento-area school districts, but the amount would be roughly proportional to the number of students.

"Every dollar for California public schools counts," said Bill McGuire, deputy superintendent of the Twin Rivers Unified School District in the Sacramento region. "Any loss of money is an issue, but ... the most important thing related to this is lost learning time."

As an example of lost revenue, McGuire said the district has to provide books for 28,000 students even if California only allocates money for 22,000 of them.

Efforts at schools around the country to prevent bullying include training teachers to intervene when they see discrimination and empowering students to create student groups around race, sexual orientation or other identity traits, said Russell. Locally, several school districts including Sacramento City Unified and Elk Grove Unified monitor chronic absences and school climate.

“We make bigger investments than that in our schools,” Russell said. “And there are a lot of really low-cost strategies that we already know of that promote a safe and healthy school climate and are associated with lower rates of bullying in schools.”

Despite a growing number of anti-bullying policies and programs, the study shows schools need to do more to make kids feel safe, said Christopher White, director of the Safe and Supportive Schools Project for the Genders & Sexualities Alliance Network, a national group that fights discrimination against LGBTQ students.

“It’s one thing to make sure you have a policy. It’s another thing to make sure you have ways to enforce that policy and to educate people about that policy, and then another thing to (be) thinking about creating welcoming and inclusive safe spaces in schools,” White said.

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White said he travels the country working with school districts to help schools provide a safer and more welcoming environment. Even then, he occasionally hears about racist, homophobic, or misogynistic taunts in the classroom.

“Unfortunately, the only way we’re really going to get administrations and state governments to pay attention is by showing the cost,” White said. “The financial cost as well the impact that this has on tests scores and grades and attendance.”