

PREVENTION TOWN HALL:

Identifying Solutions to School-Based Prevention Programming Resistance



The evidence is clear: sexual and intimate partner violence prevention in schools is effective and benefits students and overall learning environments. Yet sexual and intimate partner violence prevention practitioners are increasingly facing pushback in implementing prevention strategies and approaches, particularly in K-12 school-based settings.

While challenges in implementing prevention are not new, misinformation and cultural and political ideologies that center anti-choice and anti-transgender views, impact school climates and school-based prevention strategies and approaches.

In some instances, conflation of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL), two topics that have garnered considerable contentious attention, are impacting violence prevention programming. In other situations, terms like “grooming” are being co-opted and weaponized against LGBTQ+ communities. Programming that discusses identity, affirms queer and trans people, or incorporates sexual health are being perceived as ideological biased content. Language often used in messaging violence prevention strategies and approaches, like “health equity” and even “healthy relationships,” is in some circumstances being deemed “inappropriate” by local and state leaders, making it increasingly difficult for prevention practitioners to do their jobs.

To learn more about the realities facing violence prevention practitioners, how they are responding, and their ideas for navigating the current climate, PreventConnect hosted *Prevention Town Hall: Identifying Solutions to School-Based Prevention Programming*

Resistance in August 2023. The Town Hall featured practitioners from five organizations including:

- [Missoula Public Health](#) in Montana
- [Atria Collective](#) (formerly known as WomenSafe) in Vermont
- [The Sexual Trauma and Abuse Care Center](#) in Kansas
- [The Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#)
- [Safe Haven Ministries](#) in Michigan

During the Town Hall, presenters were asked to respond to three main questions:

1. What kind of resistance are you experiencing in implementing sexual and intimate partner violence prevention in schools currently?
2. How are you/your organization navigating the current climate around prevention programming?
3. Beyond what you are already doing to navigate this, what ideas do you have for finding solutions?

What follows in this document are summaries of the presenters' responses to the above questions and key themes and takeaways drawn from participant conversations in the Town Hall text chat. In addition, highlights from conversations that took place in a Prevention Track breakout session at the [2023 National Sexual Assault Conference](#) are also included. A list of additional resources is included at the end.

Our goal with this resource is to provide a summary of potential solutions identified by prevention practitioners to use in planning how to advance prevention while maneuvering around resistance, push back, and backlash.

Identifying Solutions: Key Themes (from presenters + audiences)

LEVERAGING POLICY

Whether it is statewide standards around curriculum, school policy and procedure or lack thereof, policies and requirements around education and healthy relationships can be a valuable tool to leverage when implementing prevention in a school setting. Some examples of potential policy reflections that could be useful for preventionists are:

- Does the state have requirements around educating about sexual violence, domestic violence, bullying, online safety, human trafficking, sexual health, etc.?
- Does the school follow those standards? Do they know about them?
- Does the school/ school district have sexual harassment policies? Could they use help in creating them?
- Are there ambiguities in health and wellness standards where the case for prevention can be made?

In Missoula, Erica Ritsema with Missoula Public Health, uses learning standards set at the state level to position herself to be able to come into classrooms. Knowing that standards are set at the state level and local school districts are required to adopt and add on with little training, she is flexible with how she presents her prevention curriculum and uplifts the pieces that can fill gaps in what schools are prepared to offer. Speakers from Michigan also shared that they use the law to their advantage, to justify why they are teaching certain curricula when parents have questions or concerns.

On the other end of the spectrum: Layla Carmen McEniry, at the Sexual Trauma and Abuse Care Center, leverages ambiguities in state education standards to advocate for prevention. "I always try to use the school district's science-based health and wellness standards as my guide for meetings," Layla said.

Layla uses Kansas's lack of standards to her advantage, knowing that there are not a lot of guidelines around sexual and domestic violence awareness or prevention, she leverages the Sexual Trauma and Abuse Care Center as a health and wellness resource for school-districts in her meetings with administrators.

ADAPTING PREVENTION MESSAGING

Explaining prevention and describing strategies and approaches in a way that makes sense and is engaging to community members can be difficult for the most seasoned prevention practitioners. Preventing sexual and intimate partner violence is complex and prevention messaging often relies on complicated language creating missed opportunities for people to see themselves as part of the solution.

One Town Hall participant reflected on this by stating that the current pushback, "... may be the push that many of us need to stop overcomplicating prevention and stop using language that is not accessible..." Another Town Hall participant also underlined the importance of clear and accessible communication and shared, regarding social emotional learning, that in Utah, "...if parents actually learn about what it actually teaches, they are typically supportive."

[Learning how to message prevention, or tell the story of prevention, more effectively may help in countering misinformation, misconceptions, and fear.](#)

Town Hall presenters, Layla McEniry of The Sexual Trauma and Abuse Care Center and Erica Ritsema of Missoula Public Health, explored how shifting language was key to navigating resistance in their communities.

Erica shared that she is constantly finding the balance between using inclusive language around gender identity and sexuality, and being able to continue working in schools.

An example she shared was that some classrooms are not open to explicit LGBTQ+ inclusivity and in those situations she thinks about other ways she can be inclusive to all gender and sexualities, and weighs whether the content is compromised or maintains its key values and themes.

In Vermont, prevention practitioners use messaging to connect with supporters and adversaries about the importance of their curriculum. This past year, staff used data from the most recent [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) to connect sexual violence prevention to other health outcomes that parents and school administrators care about, like youth safety.

ENGAGING YOUTH OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL SETTINGS

Schools have historically been an important place for prevention practitioners to engage with youth and implement prevention strategies, especially when there is involvement from the whole-school environment. With increasing obstacles in implementing meaningful prevention education in schools, prevention practitioners are identifying other environments to impact school-aged youth. As one participant stated in the Town Hall, “I appreciate going beyond the question of, ‘How do we get into schools?’ to ask the question, ‘How much do we really need schools?’”

Safe Haven Ministries in Grand Rapids, Michigan is having success in engaging children, youth, and families outside of schools. They have partnered with local libraries on an initiative called Grow Engage Read Imagine (GERI). GERI is

a reading program that uses literature to promote gender equity, leadership, respect, and community. Their curated reading lists are organized by age group, from pre-k through high school, and includes books available in both English and Spanish. The initiative also includes a parent toolkit, adolescent reading guides, and community resources.

Town Hall participants shared about their successes in engaging youth outside of school settings, too. For example, one participant talked about implementing their prevention program at their local Boys & Girls Clubs. They also shared about hosting a parent summer series and their hope to continue creating opportunities to advance prevention outside of schools. Another participant described that while the number of youth they were able to engage decreased as they moved their programming out of schools, the impact that their program had has increased.

Other ideas for engaging youth outside of schools include:

- Summer camps
- Youth-serving organizations (4-H, YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, etc.)
- After-school programs/clubs
- Local youth groups
- Community centers/youth centers
- Youth athletic organizations
- Social media
- Neighborhoods (apartment complex, parks, etc.)
- Drop-in centers for queer and trans youth
- Podcasts

In Vermont, Atria Collective leverages their Rape Prevention Education (RPE) program to support their after-school youth leadership program, which in-turn supports and uplifts their school programs. RPE funds allow Atria Collective staff to offer:

- Paid youth internships
- Paid youth advisory boards
- Youth prevention summits

FOSTERING STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS

A key component to either navigating schools' resistance in prevention programming or successfully engaging youth outside of school settings centers around strategic relationships. Prevention practitioners are skilled at fostering relationships and most have had to do this to work in schools in the first place. Town Hall presenters and participants discussed fostering strategic relationships in three main categories:

1. To access support and capacity building
2. To counter school resistance
3. To engage youth outside of school settings

Town Hall presenter, Linnea Johnson of Atria Collective, shared that it was important for them to partner with youth as part of their strategy, but recognized a need for capacity building. They worked with a statewide organization called Outright Vermont to receive technical assistance and build capacity for just and equitable ways to partner with youth and foster youth leadership. Outright

Vermont supports queer youth across the state through activism, advocacy, and education. This relationship helped Atria Collective reframe their prevention work, create meaningful and supportive relationships with local youth, and better respond to anti-LGBTQ rhetoric.

Several Town Hall presenters and participants reflected on the importance of building trusting relationships with school staff and parents as a way to navigate resistance to prevention. In some cases, teachers and other school staff were able to advocate on behalf of prevention programming and communicate its importance to decision-makers. Practitioners also described strengthening relationships with parents through providing evening programs where parents could experience content for themselves. In addition, prevention practitioners shared about increasing direct communication to parents by disseminating resources for talking to their children about healthy relationships and consent.

The Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence (DCADV) has been able to leverage and strengthen their relationships with partner organizations who do have a welcomed place in the school system which allows them to engage directly with youth and by extension still impact schools across the state. For example, Network Connect is an organization that "builds community capacity by coordinating grassroots and local partners to provide youth and families with social services, education programs, workforce skills, and mental health supports." One of Network Connect's programs, Future

Culture Creators, participates in prevention programming from DCADV such as Coaching Boys Into Men (CBIM). Another partner organization, Children & Families First, has implemented CBIM with DCADV for the last three years during their annual summer camps and also has a large presence across Delaware schools. By putting their energy towards strengthening these relationships, DCADV has been able to reach youth in more meaningful ways and increase partner organizations' capacity for violence prevention.

HARNESSING YOUTH POWER AND LEADERSHIP

Considering that it is young people who are being most affected by sexual and intimate partner violence, especially in school climates, prevention is most powerful when created and implemented in collaboration with youth. Youth can be excellent partners in making sure curricula is relevant, accessible and useful, as well as strategic partners in getting into schools.

In Vermont, Atria Collective supported a youth-led protest after a parent brought an anti-transgender speaker to a local school. When students found out about the speaking event, they asked staff if they could use their time on the leadership team to organize a counter-protest to elevate LGBTQ+ inclusivity and draw attention away from the event. The counter-protest drew hundreds of youth from across the area, and made local and national headlines. By supporting, nurturing and empowering youth to step into their own power, staff were able to advocate for inclusive curricula in a more impactful way with youth at the lead.

Other speakers and attendees added that they partner with youth to actually deliver curricula to their peers.

PIVOTING TO COMMUNITY LEVEL STRATEGIES

As important as school-based strategies are, it is equally important for preventionists to pivot to more outer-layer prevention strategies. Antonio Tendero, from Safe Haven Ministries in Michigan, shared about their community-level work as "going beyond schools but not leaving schools behind." Some examples of this could be:

- Fostering community connectedness
- Addressing social determinants of health, like economic security or housing
- Partnering with other community-based organizations to create protective factors for communities who are at higher risk of experiencing violence (i.e. culturally specific organizations, disability justice organizations, LGBTQ+ organizations.)

Erica, from Missoula Public Health, discussed how community-level strategies can also impact school policies. She mentioned that bringing parents and community members into prevention work can trickle over to presence at local government and school-board meetings, which has positive impacts on prevention. She said that most parents are supportive of prevention efforts but not involved, and that preventionists need to think about how they can organize against the louder minority that is currently dominating conversation.

Resources

- [Moving Power: Authentically Engaging Youth In the Community to Prevent Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence](#) (PreventConnect web conference)
- [Creating Protective Environments for LGBTQ+ Youth Within Schools and Communities to Prevent Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence](#) (PreventConnect web conference)