Mental Health in Schools
UCLA
Center
Program and Policy Analysis*

**A Series of Information Resources
on**

*Youth Subcultures:
Understanding Subgroups to Better
Address Barriers to Learning
& Improve Schools*

As calls for addressing barriers to student learning and improving schools increase, better understanding of youth subculture is essential. This series is intended to stimulate thinking about the implications for policy and practice of the complex, multifaceted subgroups with which youth come to be identified and/or assigned by peers.

Public health and education policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and educators need to know as much as they can about the factors that lead youth to manifest behaviors stemming from group defined values, beliefs, attitudes, and interests. Such understanding is basic to promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems arise, and enhancing intervention impact on severe and chronic problems.

To these ends, the Center is producing a series of resources, such as this one, as aids for policy and practice analyses, research, education, and school and community improvement planning.

About "Nerds" and "Geeks" as an Identified Subculture*

Our focus here is on briefly highlighting:

(1) Nerds and Geeks subculture and identity

(2) the impact of these subgroups

(3) prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact

(4) data on intervention efforts

(5) proposed new directions

(6) resources for more information.

*As with so many of the terms used by youth in referring to subgroups, the terms "nerds" and "geeks" are pejorative and offensive. We use them because it is youth subculture terminology. While we introduce it in quotes, we drop the quotation marks in keeping with common use.

About Nerds and Geeks as an Identified Subculture

The label assigned to a subgroup connotes status (e.g., popularity, mainstream acceptance, rejection). Brown, Von Bank, and Steinberg (2007) stress that these subgroup status distinctions "tend to be central to the dynamics of interaction among groups in the middle school and early high school years." Moreover, the characteristics associated with the label provide benchmarks young people use to gauge their status in youth subculture. Research suggests these benchmarks are significantly but not inevitably related to feelings about self and to various forms of positive and negative functioning and that status distinctions tend to dissipate toward the end of high school.

Our focus here is on youngsters, male and female, who are called nerds and/or geeks. The slang terms nerd and geek belong to a cluster of labels derogatorily used at schools to denote students whose characteristics and behavior make them standout in ways others view as "peculiar" and disdainful. Other labels in the cluster are nerd, geek, wonk, dweeb, and spaz. (Kendall, 1999, 2000). Another is dork.

One site on the web glibly asks: "Are you a geek, a dork or a dweeb?" Then, it offers the following Venn diagram and states "dweebs combine social ineptitude with intelligence, geeks combine obsession with intellect, and dorks lack both intelligence and social skills" (http://mashable.com/2009/09/07/nerd-venn-diagram/). And, as illustrated, nerds are seen as combining all three characteristics.
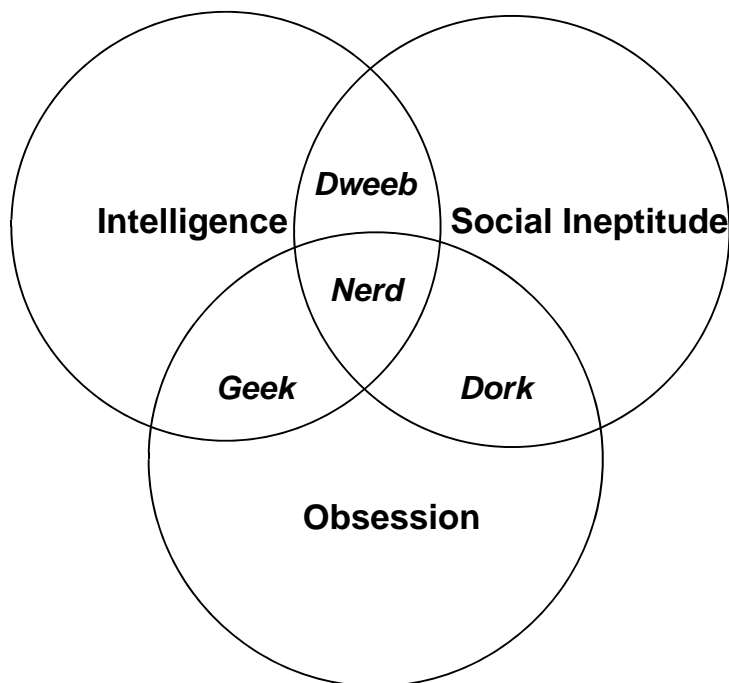
This diagram demonstrates the common and stereotypical use of these terms and the interest in differentiating among them. These terms also lend themselves to comic imitation, satire, and parody (e.g., see the online parody about diagnosing geek lifestyle as "Geek Personality Disorder" http://darojasp.blogspot.com/2006/08/geek-personality-disorder.html).

We should also note at the outset that some nerds and geeks adopt the label in referring to themselves. And, while others use the terms to denigrate and stereotype, those who adopt it for themselves try to underscore a range of positive characteristics and behaviors and also poke fun at the stereotypes associated with them (e.g., see the various websites designed for nerd and geek use). Interestingly, unlike students who are designated "losers" or "loners," these individuals often interact with a variety of peers and may be sought out when one of their strong points is found to be of use to others.

How Nerds and Geeks are defined and how individuals are identified

There has been relatively little scholarly study of those designated as nerds and geeks (Anderegg, 2007; Dunbar-Hester, 2008). Nevertheless, what is available is informative. We begin with a look at various definitions.

Nerds. The core definition of the term *nerd* emphasizes a person who is (a) intelligent, (b) single-minded in some nonsocial pursuit (usually one in which they are well-accomplished and often of a scientific or technical nature), and (c) socially inept. A common early reference was to a computer nerd. Some add to the definition by suggesting that nerds are foolish, inept, or unattractive. Physically, they are portrayed as either obese or very thin and unfit. Because they tend to value their individualism, they don't dress in a particular way or adopt a current fashion. However, it is widely thought that those who wear glasses go for large plastic-framed glasses.

In contrast to the negative definitions, nerds have been described as intelligent and industrious individuals who deeply understand the things they are pursuing.

Students who come to be designated as nerds standout because they are viewed as unusually passionate about some pursuit to the degree that others label as "uncool"(e.g., intellectual and esoteric interests). Their interests often are judged by others as age inappropriate (i.e., too advanced or immature for their age). As described by Lyng (2009):

> Nerds are primarily perceived as "academics" and less "gendered" than other student types. ... A school nerd is primarily focused on and supremely good at schoolwork, *good at everything except physical education*. Nerds are considered *know-it-alls*; they *always know the answer*. They are often called *whiz kids*, but that is rarely positively intended. On the other hand, many students express open admiration of the academic excellence of nerds and their unbeatable school performance. Nerds can also be of much assistance to both teachers and students. Local nicknames such as "the Oracle" indicate appreciation of the assistance nerds may provide. Nerds may thus also be proud and self-ironic that they are not like everybody else, that they are *hung up* on school and academic interests. A nerd may joke that he is *cramming Arabic in my spare time* and may laugh about his own failed attempts at participating in the "healthy" out-of-school activities in which young people are expected to take part. However, nerds are often alone. There is often only one nerd in a class, and often he or she has no complete membership in a friendship group. If nerds are part of a group of friends at school, they take part as "schoolmate" and not as "best friend." A nerd often sits alone and does schoolwork, at his or her desk or perhaps in the favorite room, the school library.

As to the matter of social ineptitude, Nugent (2008) suggests:

> What makes people insiders in high school is their ability to intuitively figure out how the hierarchies work. Some nerds can't follow the hierarchies, don't know how, and sometimes don't even perceive them. Other nerds are unwilling to follow them. But in general most of the people we consider nerds are people who are oblivious to or incompetent at following the hierarchies.

Apparently, it is these aspects that result in their portrayal as having obsessive-compulsive symptoms and being compared with those manifesting Asperger syndrome.

Geeks. Some use the term *geek* as almost synonymous with nerd. For example, the Merrian-Webster dictionary defines a geek as "a peculiar or otherwise odd person, especially one who is perceived to be overly obsessed with one or more things including those of intellectuality, electronics, etc." Wikipedia stresses that "the traditional accepted definition of the term distinctly refers to persons who are noticeably above average intelligence, usually more adept in technically demanding fields, and socially awkward or alienated to some degree." Among a list of definitions, Wikipedia also includes the following positive description: "A person who has chosen concentration rather than conformity; one who passionately pursues skill (especially technical skill) and imagination, not

mainstream social acceptance." Also included in the list is the following broad and somewhat more neutral definition: "A person with a devotion to something in a way that places him or her outside the mainstream. This could be due to the intensity, depth, or subject of their interest."

As described by Lyng (2009):

> The geek *never makes a spectacle* of himself, whether informally at school or in learning situations. He is one of those who, according to co-students associated with other styles, *is just there*. During breaks he will sit together with one or a few other geeks; as a group, geeks often have a corner of their own in the classroom where they hang out. Co-students talk of the geek as *calm, nice, pleasant, friendly, and proper*. The geek rarely picks a fight with teachers or co-students and, also according to himself, behaves *properly*.
> Several geeks state that it is not really at school that they are *themselves*. They emphasize that those who appear passive in school are not necessarily just as *dull* out of school. According to geeks, it is outside of school that *you really live*. A geek typically has out-of-school interests that he devotes himself, even during lessons, whenever he gets the chance to pursue them without the teachers noticing it. Geeks' interests are often found *weird*, by costudents, whether they include scale modeling or special genres within music, film, or literature that nobody else has even heard of. The geek speaks of himself as a *middle-class person* in school. He means that he *keeps up in school* and *responds when the teachers ask you questions about homework and stuff*, but he is *like not completely nerdy*. He speaks of school as generally *quite OK*. Schoolwork is something he does only because he has to, but he does do what he has to. However, he is starting to feel bored now toward the end of junior high school and *fed up with homework*. Moreover, he is tired of getting up early after devoting the night to his favorite interest.
> Many geeks have good relationships with one or a few male teachers, with whom they share a common interest. However, there are many teachers that the geek has no contact with. He evaluates them as *OK enough*, even though teachers rarely notice the geek and occasionally forget his name."

The author Julie Smith in her 1995 novel *New Orleans Beat* provides the following perspective:

> "He was the very personification of a 'geek', a bright young man turned inward, poorly socialized, who felt so little kinship with his own planet that he routinely traveled to the ones invented by his favorite authors, who thought of that secret, dreamy place his computer took him to as cyberspace -- somewhere exciting, a place more real than his own life, a land he could conquer, not a drab teenager's room in his parents' house."

Those designated as geeks always have special interests. Their involvement with technology has led to the term "computer geek" and to *The Geek Squad* created by the Best Buys stores to provide technical assistance. Those involved with marching bands are designated "band geeks." And on and on. Subculture members often seek fantasy in their video, board and roleplaying games, comic books, and TV and films; they draw on these sources in embracing specific fantasy characters (e.g., superheroes, sci fi personae).

The special interests of those designated as geeks are so consuming that little attention is paid to matters such as style and fashion. Media caricatures of geeks have ironically led some companies to advertise "geek culture" and describe males in the subgroup as prone to wearing (a) large plastic-framed or wire-rimmed glasses, (b) plain white button-down shirts or a plaid shirt made of cotton or flannel buttoned up to the collar or a T-shirt dedicated to some interest, (c) tight-fitting brown, black and gray dress or corduroy pants that show the ankle, (d) penny loafers or black shoes that come to a nice pointed toe or Converse sneakers, and more. (For the caricature of geek girls' dress, see http://www.ehow.com/how_2239580_dress-like-total-geek-girl.html .)

For all those males clustered as nerds, geeks, dorks, dweebs, the common perception is that they are

uninterested in traditional masculine pursuits (e.g., sports). Both males and females in these subgroups generally are seen as not attractive to the opposite sex; however, there are suggestions that this changes for some in college.

The impact of these subgroups on society and on subgroup members

Here is a sample of what is said about the negative impact on subgroup members; the implications for school and society seem clear.

> "The study of academically gifted 12 and 13 year olds found that some, particularly boys, were shunned by their peers if they appeared too clever. Some boys said they risked being assaulted for their intelligence, and in an attempt to fit in and conform, they may 'try to fall behind' or dumb down. ... A number of studies have identified the trend where children play down their academic ability. Teenage boys, in particular, fail to work hard, at an attempt to avoid being labeled 'nerdy" (Irvine, 2009).

> "For middle-school children, being dubbed a geek or a nerd is still, for the most part, horrifying. In fact, evidence indicates that such epithets lead children to underachieve purposely to avoid these labels" (Chamberlin, 2010).

> "Nerds typically appear either to lack confidence or to be indifferent or oblivious to the negative perceptions held of them by others, with the result that they become frequent objects of scorn, ridicule, bullying, and social isolation. ... Comparisons to Asperger syndrome are common, due to the tendency to engage in intense, specific interests and to experience difficulty in social situations" (Wikipedia, nd; also see Levin & Schlozman, 2007).

Heim, Brabdetzaeg, Kaare, Endestad, & Torgersen (2007) indicate the following:

> Boys reports of low social acceptance may be explained by the idea that children with heavy media use are viewed often as "nerds" by their peers. Interview data from Schott and Selwyn (2000) suggest that the negative stereotyping of heavy computer users still persists, particularly among those students who are not using computers. Therefore, it is relevant to ask whether it is the self-concept of being a "nerd" that reflects these findings. We know that children in this age group (10–12 years) are in a phase of life in which social relationships, friends, fashion, "the gang", the opposite sex and so forth are beginning to become more important among their peers. These children do have some good friends, but feel at the same time that they enjoy low peer acceptance or have problems in being generally well-liked by classmates because they may be considered to be "nerds". However, the "nerd" psychosocial phenomenon may not be found in older children, since more children begin to use computers when they get older, making computing a more regular activity. We believe that children who match the typology of advanced usage and/or Gameboy usage tend to have few friends except other heavy media users, or their "electronic friends" (Griffiths, 1997a). This might lead to a kind of social withdrawal, in that they are not socially involved with children other than like-minded friends. This rather small, isolated group of heavy media users may easily acquire a feeling of being unpopular, which in turn lowers their psychosocial factors in terms of a perception of poor self-concept. The main reason why "nerds" feel unpopular may be that they have other things to think about. Their attention is concentrated on the media, rather than fashion, the opposite sex and parties, unlike most children in this age group.

Some medical problems have been raised about the "geek lifestyle" (especially excessive computer

use). These include (a) insomnia and altered sleep patterns, (b) recurrent headaches, (c) back pain (e.g., due to poor posture, incorrectly sized chair, poorly positioned monitors), and (d) poor attention span for tasks other than those of high interest. With respect to attention span, it has been suggested that those adopting a geek lifestyle become so enmeshed in "multitasking" that they have trouble narrowing down to one task. Also, if they are having sleep problems, poor attention span (and difficulty staying awake during the day) are seen as likely correlates of the attention problem. The poor attention span for tasks other than those of high interest makes this subgroup vulnerable to being misdiagnosed with pathological labels such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Learning Disability.

On a political and cultural level, Kendall (1999) has suggested that representations of nerds in the media and the workplace perpetuate stereotypes and implicate the nerd "in a variety of discourses about race and class as well as masculinities." Bucholtz (2001) suggests that nerds represent white identity and "employ a superstandard language variety to reject the youth culture norm of coolness. These practices also ideologically position nerds as hyperwhite by distancing them from the African American underpinnings of European American youth culture."

From a more positive perspective, it is suggested that:

> Stereotypical nerd qualities have evolved in recent years, from awkwardness and social ostracism to a more widespread acceptance and sometimes even celebration of their abilities. This is largely attributable to the rise of the computer industry, which has allowed many "nerdy" people to accumulate large fortunes and other measures of social prestige (Wikipedia, nd).

> Although being described as a geek tends to be an insult, the term has recently become more complimentary, or even a badge of honor, within particular fields. This is particularly evident in the technical disciplines, where the term is now often a compliment, denoting extraordinary skill. . . . Technical support services such as Geek Squad, Geeks on Call and Dial-a-Geek use the term geek to signify helpful technical abilities (Wikipedia, nd).

And, as often is the case with youth culture subgroups, commercial interests are capitalizing on the "geek lifestyle." There is stuff for nerds and stuff for those who want to imitate nerds (http://www.thinkgeek.com/tshirts-apparel/). Besides clothes, the subgroup's attraction to fantasy games, video, and films and specific fantasy characters has created a significant market for a variety of toys and games (http://www.geektoysgamesandgadgets.com/).
Because some jobs (e.g., in the computing and engineering fields) are stereotyped as mainly populated by nerds and geeks, efforts are made to counter the stereotypes. For example, a group calling themselves *The Nerd Girls* is dedicated to breaking the stigma and stereotype of women in engineering (see the Nerd Girls website – http://www.nerdgirls.org ; also see the online community for women and girls interested in technology – http://www.girlgeeks.org).

And, of course, as those designated as nerds and geeks become famous and rich adults, it cannot help but counter the pervasive negative image and status. Charles J. Sykes is quoted widely as cautioning: "Be nice to nerds. Chances are you'll end up working for one."
Prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact

Given the positives and negatives related to the nerd and geek subgroups, society and its schools are advised to focus on both facets and also on the well-being not only of those who are so-designated but also those whose actions are harming these subgroups. Considerable data indicate the long-term negative impact of social aggression, rejection, bullying, and so forth (e.g., Berguno, et al., 2004; Pellegrini, 2002). It is evident that students often "tease" with the intent of hurting, embarrassing, and humiliating those peers who are perceived as displaying negative attributes (Levy, 2004). For

the most part, however, relatively little attention is paid to the problems of those designated as nerds and geeks.

Understanding that the social aggression experienced by these subgroups is a function of group process and individual-group transactions is essential in understanding why and where such aggression is likely to occur and how it causes harm. And, as Horn (2004) cautions, if we don't understand the complexity of social aggression, "our prevention and intervention programs will be simplistic and potentially ineffective."

The emphasis is on bullying. One example of approaching the problem too simplistically is the policy and practice emphasis on bullying. The problems experienced by those designatd as nerds and geeks generally are not addressed specifically as part of anti-bullying and bully prevention programs. For example, as Dellasega & Adamschick (2010) have noted, "while physical forms of aggression are targeted in traditional 'bullying' programs, relational aggression ... is often not detected or addressed." Such problems are more likely to be dealt with in character education, social and emotional learning and anti-stigmatizing programs.

As a growing public health concern, there is widespread and increasing federal, state, and local policy and practice attention focused specifically on bullying (Public Agenda, 2010). While there is a considerable variation in statutes aimed at the problem, they include one or more of the following: a definition of bullying, requirements for local school board actions, reporting requirements and immunity, some financial support, provisions related to student services, and curricular approaches. Below are some examples drawn from Dounay (2005):

Statutes provide formal definitions of "bullying." For example, in Colorado, bullying is defined as "any written or verbal expression, or physical act or gesture, or a pattern thereof, that is intended to cause distress upon one or more students in the school, on school grounds, in school vehicles, at a designated bus stop, or at school activities or sanctioned events."

In most states, local boards are required to adopt policies prohibiting bullying on school property, and during school activities and those that do not comply are subject to consequences. For example, any district in Georgia whose board does not adopt a policy prohibiting bullying and include it in the code of conduct for middle and high school students is ineligible to receive state funding. Other state statutes call for schoolwide interventions. For example, in Connecticut, every local and regional board's anti-bullying policy must "include an intervention strategy for school staff to deal with bullying."

Some policies specify a role for student service programs. In Arkansas, for example, student services programs must include "programs designed to prevent bullying" including group conflict resolution. In Louisiana, elementary schools are authorized to develop "youth development and assistance programs" that must include services for students such as "behavioral training and intervention techniques that promote cooperation and enhance interpersonal and conflict resolution skills, peer mediation, anger management, bullying prevention, life skills training, mentoring, counseling, and tutoring programs that improve academic achievement." And, some policies require schools to include an anti-bullying curriculum. For example, in Virginia, the character education program in every school must "address the inappropriateness of bullying." In Georgia, the character education program must address "methods of discouraging bullying and violent acts against fellow students."

With respect to reporting requirements and immunity, some states require students and/or school staff to report suspected bullying. In Arkansas, for example, "a school employee who has witnessed or has reliable information that a pupil has been a victim of bullying defined by the district" must report the incident to the school principal and is immune from tort liability. Local and regional board

policies in Connecticut must allow "students to anonymously report acts of bullying to teachers and school administrators," as well as "require teachers and other school staff who witness acts of bullying or receive student reports of bullying to notify school administrators."

Beyond bullying. Beyond a specific focus on bullying, there is an emphasis on preventing antisocial behavior in general. For example, a 2010 grant program from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services focuses on preventing aggressive, disruptive, and antisocial behavior. It is both noteworthy and a contentious issue that this grant is only for implementing a specific approach entitled "the Good Behavior Game." The reason for restricting the grant to one program is because the grant is offered as part of a federal initiative for "Implementing Evidence-Based Prevention Practices in Schools." The Good Behavior Game is a behavioral classroom management strategy focused on teaching children how to work together. In doing so, the objectives are to increase a positive learning environment and decrease disruptive behavior in the classroom. The research shows that the approach contributes to these objectives. However, given the comprehensive nature of these objectives, it is unlikely that policy and practice overreliance on this one approach will be sufficient.

Similar concerns are raised about policies and practices that pursue narrowly focused strategies for promoting social and emotional learning, facilitating well-being, and enhancing school climate.

Sources for Resources. Schools have focused on many facets of bullying, so many resources are available. Ready access can be made through our Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on *Bullying* (online at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/bully.htm).

Because of the mental and physical health implications, several major units in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have paid significant attention to providing general recommendations and resources focused on bullying. For example:

- As part of its violence prevention agenda, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) focuses on bullying – see http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/youthviolence/schoolviolence/index.html

- The Health Resources Service Administration (HRSA) has a section on its website to *Stop Bullying Now!* – see http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/kids/

- Office of Women's Health also has a Bullying section on its website – see http://www.girlshealth.gov/bullying/

- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers a variety of resources – see http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/15plus/aboutbullying.asp .

For a review of *character education,* see the U.S. Dept. of Education's "What Works Clearinghouse" (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/reports/Topic.aspx?tid=12).

The Online Clearinghouse for the Center's at UCLA also provides Quick Finds on *Social Emotional Development and Social Skills* (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2102_05.htm) and on *School Climate* (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/environments.htm).

Data on Intervention efforts

In an interview, the author of *Nerds: Who they are and why we need more of them* (Anderegg, 2007) had this to say about the state of research on nerds: "There is very little on how people acquire these

stereotypes, how it affects their decisions about what to study, and on what potentially protects some kids from acquiring these stereotypes." The result: interventions have not been designed specifically to counter the stereotypical thinking or reduce its impact. As noted, the emphasis is on anti-bullying and bully prevention programs, with some consideration given to character education, social and emotional learning, and anti-stigmatizing programs.

As many reviewers have stressed, the body of intervention research has not indicated significant intermediate and longer-term psychosocial and educational outcomes related to bullying prevention and character education. Some promising findings are emerging related to enhanced school performance from programs promoting social emotional learning (Zins, Payton, Weissberg, & O'Brien, 2007). However, there are no data specifically on the impact on the subgroups designated as nerds and geeks.

Nevertheless, some conclusions have been offered based on the available, albeit limited research, and other rationale that delineate good practices. Of note, SAMHA suggests the following as principles and characteristics for a model bullying prevention program:

> Create both a school and home environment characterized by warmth, positive interest, and involvement with adults who act as authorities and models
> Establish firm limits against unacceptable behavior
> Apply nonphysical, nonhostile negative consequences.

Limber and Snyder (2006) list the following as what works in bullying prevention:

> Focus on the school environment
> Assess bullying at your school
> Garner staff and parent support for bullying prevention
> Form a group to coordinate the school's bullying prevention activities
> Train your staff in bullying prevention
> Establish and enforce school rules and policies related to bullying
> Increase adult supervision in "hot spots" for bullying
> Intervene consistently and appropriately in bullying situations
> Focus some class time on bullying prevention
> Continue these efforts over time."

And they also conclude the following are common mistakes/misdirections in bullying prevention and intervention:

> Zero tolerance policies
> Group treatment for children who bully
> Conflict resolution/peer mediation
> Simple, short-term solutions
> Confusing civil rights issues with bullying issues
> Disregarding state laws and legal liability issues

Besides the above mistakes/misdirections, other analyses have raised fundamental criticisms about policies and practices for responding to bullying, social aggression, and so forth. For example, Verduzco-Baker (2008) stresses:

Current approaches to bullying and conflict are found to obscure ways in which power

(i.e. social power rather than psychological or physical power) is salient to conflicts and to intervention strategies. During interviews staff demonstrate a common assumption that developmental or psychological problems cause children to be involved in conflicts and bullying. Furthermore, analysis of staff members' descriptions of their intervention strategies show they rely on conflict resolution techniques derived from psychological frameworks that presume children enter a conflict on an equal playing field.. Further investigation of how current approaches to bullying and conflict may obscure or even reproduce children's unequal access to social power are needed. Adding a sociological perspective to the current psychological perspective might account for and remediate power differentials between children.

New directions

The reality is that schools need to understand the impact of all youth subcultures. And, where any lifestyle is significantly interfering with positive physical, cognitive, social and emotional development, action is warranted. However, the school's stance must be proactive not reactive.

A proactive approach avoids traditional tendencies to wait for problems to arise. It also avoids presuming every problem requires unique intervention strategies by understanding which concerns represent common youth cultural subgroup dynamics and which are associated mostly with one or a few subgroups. Analyses should consider a subgroup's behavior in terms of motivating factors (including efforts intended to enhance feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to specific others), as well as social, cultural, and gender politics and economies.

Current new directions for policy and practice addressing student social-emotional problems reflect an increasing emphasis on enhancing social-emotional learning, school climate, and general wellness. For example, federal policy coming out of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools is on the verge of shifting. Assistant Deputy Secretary of Education, Kevin Jennings, is pushing his division to broaden its focus to encompass school climate as essential for ensuring school is a place in which students are both physically and emotionally safe and feel valued. (http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2010/02/obama_appointee_advocates_scho.html). This could have a significant impact on how schools and communities address many individuals previously only attended to tangentially (e.g., those designated as nerds and geeks).

The impact, of course, is dependent on what a school does and what it stops doing so that students feel "both physically and emotionally safe and feel valued." From the perspective of our Center's work, what is needed is the development of a full continuum of interventions. A full continuum allows schools to begin with a focus on promoting healthy development and preventing problems for all students. Well designed systems for healthy development and prevention should be foundational features in every school and community. Beyond the benefits they provide directly, they also provide a platform for determining whether the impact of any subgroup is significantly interfering with positive physical, cognitive, social and emotional development and thus warrants special attention. Where it is clear that this is the case, early-after-onset interventions can be introduced based on an analysis of subgroup concerns associated with a particular lifestyle. Finally, if individuals are found to need specialized assistance, steps can be taken to address identified needs.

In sum, rather than waiting for problems, new directions thinking stresses a proactive approach to preventing school and student problems, enhancing personal well-being, and improving academics, and using a continuum of interventions that contributes to enhancing a positive school climate.

Below and in the box that follows, we illustrate approaching policy and practice proactively and with a full continuum of interventions. Embedded are a few examples to illustrate addressing concerns related to students designated as nerds and geeks and those victimize them.

- *Promoting healthy development and preventing problems*

Examples:
> providing information to educate school and key community stakeholders and policy makers about the positive and negative features of youth subculture in general and nerd and geek lifstyle/subculture specifically and about how to counter any negative impact

> establishing dialogues with students identified as nerds and geeks, with the intent of engaging them in ways that minimize identified problems and promote healthy social and emotional development (e.g., clarifying who is teasing them and helping them learn how to turn around such problem)

> protecting all students (e.g., from injuries, from negative social and emotional impact, from discrimination and negative images)

- *Intervening when problems are noted*

Examples:
> implementing agreed upon promising practices to respond as quickly as feasible (e.g., watching for those who are viewed as nerds and geeks and, if someone is being victimized, taking corrective actions)

> ensuring a student's status as a nerd or geek isn't interfering with success at school (e.g., enhancing regular attendance and motivated participation in classroom learning)

> ensuring medical, mental health, and learning supports are available for all in need (e.g., related to physical, social, emotional, and learning problems)

- *Attending to chronic and severe problems*

For instance:
> identifying and referring for appropriate individual interventions as necessary (e.g., to reduce serious and pervasive physical, emotional, and cognitive concerns)

> establish a safety net of support (e.g., through school, family, community mental and physical health providers and agencies)

A Perspective on What Schools Should Do Based on the Work of our Center at UCLA

Schools experience many overlapping concerns related to youth subgroups and youth subculture. Of special concern is addressing any negative impact (e.g., criminal acts, bullying, sexual harassment, interracial conflict, vandalism, mental health problems). But, also essential is a focus on promoting healthy development and fostering a positive school climate.

As always, the more we understand about subgroups and individual differences, the more effective our interventions can be. But to keep from the tendency to focus on each concern as if it is discrete, schools need to work in a new way.

Given the complexity of the negative behaviors that arise in relation to youth subgroups, those in the school, district, and community who have responsibility for gangs, safe schools, violence prevention, bullying, interracial conflict, substance abuse, vandalism, truancy, and school climate need to work collaboratively. The *immediate objectives* are to (1) educate others about motivational and behavioral factors associated with a particular subgroup, (2) counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services, and (3) facilitate opportunities on campus for youth subgroups to engage positively in subcultural activity and connect with effective peer supports.

By working collaboratively and differentiating the causes of observed problems, school staff and community stakeholders can integrate fragmented and marginalized initiatives for promoting positive youth development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems are identified, and providing effective ways to respond to pervasive, chronic, and serious problems. *Longer-term*, the aim is to help develop a comprehensive system of student and learning supports that (a) addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development and (b) re-engages disconnected youth. Such a system encompasses a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems that are fully integrated into the improvement agenda for schools and communities (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b).

Toward these ends, schools must reach out to the community and establish a collaborative mechanism where those with specialized knowledge not only bring that knowledge to the table, but also work to build the needed comprehensive system of student and learning supports that addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development (Adelman & Taylor, 2007). And it is essential to remember that those with specialized knowledge include youth themselves (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2009).

Moving forward requires building a comprehensive and systemic continuum of interventions and fully integrating the system into the improvement agenda for schools and communities. To guide development of a systemic approach, we have suggested using a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems as a unifying framework. This includes school-community systems for promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible, and addressing chronic and severe problems.

Policy that helps schools and communities develop the full continuum of interventions is essential to moving forward in enhancing equity of opportunity. Such policy must effectively establish a *comprehensive intervention framework* that can be used to map, analyze, and set priorities. It must guide fundamental *reworking of operational infrastructure* so that there is leadership and mechanisms for building integrated systems of interventions at schools and for connecting school and community resources. And, it must provide guidance for the difficulties inherent in facilitating major *systemic changes*. By working in this way, we can counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services.

For resource aids related to policy examples, intervention frameworks and related mapping tools, examples of ways to rework the operational infrastructure and develop key mechanisms such as a *Learning Support Resource Team*, guides for facilitating systemic change, and much more, see the Center's Toolkit at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm

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Source for Additional Information

See our Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find on *Youth Culture and Subgroups*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/youthculture.htm

The Center's Series of Information Resources on *Youth Subcultures: Understanding Subgroups to Better Address Barriers to Learning & Improve Schools**

Online:

What is Youth Culture? A Brief Introduction

Glossary of Terms Related to Youth Culture Subgroups

Youth Subcultures: Annotated Bibliography and Related References

About Youth Gangs

About the Goth Youth Subculture

About Hip Hop Youth Subculture

About "Loners" and "Losers"

About "Jocks" as Youth Subculture

About Emo Youth Subculture

About Surfing and Skateboarding Youth Subcultures

About the Cheerleading Youth Subculture

About "Mean Girls" as a Youth Culture Subgroup

About "Nerds" and "Geeks" as an Identified Subculture

About "Preppies" as a Youth Culture Subgroup

About Sexual Minority (LGBT) Youth Subculture

Youth and Socially Interactive Technologies

About Raves as a Youth Culture Phenomenon

Others are in development

*Many of the terms used by youth in referring to subgroups often are pejorative and offensive. We do not condone such language. We do, however, recognize the need to go beyond adultcentric definitions and descriptions of youth subgroups if we are to understand youth perceptions and perspectives. So the *Information Resource* documents reflect the terms used by youth.