CALIFORNIA
PARTNERSHIP TO END
DOMESTIC **VIOLENCE**

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Addressing Bullying and Adolescent Dating Abuse: Supporting Healthy Relationships in Schools

A Publication of the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence

Young people are experiencing forms of violence such as bullying and adolescent dating abuse both on and off school grounds, and the negative impacts are felt at the school site, regardless of where the violence occurs. Most schools now recognize the serious short and long term consequences of bullying, including the impact it has on student safety and learning. These schools are taking steps to address the seriousness of bullying, developing prevention strategies, and talking about the issue.

While bullying has received substantial attention and focus in school settings, arguably adolescent dating abuse has not. This brief will focus on what school boards should know about the similarities and differences in how to best respond to these serious forms of youth violence.

The data shows us that bullying and adolescent dating abuse are impacting students all across California. These behaviors are occurring on school grounds and are impacting the health, well-being, and educational achievement of students. Because

of that, our schools have an important role to play in addressing and preventing both bullying and adolescent dating abuse.

Overview of Bullying and Adolescent Dating Abuse

Bullying is defined as verbal, physical, socially aggressive or unwanted behavior among young people when there is a perceived or real power imbalance. Bullying behaviors are repeated or have the potential to be repeated.[1]

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found in a 2015 study that 20% of U.S. high school students were bullied on school grounds and 16% reported some form of electronic bullying.[2] The 2013-2015 California Healthy Kids Survey report showed that 23% of 7th grade students reported experiencing a sexual joke or gesture more than two times and 27% of 11th graders reported the same. 25% of 7th graders experienced being made fun of for their looks or how they talk at least twice, while 21% of 11th graders reported being

20% **bullied** on **school grounds**[2]
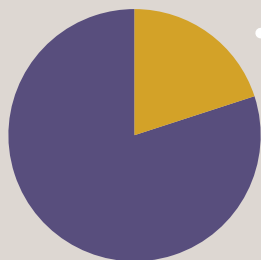
16% reported some **form of** **electronic bullying**[2]

23% of 7th grade students reported experiencing a **sexual joke** or **gesture**[3]

made fun of.[3] Bullying impacts the academic success and mental health of students, including depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness, changes to sleeping and eating patterns, decreased GPA and standardized test scores, and an increased likelihood to miss, skip, or drop out of school.[4]

Adolescent dating abuse is defined as verbal, physical, emotional, sexual or technological conduct by a person to harm, threaten, intimidate or control a dating partner, regardless of whether that relationship is continuing or has concluded.[5] Similar to the consequences of bullying, adolescent dating abuse increases the risk of depression, anxiety, and unhealthy behaviors for youth.[6] Dating abuse is also connected to academic achievement - 20% of students with mostly D and F grades have been involved with dating abuse compared to 6% of students with mostly A's engaging in dating abuse.[7]

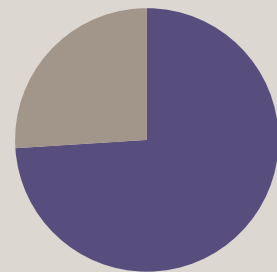One in four adolescents experience dating abuse each year.[8] Of the students that have experienced adolescent dating abuse, almost half report that some of the abuse occurred on school grounds.[9] According to the 2011-2013 California Healthy Kids Survey, 46% of 7th graders reported having a girlfriend or boyfriend and 8% of those students reported experiencing physical violence from their girlfriend or boyfriend. By 9th grade, 50% of students report having a girlfriend or boyfriend and 10% of those students experienced physical violence. These numbers increase even further by 11th grade, with 56% of students reporting having a girlfriend or boyfriend, and 13% of those students experiencing physical dating abuse.[10]

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students are at the highest risk to experience bullying or adolescent dating abuse. According to a Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) study, 74% of LGBT students experience verbal harassment and over 35% experience physical harassment. Over 55% of students reported feeling unsafe due to their sexual orientation.[11] In a different study, 43% of LGBT students reported experiencing physical abuse from a dating partner compared to 29% of heterosexual students.[12]

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One in Four
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74% of
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harassment[11]

Intersections Between Bullying and Adolescent Dating Abuse

Research has demonstrated the intersection and overlap between these two issues. Students were 5 times more likely to perpetrate physical peer violence when they also had perpetrated physical adolescent dating abuse.[13] Students that were both bullied and bullied others were more likely than other students to experience physical and emotional adolescent dating abuse.[14] The long and short-term consequences of bullying and adolescent dating abuse are similar, including both mental health and academic effects. To counteract this, schools must be proactive in establishing a healthy school climate that reflects the feelings and attitudes that are elicited by the school's environment. Positive school climate helps student development, promotes student health and risk prevention, contributes to student learning and success, and increases the likelihood that students will graduate.[15] This makes it especially critical that schools address and prevent the impacts of both adolescent dating abuse and bullying through school policies and efforts involving the entire school community.

Bullying and adolescent dating abuse also have similar risk and protective factors that need to be recognized and integrated into prevention efforts and policies for both issues. Risk factors increase the likelihood of experiencing violence, while protective factors reduce the possibility of violence. The protective factors, or conditions and variables that are associated with an enhanced likelihood of positive or socially desirable outcomes, that reduce the likelihood of both bullying and adolescent abuse include: family support, association with peers that are a positive

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influence, and connection or commitment to school.[16] Factors that increase the risk of both bullying and adolescent dating abuse include: harmful social norms around masculinity and femininity, poor neighborhood support and cohesion, lack of social support, and poor parent-child relationships.[17] This makes it critical to be diligent in promoting these protective factors, while conversely addressing and reducing the risk factors that increase an individual's likelihood of involvement with violence.

Considerations for School Boards and School Sites

Addressing the shared risk and protective factors for bullying and adolescent dating abuse can be incorporated into existing efforts and activities of schools. A few examples of how schools can do this include:

- Parent notifications, which are already routinely sent out by schools, serve as an area for including information about how the school creates a respectful learning environment amongst all students.

- During staff meetings or in-service days, all staff can receive training in the area of promoting healthy relationships and responding to abuse.

- Following this training, staff will be informed on how to advise students about what resources are available on campus and who on campus is prepared to discuss healthy relationships.

- Schools can ensure that students have access to healthy and participatory extracurricular activities.

In addition, the following questions can help to guide a school board's consideration of additional methods to best address adolescent dating abuse.

1. What are the current school policies and practices addressing bullying? How can adolescent dating abuse be added to strengthen and expand existing policies?

One important first step for school boards is to review their policies and incorporate adolescent dating abuse where it is relevant. Within bullying policies, schools can add provisions that explicitly include adolescent dating abuse and recognize the intimate relationship between dating partners and the added complexity that these relationships bring. Developing a school reporting and response policy on adolescent dating abuse which addresses the unique situation of dating partners is an important component of these policies. A school's bullying reporting and response policy can be a helpful starting point in creating the adolescent dating abuse policy.

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2. How does the school promote a positive school climate?

When students do not feel safe they are unable to focus on learning. A positive school climate creates a healthy learning environment for students that allows for a focus on academics and creates the best opportunities for learning and growth. Schools have a responsibility to maintain a safe, nurturing, and affirming environment. Educators have the platform, position, and presence not only to teach their academic subject matter, but also to encourage appropriate behaviors and prosocial attitudes through instruction, modeling, policies, reminders, and reinforcement. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that a positive school climate will help schools achieve what administrators and teachers prioritize on a daily basis: higher academic achievement, lower absenteeism and truancy, and lower behavioral problems among youth. Students' connectedness to schools, a direct expression of the school climate, is a protective factor against many different types of violence: adolescent dating abuse, sexual violence, youth violence, bullying, and suicide.[18] The creation and maintenance of a school-based culture marked by social support from supervisory adults, as well as instruction and modeling on how to engage in healthy relationships, can also insulate youth from the negative effects of these various forms of violence.[19]

School climate, why it matters, and how it can be measured have all been covered in greater depth through the California School Board Association's policy briefs *Climate for Achievement, Issues 1 through 3* and we will not restate those points here. Specific to addressing a positive climate around healthy peer and dating relationships, schools can provide educational programs and policies that address gender norms and support all forms of gender expression.

3. What opportunities exist for students, families, and communities to engage with the school and help promote healthy adolescent relationships?

School connectedness is the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning, as well as about them as individuals. The factors that facilitate school connectedness

are strengthened by the following strategies provided. Opportunities for student leadership and skill development support positive peer group interactions amongst students that encourage a lasting feeling of connection and belonging at school. Engaging families and parents in school activities, providing professional development for all school staff, and supporting proficient classroom management all create opportunities for the building of trusting youth/adult relationships and demonstrates to students that there is a strong family, community, and staff commitment to their education and well being. By improving communication between all invested stakeholders and prioritizing engagement of youth in the school community, a greater sense of school connectedness and investment is promoted to students. Advancing the protective factors in the school environment and within staff development fosters healthier physical and psychosocial space in schools. These are all strategies that are essential in establishing a school culture that provides relational support and positive adult–student interactions.[20]

> **Train staff on how to identify abusive relationships and promote healthy relationships.**

The CDC's publication, *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth*, lays out 6 strategies for schools to facilitate student connectedness:[21]

- Create opportunities for student leadership and decision-making in the schools
  - ❱ Provide opportunities for students to participate in developing school policies. Give students the opportunity to provide feedback on the school environment.

- Provide opportunities for family involvement

- ❱ Host events on school grounds. Offer workshops or informational sessions for parents on different topics important for youth. Encourage regular and on-going communication with parents about student progress.

- Develop academic, social, and emotional skills, that allow for student engagement
  - ❱ Make tutoring, or homework clubs, available for students. Encourage the development of healthy and respectful communications skills throughout classes.

- Classroom management which takes advantage of teachable moments when an incident occurs while fostering a positive learning environment
  - ❱ Provide school staff with the skills needed to intervene when disrespectful, abusive, or bullying behavior occurs. Take those opportunities to teach skills about conflict resolution, communication, and healthy relationships.

- Professional development and support for school staff is important so that they may meet the needs of a diverse student body
  - ❱ Train staff on how to identify abusive relationships and promote healthy relationships. Provide opportunities for school staff to develop skills to model healthy and respectful communication and conflict resolution skills.

- Create an environment of open and honest communication which will facilitate trusting and caring relationships within the school community[22]

❯ Provide opportunities for school wide events that allow for students and staff to build trusting relationships. Demonstrate respect in all school relationships.

School districts should also incorporate local service providers into violence response plans. This should include sexual and domestic violence response centers, mental health providers, and other healthcare resources. Rehabilitative resources must be made available to those who cause harm.

To increase community support, schools can develop opportunities for community involvement in school programs or by holding community events. These events can range from hosting community health fairs to bringing in guest speakers or holding town hall meetings. Hosting community events and providing opportunities for families to participate in fun events at the school can support positive parent-child relationships, promote positive peer connections, and foster connections to the school and community.

4. What are existing resources available to help guide the process of implementing a dating violence prevention policy on campus?

Resources to help your campus start in the process of addressing adolescent dating abuse can be found through the following organizations:

- **The California Partnership to End Domestic Violence:** The Partnership is California's recognized domestic violence coalition, representing over 1,000 advocates, organizations and allied groups throughout the state. Through public policy, communications and capacity-building efforts, the Partnership aligns prevention and intervention strategies to advance social change. More information on finding and connecting with finding a local

domestic violence prevention organization that can provide community based support to schools looking to implement policies and prevention efforts, visit *www.cpedv.org/ domestic-violence-organizations-california*

- **PreventConnect:** A national online project dedicated to the primary prevention of sexual assault and domestic violence, provides numerous resources and training opportunities. PreventConnect also builds the capacity of local, state, territorial, national and tribal agencies and organizations to develop, implement and evaluate effective prevention initiatives.

- **Futures Without Violence:** For more than 30 years, Futures has been providing programs, policies, and campaigns that empower individuals and organizations working to end violence against women and children around the world. Striving to reach new audiences and transform social norms, Futures trains professionals on improving responses to violence and abuse. Futures also works with advocates, policy makers, and others to build sustainable community leadership and educate people everywhere about the importance of respect and healthy relationships.

- **California School Boards Association (CSBA):** CSBA is a nonprofit education association representing the elected officials who govern public school districts and county offices of education. CSBA provides policy resources and training to members, and represents the statewide interests of public education through legal, political legislative, community and media advocacy. In conjunction with the Partnership, CSBA has published *Promoting Healthy Relationships for Adolescents: Board Policy Considerations.*

Conclusion

Given the many overlapping issues between bullying and adolescent dating abuse, schools need to take steps to ensure that both issues are incorporated into their policies and prevention strategies. Schools where bullying and adolescent dating abuse are not significant concerns result from a lot of hard, but doable, work by the students, educators, and parents who intentionally cultivate and maintain an environment where people simply care about one another.[23] By working on these issues in tandem, schools will help students learn how to form healthy relationships, increase student safety, and improve students' academic outcomes.

Endnotes

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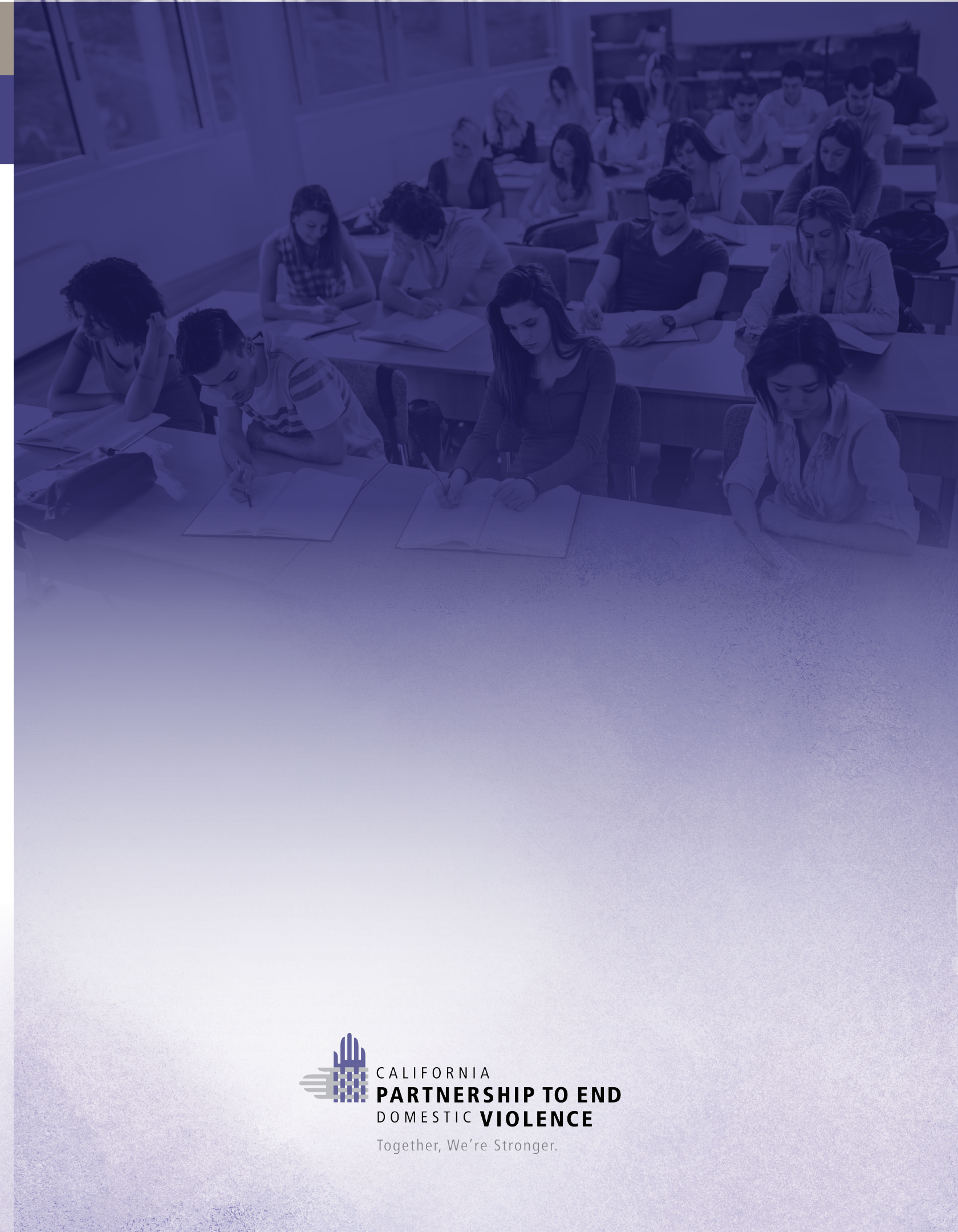
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