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# **Teenage Dating Violence: Perceptions of Need, Priority, and Prevention Responsibility among Schools in Predominantly Mexican Heritage Communities**

*Lela Rankin Williams and Heidi Adams Rueda*

Teen dating violence (TDV) affects adolescents' overall wellness, subsequent social–emotional and academic development, and future success. The extent to which high schools recognize the importance of TDV prevention, and their accountability to prevent or reduce its occurrence, is largely unknown. Recently, there has been increased legislative debate urging or requiring school boards to include TDV prevention strategies in their curriculum. The purpose of this study was to understand how high school personnel from three large schools, of predominantly Mexican heritage urban communities, perceive their role to intervene and prevent TDV. The authors conducted five focus groups ( $N = 26$ ). TDV was recognized as a significant problem, but opinions about the extent to which it should be prioritized varied. Some participants were concerned with a consequential reduced focus on academics, whereas others viewed TDV prevention as a necessary precursor to academic achievement. In light of these findings, authors recommend that social workers take more leadership in identifying factors contributing to TDV, provide intervention in conflict and relationship management, advocate for more preventive education on a community- wide basis, and serve as a resource for any economic or cultural considerations that may help to promote change.

## **KEY WORDS:**

*Latino students; school administration; teen dating violence; violence prevention*

In 2012, then-President Obama declared February Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month; in early 2014, he created a task force “to hold schools accountable if they don’t confront the problem” (D. Jackson, 2014). Nearly one-fifth of Latino high school students who had dated during the past year experienced physical teen dating violence (TDV), specifically 11.4 percent of girls and 8.0 percent of boys. Similar rates were reported for sexual violence, with 14.2 percent of girls having been victimized and 7.0 percent of boys (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016). It is critical that TDV prevention and intervention take place early. Although the incorporation and perceptions of this mandate vary from state to state, currently 22 states legally “allow, urge or require” school boards to include TDV prevention strategies in their curriculum (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2017). The purpose of this study was to understand how high school personnel in predominantly Mexican heritage communities perceive their role in TDV prevention.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Standardized Testing, Incentives, and Accountability**

Most public schools emphasize academic achievement, taking priority and precedence over intervention programs to promote healthy relationships (Fleming et al., 2005). Student performance on standardized tests is often linked to teachers’ compensation and to local and state funding sources, and in some cases also promotions or public recognition (Lavy, 2007). Performance-based pay places more stock on academics as teachers are held responsible and accountable for standardized testing outcomes. Although students’ standardized test scores are correlated with positive emotional and social skills (Fleming et al., 2005), these important mediators are not incentivized. As a result, teachers, administrators, and school districts are often outcome driven and circumstantially neglect other aspects of development such as healthy relationship formation (Lavy, 2007).

Public schools in Arizona receive a rating based on the state’s academic standards and performance on standardized tests. Those ratings are underperforming, performing, performing plus, highly performing, and excelling (Arizona Department of Education, 2014). In 2000, Proposition 301 was passed in Arizona, enabling a portion of funds from sales tax to be streamed into schools (Arizona Secretary of State, 2000). The purpose of this proposition was to increase accountability of schools and teachers and to reward teachers for student improvement (Arizona Secretary of State, 2000). Schools set “301 goals” yearly, and if goals are met teachers receive a minimum of \$650, in addition to the school receiving monetary incentives (Tucson Unified School District, 2014). Those schools that already have a high rating still receive monetary incentives,

but not as much as those schools that see improvement in academic achievement (Fischer, 2014). In addition, teachers and administrators who consistently have students who perform well on standardized tests are more likely to receive pay raises (Thompson, 2014). This incentive program is similar to other states nationwide. In 2009, then-President Obama created the Race to the Top program for states to compete for \$4.3 billion; the program resulted in funds for 11 states, plus the District of Columbia (Kastenbaum, 2012; Procon.org, n.d.). Because of the program's success, Obama promised additional incentives for state schools in 2010 that adjusted their assessments to align with state standards and included other criteria such as attendance, graduation rates, and learning environments (Procon.org, n.d.).

## **Dating Violence and Academic Achievement**

Some factors linked to increased school dropout rates and low academic achievement include disruptive and violent behavior and physical and relational hostility among youths (Fleming et al., 2005). Many adolescents who are involved in dating violence have such behavioral characteristics, resulting in a negative impact on their academic performance (Fleming et al., 2005). One study found that commitment to school and positive social, emotional, and problem-solving skills were correlated with higher academic achievement (Fleming et al., 2005).

Adolescents are simultaneously experiencing a normative period of transition, resulting in added pressure and responsibility (Wolfe et al., 2009). During this transitional period, they are navigating relational and familial conflict and their emotional responses, in addition to potential dating violence. Furthermore, many adolescents experiencing dating violence lack positive emotion regulation capacities and social skills (Ashley & Foshee, 2005), thus impeding their ability to do well in school.

Schools have been established as an optimal setting to house programs that promote healthy youth development and enhance overall well-being (Temple, Le, Muir, Goforth, & McElhany, 2013). Some public middle and high schools have successfully implemented dating violence prevention programs, incorporating lessons on health education including sex, relationships, and substance use (Wolfe et al., 2009). School interventions that focus on healthy relationships are likely to result in higher academic achievement. This is supported by research finding that social-emotional learning, which includes personal and social skill development, has a positive impact on adolescents' relationships, prosocial attitudes and behaviors, problem-solving abilities, and academic achievement (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). It is further supported by data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (CDC, 2009, as cited in Temple et al., 2013) which found that one in five adolescents (compared with 6 percent of the sample as a whole) in

violent relationships received failing grades, and as replicated in other longitudinal research of adolescent health.

## **Intervention in and Prevention of Dating Violence**

Both boys and girls report being victims and perpetrators of violence (Wolfe et al., 2009, 2003), and most adolescents who are involved in dating violence do not seek help (Ashley & Foshee, 2005). Dating violence may be more common among adolescents because of their inexperience and yearning for intimate relationships (Walker & Smith, 2009). It is therefore critical to consider adolescence as an optimal time for implementing dating violence interventions and prevention programs. One recent study found that educating adult professionals within the school system about dating violence increased their knowledge and fostered concerning attitudes, thus increasing the number of referrals of children to domestic violence and child abuse agencies (Walker & Smith, 2009). Furthermore, high school students report awareness of dating violence among their peers and believe that schools should play a large role in promoting dating violence awareness and prevention (Temple et al., 2013).

Although more evaluative research is needed, several studies document successes of school-based TDV interventions. Still, most such interventions find changes in mediating variables (that is, knowledge, attitudes), with few assessing long-term behavioral outcomes (Temple et al., 2013). Furthermore, programs differ in their approach in that some are targeted specifically to educating youths about TDV (Foshee et al., 2004; Jaycox et al., 2006; Wolfe et al., 2009), whereas others focus more broadly on healthy relationships (Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011; Futris, Sutton, & Richardson, 2013). Regardless, most programs include overlapping topic areas such as conflict resolution skills, knowledge of what constitutes a healthy versus unhealthy relationship, and reducing the acceptance of violent conflict strategies. The Safe Dates project (Foshee et al., 2004) and Fourth R (Wolfe et al., 2009, 2003) are among few TDV programs that have been successful in demonstrating long-term behavioral changes. The latter integrates content into existing health classes and has been deemed a “more promising program” (Temple et al., 2013). However, the absence of a federal mandate requiring health education leaves it up to each state to determine whether and how such education will be incorporated (National Association of State Boards of Education [NASBE], n.d.). Arizona, along with many other states, prioritizes physical health education and lacks mandates for health education (NASBE, n.d.). In addition to the importance of creating a time and context in schools for TDV education to occur, research points to the important role that teachers and high school personnel play in ensuring its effectiveness (R. D. Jackson, Bouffard, & Fox, 2013). We address this gap in the literature by conducting focus groups with diverse high school personnel to gather a range of

experiences with and perceptions of TDV at their school and to assess their perceptions of their role in TDV prevention and intervention. The phenomenological study design privileges their experiences of the issue, aims to deeply explore their perceptions, and offer a contextually rich understanding that relies on their own descriptions and posits a curious and reflective stance on behalf of the researchers ([Creswell, 2007](#)).

## **METHOD**

### **Sample and Procedure**

High school personnel ( $N = 26$ , 73 percent women) from three large high schools of predominantly Mexican heritage urban communities in Phoenix, Arizona, were invited to participate in focus groups ( $N = 5$ ; three to 10 participants per group) conducted in school during regular school hours. Groups ranged in size because all personnel were invited to attend, and groups were held separately for school administrators versus other staff to facilitate discussion among those holding similar roles and decision-making power within the school. The majority were female; male participants were in administrative positions or security, which reflects the distribution of these positions by gender in the schools we sampled. Participants included 38.5 percent administration (for example, principals), 38.5 percent staff (for example, security guards, nurses, prevention staff), and 23.1 percent counselors or social workers. A sample of Mexican American students (ages 15 to 17 years) from their school had completed an online survey as part of the Mexican American Teen Relationships study. We summarized these findings into a two-page summary report for each school that participated. Each report only included students who attended that school. Participants were provided the summary report at the beginning of the focus group and were asked for their reactions to this report. Of note, reports found higher than national rates of physical and sexual violence (see [Table 1](#) for frequencies of the five types of TDV by school; the reader may compare these rates with those discussed in the introduction; see also [CDC, 2016](#)).

After gaining signed consent, the first author moderated the focus groups by asking a set of eight questions:

- (1) How do adolescents' dating lives affect the school as a whole?
- (2) What does your school currently do to foster healthy dating relationships among adolescents and to prevent TDV?
- (3) What do you feel is the best way to educate teens about the prevention of dating violence?
- (4) What do you perceive are the biggest barriers to reaching adolescents with information and skill sets to equip them to have healthy dating relationships? (
- 5) How might the information contained in this report be used to design effective TDV prevention programs?

(6) How important is it to have

than from a pre-existing conceptual framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All data were included as they pertained to TDV. The two authors created an initial set of codes and then further integrated, connected, and refined these to create themes operationalized through a code book (referred to by Braun & Clarke, 2006, as a “thematic map”). Countering concerns associated with using prevalence counts only in coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we gave weight to comments based on frequency, specificity, emotion, and extensiveness (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The final code book was then validated by a third coder from the Tucson Unified School District. The results include two distinct themes along with quotations from participants. prevention or intervention for teen dating violence in your school?

(7) What are your biggest recommendations for us to effectively promote positive youth development?

(8) After reviewing and discussing this report, do you feel there is anything we have missed?

**Table 1: Student Experiences with Teen Dating Violence in Their Most Recent Dating Relationship, by School**

Demographic or Behavioral Factor	School A (n = 44) %	School B (n = 55) %	School C (n = 29) %
Age			
15 years	16	13	24
16 years	46	27	31
17 years	39	60	45
Gender (girls)	52	67	69
Immigration status			
First generation	9	11	14
Second generation	61	47	65
Third generation	30	42	21
Sexual violence			
Perpetration	36	47	46
Victimization	45	58	46
Physical violence			
Perpetration	50	49	46
Victimization	41	60	46
Threatening behavior			
Perpetration	29	33	43
Victimization	33	44	36
Relational violence			
Perpetration	17	18	29
Victimization	29	24	29
Emotional/verbal violence			
Perpetration	90	91	82
Victimization	90	91	79

Notes: First generation = adolescent born in Mexico; second generation = adolescent born in the United States, at least one parent was born in Mexico; third+ generation = both parents and adolescent were born in the United States. Violence types: sexual = unwanted sexual activity; physical = physical harm; threatening behavior = destroying property or threatening physical harm; relational = psychological violence that involves the relationship with others, such as friends and acquaintances; emotional/verbal = putting one’s partner down or causing jealousy.

Data from focus groups included audiotaped recordings, verbatim transcripts, and field notes from the assistant moderator (second author). Thematic analysis was used to code and create themes inductively (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This form of analysis moves from description, whereby participants' dialogue is organized into meaningful conceptual codes, to interpretation, where codes are used to delineate clear themes that convey a meaningful story. By using this approach, themes originated from several careful readings of the data itself rather

## **RESULTS**

Reactions to students' TDV experiences elicited a similar perspective around its significance: School staff acknowledged TDV as problematic and had some experiences with witnessing or intervening with the youths in their school around this issue, yet they differed regarding how much of a priority should be placed on TDV intervention. In addition, there was a range of responses regarding how schools should handle TDV prevention and intervention.

### **Theme 1: Is There a Need for Dating Violence Interventions?**

Many school staff members witnessed dating violence among the youths at their school regularly: "I'm dealing with it all the time" (School A staff). Furthermore, staff members witnessed dating violence in many different forms: "We are seeing a lot of physical and sexual violence"; "We are working on a case [where] there have been bruises here and there all year" (School B counselors). Similarly, in another school: "There are chokings, physical dragging . . . incidents between couples that we witness"; "We do have a fair amount [of] emotional or verbal violence" (School A administrators). In addition, it was noted that both adolescent boys and girls are perpetrators of dating violence: "I'd have to say the couple that I've worked with, they are both perpetrators. He smacks her, she smacks him back" (School B counselor). Across schools, staff at all levels (for example, administrators, counselors) acknowledged that dating violence exists within their student population; however, it was debated as to whether this is sufficient to elevate its importance to require intervention when considering the pressure to raise student academic performance.

Some school counselors viewed dating violence programming as a priority; however, this was framed within the suggestion that it would need to be implemented within the academic curriculum, rather than as a separate component. Many felt that the schools' priority should be on academics: "We [have] watered down education. We can't take care of every possible developmental need in a kid's life" (School B counselor). The primary function of the school is for their students to succeed academically; one counselor



suggested that a program could be put in place after school, so it would not distract from time spent on academics. Other staff members simply felt that an intervention would be difficult to implement because there would not be a place for it.

On the other hand, other school counselors viewed the prevention of TDV as important and articulated that although education is a top priority, it is difficult for students to reach high academic achievement if they are dealing with violence in their relationships: "I think it's [currently] a low priority, [but] it needs to be a high priority. If their social and emotional needs aren't being taken care of . . . they're not available to learn in class" (School B counselor). Staff who held this point of view further expressed that intervention programs are needed that begin with teaching what it means to be in a healthy relationship. They noted that many of their students are not aware of what a healthy relationship is supposed to look like and do not understand "the controlling aspects of dating violence." As one counselor stated, "They don't know what a healthy relationship is. Let's talk about what a healthy relationship is and sometimes they are surprised" (School B counselor). Other school staff members echoed this sentiment: "I think it's hard to explain to them that jealousy is control, it's not love" (School A staff); "If you're putting together an intervention, it would have to be teaching them self-esteem building" (School C administrator).

Most school administrators held the same perspective. Within their role as overseeing the school environment, they came to similar conclusions: "If they are acting out in the classroom there [may be] a relationship issue or something going on at home . . . [that] has to do with academics" (School B administrator). Across the schools, most staff and administrators acknowledged the importance of academics and dating violence: "There's definitely an issue of credit and academics, but then you have all this [dating violence] to deal with. How can you come in and focus on math? I really think we need some resources to help our kids" (School C administrator).

## Theme 2: Should Schools Be Accountable?

The level of accountability and responsibility among personnel to combat or address dating violence varied across administrators and counselors. In some situations, the role and responsibility of administrators was dependent on the gender of the student. There was a greater perceived sense of responsibility to address and acknowledge dating violence with adolescent girls, rather than with adolescent boys. Some administrators stated that they would be more likely to approach an upset student if she were an adolescent girl because of gender stereotypes: "Sadly enough, if a boy tells me [he's been abused], I'm like, 'Yeah, I bet you did. I'm sure you're out there roughing it up. I'm sure you're OK'" (School B

administrator). Other staff members added that there have been several incidences when adolescent girls have been suspected of being abused, and those situations have taken precedence over adolescent boys' issues: "But if a girl has unusual marks it is different. I am like, 'What! What's going on? Are you OK?' I'm not the only staff member [with this perspective]" (School B administrator).

There was a range across schools on the extent to which participants desired to hear, and therefore be accountable, to students' problems. It was notable that in some schools an open environment was welcomed and students readily turned to school staff: "They open up a lot with me. Something that I always tell them is, 'Talk to me. The more I know you, the more I can help you'" (School A administrator). In these schools, the staff recognized that they may be the only trusted adult in that child's life because the student lacks the support of other adults: "Sometimes they have no one that they can talk with at home" (School A administrator). Some administrators said that teachers often wanted to become more involved or accountable to the students but lacked the resources to effectively intervene: Teachers oftentimes will say, "I know that there is something wrong with this kid in terms of abuse or in terms of alcohol or in terms of relationships, but I don't know what to do or how to deal with it." (School B administrator)

Participants also indicated a struggle to balance dating violence education with academic efforts. Many counselors described taking responsibility to educate students about dating relationships. For example, one counselor stated, "Right now I'm trying to promote abstinence and healthy relationships and I have brochures up in the hallway. Maybe a light bulb will go off" (School B counselor). Many found this process taxing and difficult: "It's overwhelming, but I don't mind if a kid comes up to me and says, 'I'm having a bad day.' I don't want to take too much of your time because I know your education is important" (School A staff). Despite the interest among at least some of the counselors to implement a dating violence intervention, they also felt that it would be very difficult to do so while preserving academic content. Schools are reluctant to add to teachers' responsibilities when academics are not held to a high enough priority, and furthermore participants felt that if schools are to be responsible, this needs to be conveyed at the school district level: "Until a school district sees the necessity of this . . . it's going to fall on deaf ears" (School B counselor). Regardless of differences across schools in the extent to which student help-seeking or reporting of dating violence is encouraged, it appears that administrators, teachers, and counselors take responsibility when incidents of dating violence are reported. However, whether schools are holding themselves accountable to TDV intervention and prevention varies greatly.

## DISCUSSION

All focus groups identified a clear need for a TDV curriculum, but how participants prioritized that need ranged from low to high. The level of responsibility school personnel felt they should take to prevent TDV varied, primarily because of the complexity of the problem and implementation concerns. A related concern was how to effectively intervene. Despite broad perspectives of school administration and staff regarding the necessity of dating violence intervention programs, dating violence was seen as a significant school-level problem. The predominant message was that if an intervention were going to be implemented, it would need to be incorporated within the academic curriculum and that academics would need to remain the focus.

Academic achievement will always be the priority for public schools, particularly given the current climate of linking student performance on standardized tests with teachers' compensation and with local and state funding sources (Lavy, 2007). It was striking, however, how very few school personnel in the present study recognized the connection between adolescents' experiences with dating violence and academic performance. This connection needs to be emphasized more clearly, and the priority needs to shift, given the prevalence of TDV and its negative impact not only on student performance (Fleming et al., 2005; Temple et al., 2013), but also on serious and lasting health consequences (Ackard, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). Health classes are a natural place for incorporating TDV as part of a holistic approach to adolescent well-being and should be mandated in alignment with TDV policies to provide a forum through which education can occur. Recent policy changes including the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 are promising as they are beginning to view education holistically, including tracking health outcomes inclusive of social and emotional development, relationships, and healthy decision making (Hampton, Alikhani, Auld, & White, 2017).

Combining educators' expertise in classroom instruction with social workers' expertise in skills training and group processes holds the potential to create a strong collaborative team. By administering culturally attuned and cost-effective evidence-based TDV interventions, social workers can be leaders in improving healthy relationship outcomes for adolescents that foster healthy patterns into adulthood. Furthermore, schools have been promoted as the best place for coordinated TDV education and interventions (Hampton et al., 2017; Temple et al., 2013). Despite inherent limitations, schools provide the opportunity to reach all youths for extended amounts of time and to change peer culture around the acceptance of unhealthy relationship dynamics. In addition, schools provide the infrastructure to offer youths wraparound services through direct access to trained helping professionals (Temple et al., 2013). Although research specific

to social workers' perspectives is lacking, a study with counselors found that such professionals believe they play an important role in providing much needed assistance to adolescents experiencing TDV ([Khubchandani et al., 2012](#)). Additional support may be necessary, however, in assisting social workers to locate evidence-based programs that fit the needs of their student bodies ([R. D. Jackson et al., 2013](#); [Rueda, Hawley, Black, & Ombayo, 2016](#)). Evaluation research is also required.

The current federal administration has not published any changes to sexuality or TDV prevention education, but past federal prioritization of TDV prevention is a move in the right direction. However, more needs to be done at the implementation level to ensure that policies and programs are feasible in schools amid other demands that prioritize meeting academic standards. For example, a recent study found that although school districts had attempted to improve their response to TDV by creating agreed-on definitions and consequences of misbehavior, services to help victims remained unavailable ([R. D. Jackson et al., 2013](#)). Our study contextualizes this phenomenon by highlighting the importance of school buy-in, evident in the overwhelmingly positive sentiment voiced by school counselors and social workers who were independently spearheading TDV intervention efforts. This movement coincides with a recent assessment of high schools' implementation of TDV programs in Texas, another border state, which found that counselors and social workers often created materials themselves from what they knew about the topic, including information learned from conference attendance ([Bell & Rueda, 2015](#)). Such programs included mixed assortments of online materials, TDV awareness-raising activities (for example, during Valentine's Day), and other amalgamated presentations on a yearly basis. Of note, school districts that had superintendent backing on research concerning TDV evidenced a more coordinated effort to share information on their TDV practices and procedures ([Bell & Rueda, 2015](#)).

Finally, there is a lot of opportunity to change prevalence of TDV at the state level. TDV prevalence rates are lower in states that have strong policy (for example, related to Civil Protection Orders), a Democrat governor, and a higher median household income ([Hoefer, Black, & Ricard, 2015](#)). Also, although this study focused on school personnel's input concerning their role in TDV, state policies and school practices should include parents in prevention and intervention efforts ([Foshee et al., 2012](#)). Research finds that parents desire dating and sexual health education to be delivered in school ([Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 2004](#)). This may be in part because parents, although influential in adolescents' relationships, are often unaware of the relational dynamics of TDV and may not know how to effectively educate their children about these issues or to intervene in instances of TDV ([Foshee et al., 2012](#); [Rothman, Miller, Terpeluk, Glauber, & Randel, 2011](#)). Parental support and comfort

while discussing TDV issues, however, has been stressed as desired from adolescents themselves (Black & Preble, 2016). Expanding education efforts to include extended family members may be important within Mexican heritage communities, particularly among low-acculturated youths, who may turn to them for help (Nagoshi, Rueda, & Williams, 2014). Coordinating efforts with schools and at the community level to incorporate parents' and familial perspectives and creating awareness across systems are important to maximize the effectiveness of federal and state policies to prevent and intervene with youths experiencing TDV. Special consideration (for example, a screening tool for eligible family participation) may be appropriate for youths who have witnessed or are experiencing violence in the home. Such a tool may also help social workers and counselors to identify youths most at risk of TDV perpetration and victimization. Furthermore, and given that Mexican heritage youths are more likely to come from neighborhoods and communities plagued by community violence (Smokowski, David-Feron, & Stroupe, 2009), resiliency approaches that foster collaborations between public health sectors, schools, and community organizations to engage with students and promote protective factors within individuals and peer groups are ideal (Jain & Cohen, 2013).

The current statutes related to TDV should be infused in social work education and be familiar to social workers such that they feel comfortable relaying this information to adolescents in a way that both meets their needs and is developmentally appropriate. Social workers should also inform adolescents on the evidence linking strong Civil Protection Order policies with the incidence of TDV. We can also advocate for stronger policy in this area. Recent evidence indicates that having the Democratic Party in the governor's position is even more influential than control of the Senate and House of Representatives in their respective state (Hoefler et al., 2015).

## Strengths and Limitations

Using focus group methods, this study uncovered several perceived barriers to reaching youths with effective TDV prevention and intervention within schools. Studies that seek to understand how policies are interpreted and carried out are needed in the area of TDV, particularly as mandates to include such education often lack in specificity and do not include guidelines (R. D. Jackson et al., 2013). An additional strength of this study is its inclusion of community-level perceptions within schools serving understudied youths at heightened risk for experiencing TDV (that is, Hispanic youths) (CDC, 2016). Reaching youths within communities marked by multiple and additive risk factors is particularly challenging, as academic achievement tends to suffer alongside relationships and other forms of social malfunctioning (for example, gangs, family stress) (Fleming et al., 2005; Smokowski et al., 2009). However, the perceptions and experiences outlined in this study are not

necessarily representative of administrative and staff perceptions at schools in other areas. School personnel were also primed in the current study by re-viewing the summary reports that provided context for the current level of TDV at their school before answering the focus group questions. This may have elicited a greater emotional response and heightened salience to the importance of TDV. Furthermore, it may be considered a limitation that groups ranged greatly in size; although our open invitation to school personnel facilitated comfort and scheduling, future research should more systematically assess individual interpretations and knowledge of TDV state and school policies, group teachers with social workers to solicit feedback concerning how they may work collaboratively to promote academic achievement and TDV education simultaneously, and test the effects of TDV education on students' academic achievement.

## **Conclusion**

Despite recently voiced attention at the federal and state levels to eradicate TDV, public high schools are still ultimately responsible for prioritizing its prevention and intervention. This study found that administrators, staff, and social workers perceived TDV preventive education as important but by and large did not connect it to academic achievement. Conversely, the association between well-being or wellness of adolescents—including their relationships—and academic achievement is well documented ([Hampton et al., 2017](#)). Social work advocates for TDV education should clearly communicate the connection between prosocial relationship skills and academic performance, creating buy-in with schools and carrying forward TDV policies effectively at the community level. We recommend that social workers take more of a leadership role in identifying factors that contribute to TDV, provide interventions in conflict and relationship management, advocate for more preventive education on a communitywide basis, and serve as a resource for any economic or cultural variables that may help to promote change.

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