

Sticks and Stones; Words and Wounds

The old playground chant, “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me,” isn’t true. Just ask any principal who deals with the destructive fallout of bullying—an injured child, an unruly or disturbed child, intimidated classmates, frustrated teachers, distraught and outraged parents, and a disrupted school culture. Pushing, hitting, name-calling, taunting—it all hurts.

Not only do the wounds last a lifetime, but a staggering number of children are being victimized. An estimated 18 million children will be bullied in the United States this year, and 3 million students are absent from school *each month* because they feel unsafe.

Bullying is not a new challenge for principals, but a handful of high-profile incidents in which a tormented child tragically ended his or her own life to escape being attacked are prompting a fresh round of calls from parents and legislators for schools to “do something.” And while these heartbreaking losses represent a tiny fraction of bullying incidents, they help shine a light on this age-old problem.

In the not-too-distant past, principals could stop or dramatically mitigate bullying by personally intervening with the perpetrator, enlisting teachers and other adults in the school to keep a watchful eye on early signs of bullying, meeting with parents and students, and modeling positive, respectful behavior.

Today, however, bullying might start on the playground or the bus, but it often heats up online, escalates back at school, and carries over for more online bullying, resulting in a situation that quickly spirals out of control. A retired principal and friend lamented that home is no longer the safe haven it once was for students who are bullied during the school day. And even if the victim doesn’t have a Facebook account, for example, perpetrators increasingly use social media and texting for extended—sometimes anonymous—ridicule, spreading destructive behavior from student to student and compounding the victim’s feeling of isolation. Of course, principals do not have jurisdiction over a student’s activity at home, but they certainly deal with the consequences of those activities.

What should principals do to stop bullying, whether it occurs on school grounds or in cyberspace? Thankfully, there are a host of resources available. We have prepared a special webpage (www.naesp.org/bullying) featuring several



resources and initiatives that can help.

A few are highlighted below:

NAESP’s professional standards, *Leading Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*, include guidelines describing the principal’s role in leading diverse communities. In doing so, principals are essential in creating a school culture that supports every child’s well-being, safety, and self-confidence.

In addition, NAESP and the NAESP Foundation are highly engaged in other bullying-prevention initiatives, including those with the Hazelden Foundation and its

Olweus program (which many of our state affiliates offer to members) and a new three-hour online workshop; the Stop Bullying Now campaign sponsored by the Departments of Education, Justice, and Health and Human Services; and the Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center, developed by the Department of Education.

Home is no longer the safe haven it once was for students who are bullied during the school day.

I strongly encourage you to access these resources today. We don’t have a moment to lose. Schools must be safe and welcoming for all students, of course. Beyond that, however, education is once again the target of a documentary that paints an unflattering picture of schools. This time, a middle school principal is shown as being overwhelmed to the point of inaction by the bullying in her school. The film is *The Bully Project*; watch the trailer at www.thebullyproject.com. As this issue of *Principal* was going to press, NAESP was working with the director to invite our members to private screenings for select audiences in November. Please watch for details, if and when we have them to share.

Principals who struggle to prevent bullying, like the middle school principal in the film, needn’t feel ill-equipped and alone in their efforts to stop this violence. We owe them—and the children in their schools—our help and support so they can get informed and take action. NAESP’s resources page is a good first step.

Like you, my heart aches to know that some children are tormented by bullying in schools. And also like you, I feel concern for the bullies. No one involved in these destructive relationships is unscathed. Let’s all pledge to stop bullying and keep our children safe—in and out of school. 