NO PLACE FOR BULLYI

Principals must take the lead in creating an atmosphere where bullying prevention is a school and community goal.

by James Dillon

AFTER A TRAGIC EVENT, suicide, or violent act of revenge that occurs as a result of frequent bullying, the public is outraged at school employees who they think did nothing to prevent it. The public asks the obvious questions: How come nobody cared enough to do something to stop it? How could the staff be so heartless and callous? Where were the administrators?

I have worked in education for more than 30 years and know that teachers and principals care very much about keeping children safe. But I have a few questions of my own: How is it that people who care act as if they don't? Why should it take a tragedy to get a school to finally act? How many other tragedies need to happen before all schools decide to do something to prevent bullying? And finally, is there something about the structure and culture of schools that makes it difficult for people to see the problem and address it? Perhaps the hardest task of leadership is having the courage to ask these questions and begin looking for answers.

Current research and common sense tell us that schools need to be places that are physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe for students to learn to their fullest potential. Given these criteria, one would surmise that preventing bullying would be paramount on any principal's list of priorities. Unfortunately, this is often not the case.

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Boy, 13, hanged himself after he was bullied

9 Teens Charged in Bullied Girl's Suicide

Whose Job Is It, Anyway?

As a certified Olweus bullying-prevention trainer and an elementary principal who has attended many conferences and workshops on bullying and its impact on school safety and climate, I have been struck by how few principals are in attendance. Social workers, counselors, and teachers who attend such conferences express concern about returning to their schools and not getting the support necessary from their school's principal. They are right to be concerned. Without the support and leadership from the principal, there is little chance that significant progress can be made in preventing and reducing bullying.

In trainings that I conduct, I ask participants to choose the single group they feel is most responsible for addressing school violence and bullying. In each session, responses always vary widely between parents, students, school, and community. While it is OK to have such differences, one reason problems often go unaddressed is that people think bullying prevention is someone else's responsibility.

The reality is that no one is to blame, yet everyone is responsible. Who can better get all stakeholders to realize that working together is not just preferable but absolutely essential? Principal leadership is crucial because they can create conditions where everyone assumes

responsibility. The principal cannot do this alone, but must take the first step in reframing the problem and accepting responsibility for it.

Not Seeing Is Not Believing

One reason why it is often difficult to get faculty and staff to commit to addressing bullying is that so much of it happens under the radar. Statistics indicate that most bullying goes undetected by school staff, and students report that it occurs in the classroom even when a teacher is present. If staff don't have an understanding of what bullying is, they won't identify it even when they see it.

Another obstacle is the belief that bullying prevention is solely a discipline issue, that it only concerns the perpetrator and target of the bullying. An environment with frequent bullying infects an entire school community. Even if they never become a victim, many bystanders are frightened and intimidated by the thought that they could be next.

When a case of bullying is verified, then the traditional discipline system of determining the perpetrator and applying an appropriate consequence appears to be sufficient to most staff. However, bullying requires ongoing monitoring, proactive efforts, and culture change—tasks that are easier said than done.

Culture change is the only truly effective way to address this problem. But culture change is difficult because the people who live in the culture can't see it; for them it's just the way things are. My leadership in addressing bullying in our school began long before I was consciously aware that I was specifically addressing it. What I was doing was creating the conditions that would motivate staff to respond to the problem. Here are four conditions for positive change.

A Moral Obligation. The safety and well-being of children is our most important responsibility, and the first and most important step a school leader can take is to see bullying prevention and reduction as a moral obligation. A large part of my success as a principal in addressing bullying stems from the fact that students, parents, and staff know that I am passionate and committed to doing something about it. Once I could help the staff find the will, we ultimately found the way to make a real difference in bullying prevention.

Practice What You Preach. I challenge myself to resist the temptation of solely using my status as the primary

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lever for affecting change. (You cannot bully staff into stopping bullying.) Because my chief responsibility is to support and empower people to do their jobs better, I learned to listen before talking and reflect before acting. As Jim Collins explains in *Good to Great*, I consistently choose leadership over simply exercising power, with the result of teachers doing the same with their classes. When principals make schools safe places for teachers to make mistakes and take risks, teachers do the same for their students.

Getting the Right Mind-set. If students perceive that a teacher disapproves of a student, as a person, the other students are more likely to feel justified in teasing and bullying that student. Conversely, if a teacher accepts and values a student despite problem behavior, the student remains a member of the community and bullying

behavior will decrease. The value of accepting the individual—without condoning the behavior—must come to permeate a school community and the principal must articulate it clearly and practice it consistently.

People Before Programs. Schools are littered with initiatives and programs promising positive change. In some districts, veteran staff know the fleeting nature of programs and learn to wait until they fall out of favor. The issue of preventing and reducing bullying, however, is not like other issues. The real task of leadership is to get staff to see and understand this difference.

After researching the various programs available, our school chose the Olweus Bully Prevention Program because it fit our philosophy. The program is research-based and designed to affect systemic change. It was also flexible enough to be tailored to our existing culture. In addition, the key components of the Olweus program matched many of our practices and procedures: Our staff was comfortable working with parents on shared decision-making committees and our teachers had skills in facilitating classroom meetings.

Even the best educational program is only a tool whose success lies in the hands of those who use it. A principal must assess the existing knowledge, skills, and attitude of the staff before selecting a program or resource. Including staff and parents in making this decision is essential for getting the rest of the community to buy into implementing it.

One of a principal's most important leadership skills is the ability to reframe problems as opportunities to transform a school for the better. To say that bullying is a challenge is an understatement, but what is more important or essential for school leaders to tackle? What greater contribution can a principal make? **P**

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Success With Anti-Bullying

Here are essential elements for getting your school community motivated to work together to address bullying.

USE DATA TO INFORM, but put a human face on the problem. Principals can take the lead in gathering data to determine the amount of bullying that is occurring in a school and how students feel about it. However, numbers alone might often fail to galvanize a staff to confront this issue; principals need to put a face on the numbers. Getting students to tell their stories and relay their fears can often open the eyes and hearts of staff.

EMPOWER BYSTANDERS; this means everybody! Let everyone know that they can make a difference and that positive change is only possible when everyone assumes responsibility for reporting bullying and supporting those who are vulnerable. If you ask students to help you in this important job, they will view the request as a sign of respect and confidence in them. If students have doubts about staff receptivity, they most likely will remain silent. Staff must emphasize that they care and want to know about all bullying situations. As more bystanders come forward, the cultural norm becomes reporting rather than withholding.

BUILD COMMUNITY, create empathy. When a strong community is developed in the classroom and throughout the entire school, bullying becomes harder to keep a secret. When parents call me to share a complaint, I thank them for helping me do my job because I need to know what is going on. Parents can tell by your tone of voice whether you are sincere. It is crucial to document all contacts, phone calls, and actions you take in order to prevent future bullying.

WORDS MATTER. Many principals shy away from using the word "bully" because they think it is too negative. Its meaning—aggressive behavior that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power or strength—must be understood by each member of the community. Confusing conflict and bullying can have dangerous consequences. Conflict is inevitable, but bullying should never be viewed as such. It should be understood as a form of abuse that cannot be accepted on any level. Make sure the rules are few, clear, and straightforward. They should also be posted in every room.

LITTLE THINGS can make a big difference. Simple and genuine measures, such as regularly greeting students, talking to students, and addressing students by name, help to make students feel connected and part of a school. Let staff know that significant progress can happen with even small steps.

EXAMINE SCHOOL PRACTICES, traditions, and structure. Almost any form of institutional bullying can override and negate all bullying prevention efforts. The principal must have the courage to ask: Do all students perceive themselves as being valued and cared for by all the adults in the school? In light of this question, each school must review its discipline plan, protocols, and any traditions that might inadvertently conflict with the values and beliefs that underlie a successful bullying prevention program.

—James Dillon