



FACING DOWN BULLYING

Schools expand their awareness,
definition, tactics and strategies

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Abby the “Mean Girl,” Brian the “Class Clown,” Emily the “Cheerleader,” Kyle the “Jock,” and Aaron the “Tough Guy”—the nicknames all self-proclaimed, based on their perceived roles on campus—gather together at Anthony Wayne High School in the suburbs of Toledo, Ohio.

The group sounds almost based on the cast of the 1980s hit movie “The Breakfast Club,” but they’re not thrown together randomly in Saturday detention. As part of a daylong program called Challenge Day, they are jointly answering emotionally difficult but important questions; their discussions will become part of an episode of an MTV series called “If You Really Knew Me.”¹

Some of those questions include: What are the cliques at your school? Have you or a friend ever been the victim of cyberbullying? Have you ever been a bystander while other people were being teased or hurt? Have you ever been hurt by negative rumors? Are you proud of the way you’ve been treating people around you?

Their thoughts and emotions pour forth: Brian acknowledges he created a practical joke Internet page suggesting that two people should be dating, and it didn’t turn out well. Aaron recalls being picked on as a younger child and admits that to make himself feel better, he found other kids to tease. Emily starts crying when recalling how her friendship with Karlee ended because of negative rumors.

Since the days of “The Breakfast Club,” spurred partly by disasters like the Columbine shootings and highly publicized teen suicides, schools and parents have become much more intentional about mixing kids together to discuss their differences, find common ground and combat bullying in all its forms.

In addition to this greater awareness, definitions of bullying have expanded beyond the old-school, “sticks-and-stones” spectrum to include verbal harassment, social exclusion and online “cyberbullying.”

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Hill M. Walker

Even President Obama has lent his “bully pulpit” to the issue, recalling that he experienced bullying himself during a White House conference on the subject. “With the big ears and the name that I have, I wasn’t immune,” he said in March 2011. “I didn’t emerge unscathed.”²

RESEARCH EXPANDS THE DEFINITION

Educators in the 1980s might have defined bullying as one child—most often a boy—beating up or threatening a smaller child. But this “no blood, no foul” approach has fallen by the wayside as research has begun to focus during the last couple of decades on “relational aggression”—hurtful language and social exclusion that’s practiced by both genders but most often associated with girls.

Gossip, manipulation and social isolation are often overlooked by adults, but despite their more nuanced nature, might represent the form of bullying most intertwined with a school’s culture, according to *Education Week*.³

This form of bullying can be harder to uproot because while physically aggressive bullies are often not especially popular, those who engage in relational aggression are often more popular and socially astute, the article states.

“It’s the dark side of popularity,” said Antonius H.N. Cillessen, professor of development psychology at Radboud University in the Netherlands, in the

Education Week article.⁴ “For the practice of education it’s pretty important, because the popular bully gets a lot of peer reinforcement.”

Research by Robert W. Faris, assistant sociology professor at the University of California, Davis, found that students in the middle of their schools’ social hierarchies are most likely to be bullies. His research, published in the *American Sociological Review* and cited in *Education Week*, found those at the top of the pecking order are too secure to need to bully.

“These kids view aggression as one tactic for gaining or maintaining their social status,” Faris told *Education Week*.⁵ “Our interpretation is, kids view this as a means to an end. Once they get to the top, they no longer need to be aggressive.”

“It’s a myth that it’s just the popular kids that bully,” agreed Leigh Anne Kraemer of The Ophelia Project, a nonprofit based in Erie, Pa. “It’s not the rich kids picking on the poor kids or the bigger ones picking on the little ones.”⁶

Educators tend to have a difficult time recognizing relational aggression, and victims are often reluctant to self-report, University of Oregon special education professor Hill M. Walker told *Education Week*.

But the article cites research by educational psychology professor Karin S. Frey of the University of Washington that found such episodes were “semi-public” and could

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be easy to spot if one knew how to watch. Teachers did not, and they expressed surprise at some of the students named.⁷

CYBERBULLYING: THE LATEST WAVE

This relational aggression can be even harder to spot online, especially since so much Internet activity happens away from school and adult supervision, Walker told *Education Week*.⁸

“Cyberbullying poses a gigantic risk for our children,” he said. “It affords one person the ability to assume the identities of 10, 15, 20 people who can send messages and spread rumors about the targeted victim. Your friends who support your bullying can be told about it. So it’s a way for a bully to torture ... unmercifully.”

Cyberbullying puts educators in a tough spot because it’s unclear what they can do about off-campus speech other than banning access to it online on campus, according to *Education Week*.⁹ The same courts have ruled different ways on similar cases, and state laws require districts to address cyberbullying but don’t provide much guidance or funding.

“It’s beyond murky. It’s contradictory,” Thomas E. Wheeler, chairman of the Council of School Attorneys, told *Education Week*. Kathleen Conn, assistant education professor at Neumann University, added that school officials “want to step in, but their collective hands have been slapped by the courts so many times that they are reluctant.”¹⁰

Parry Aftab, an attorney and founder of several Internet safety organizations, advises that when a cyberbullying incident enters school grounds in any sense, school administrators gain jurisdiction. “When it drifts into school in any way, it’s like the Midas touch,” Aftab says.¹¹

A complicating factor is that parents of cyberbullies don’t necessarily support schools’ efforts, partly because their children are often not stereotypical bullies but bright, quiet students; they tend to ask to discipline children themselves or dismiss the incidents as harmless joking, according to *Education Week*.¹²

NATIONAL AND STATE EFFORTS

The federal and state governments and other national organizations have stepped up efforts to support school districts in combating bullying in all its forms.

The conference at the White House, during which the president talked of his own victimization as a child, brought together educators, representatives of anti-bullying organizations, students and parents including relatives of two 11-year-old boys who had committed suicide in the last two years, and officials from the U.S. Department of Education and nongovernment actors like the National PTA and MTV.¹³

“If there’s one goal, it’s to dispel the myth that bullying is just a harmless rite of passage,” Obama said.¹⁴ “As adults, we can lose sight of how hard it can be sometimes to be a kid. It’s easy for us to forget what it’s like to be teased or bullied.”



Obama unveiled a new website called stopbullying.gov and discussed new partnerships with MTV and Facebook to fight bullying online. Some at the conference expressed hope that the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, now called No Child Left Behind, will institutionalize bullying prevention measures at the federal level.¹⁵

The National Education Association is another organization to recognize that “the days when bullying was seen merely as a rite of passage or thought of as ‘kids being kids’ are long gone.” The NEA’s recently announced effort, “Bully Free: It Starts With Me,” engages adults to stop bullying wherever and whenever it occurs, recognizing the challenges involved in cyberbullying in particular.¹⁶

NEA President Dennis Van Roekel has encouraged parents to watch children’s behavior, appearance and mood to sense whether they might be involved in bullying—either as the perpetrator or the victim. “Bullying is serious, it can come in many forms, and it always hurts,” he said. “We know that one caring adult can make a world of difference to a bullied child.”

Efforts by the Texas legislature to address bullying illustrate how difficult it can be to legislate on the

issue. Opponents of the more than 15 bills introduced this session range from the American Civil Liberties Union to the conservative Liberty Institute, and some legislators have expressed skepticism about how easy bullying is to define.¹⁷

Outside of government, the It Gets Better Project is a national effort established in September 2010 by syndicated columnist and author Dan Savage to show teens of different sexual orientations that no matter how isolated they might feel today due to anti-gay bullying, brighter days lie ahead.

Started with a single YouTube video, the project has led to nearly 10,000 more that have seen more than 30 million viewings, along with the overarching website.¹⁸

INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL EFFORTS

Schools and districts have also undertaken their own homegrown efforts to combat bullying and encourage positive behaviors and social acceptance of peers.

At South Allegheny Elementary in Pittsburgh, the founding of a popular after-school club called “Girl Talk” begat the “Gladiator Guys” when boys wondered why they didn’t have a parallel activity of their own.¹⁹

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Mike Matt

Both clubs work to build self-esteem and strengthen relationships, both of which work against bullying and social isolation. Activities in Gladiator Guys have included sanding and staining wooden birdhouses, gym time, playing board games, creating anti-bullying posters for the school’s use, and listening to a speaker on Internet safety and cyberbullying.²⁰

Students don’t always express upfront enthusiasm about such clubs, but 11-year-old Shawn Dainty learned they have hidden benefits. “I didn’t know it would be this much fun,” he told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

At Windber Area High School in Windber, Pa., juniors and seniors have produced MTV-style videos aimed at discouraging students from engaging in bullying. Teacher William Morrison says the project brings together “students you would never see sitting together at lunch.” As with the Challenge Day’s “Breakfast Club”-style arrangements, “You have all the different personalities.”²¹

PROGRAMS OFF THE SHELF

Schools and districts also can opt to bring in a daylong program such as Challenge Day and hour-long speaker assemblies. Mike Matt, National Motivational Programs Manager for Herff Jones, says such programs address the separation, isolation and loneliness often at the root of bullying.

“When I’m going on to a campus today, I’ll say, ‘What are the major issues we face?’” Matt says. “They

mention graduation rates and what they’re doing to improve them. And then secondly is bullying. How are our students getting along?”

A member of Challenge Day’s board of directors, Matt says the program—which has been featured on “The Oprah Winfrey Show,” MTV’s “If You Really Knew Me” and Tom Brokaw’s “Bridging the Divide” program on USA Network—spends a full day with 100 children to get them talking to one another.

They’re encouraged to notice what’s happening around them, choose how to address negative behaviors and have the courage and commitment to act. “Challenge Day focuses on creating schools where every child feels safe, loved and celebrated,” he says. “Students have the opportunity to understand that we’re more alike than different... It’s harder for me to bully someone that I know more about.”

Matt mentions similar programs such as Teen Truth and speakers such as Albert Gonzales and Travis Brown, all of which can encompass a wider group of students but don’t go quite so deep because the sessions typically only last an hour or so. Gonzales delivers a program called “Fearless Schools,” while Brown is on a perpetual “No Bullying Tour.”

Matt also suggests initiatives schools can undertake on their own. “There are things schools can do today, like start a ‘Be the Change’ club, which gives students an opportunity to talk about how they want to see their campus change,” he says.

A combination of heartbreaking tragedies and painstaking research has pushed the issue of bullying to the forefront of the nation's consciousness. Educators, parents and students are more aware than ever of the various forms of bullying, its implications and effects on all concerned, and ways to combat it.

This has led to greater efforts at the national and state levels, with special focus on "relational aggression" and its high-tech cousin, cyberbullying, as well as school-by-school and district-by-district attempts to get at the issue, some homegrown and some that come off the shelf from companies and speakers who specialize in the issue.

"The definition of bullying is becoming more understood to include anything that's being done to make me feel insecure and intimidated," Matt says. "It could be things that in the past we didn't even think about, that when we look at it more closely, we see this is a form of bullying. It's both gotten worse and adults are taking it more seriously."

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