

Is bullying in schools a problem?

It is if you ask teachers and parents in Columbine, Colorado, Paducah, Kentucky and, most recently, in Cazenovia, Wisconsin. Those tragedies had a common thread: the students who committed acts of violence were victims of bullying at school.

Millions of American school children are involved in bullying annually, as bullies, victims of bullies, or both. According to a study by the American Psychiatric Association, some 160,000 American school children, on the average, skip school daily because of bullying. Our nation is just waking up to the problem. Other countries, primarily the British Commonwealth nations and the Scandinavian countries, are ahead of us.

Fortunately, educators and researchers in the U.S. are finding ways to prevent and correct bullying in schools. The most widely recognized bullying prevention program is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, created by Professor Dan Olweus. Dr. Olweus conducted extensive research into school bullying after four students in his country (Norway) committed suicide after being bullied in school. Olweus training in the U. S. is centered at Clemson University.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program has been shown to dramatically reduce bullying in schools, sometimes by as much as seventy percent. Many of Dr. Olweus' concepts have been adopted by other programs. These include:

- Conducting a survey of the students to learn where bullying activity is taking place ("hot spots" of bullying), how severe the problem is, and whether the students have any faith in the ability of the school personnel to do something about it.
- Creating a school bullying committee to coordinate school-wide bullying prevention efforts, including training school staff in bullying prevention.
- Holding regular classroom meetings to help students understand the nature of bullying and how they can help change the social climate of the school to prevent bullying.
- Teaching the school staff, including teachers, administrators, counselors, nurses, and monitors how to recognize bullying and address it on the spot with timely interventions.
- Taking action immediately to admonish and discipline students who bully, and to support and help the students who are the victims of bullying.
- Involving the parents of both students who bully and students who have been bullied in the school's efforts.
- Adopting school rules against bullying, even if the district already has policies in place that address bullying behavior. Few schools specifically address bullying and cyber-bullying in their student handbooks and codes of conduct.
- Involving the community in the school's bullying prevention efforts.

Schools should be quite open and public about their bullying prevention program and are encouraged to hold assemblies in which they can “roll out” the program. The initial “roll out” must be followed by a school-wide effort to support the program. The most effective programs involve a strong commitment over time. Three years is the minimum duration for a serious bullying prevention program.

The Nevada legislature has passed legislation that requires schools to adopt policies to prevent bullying behavior and to report violations of the policy. The law also requires that school staff be trained in the meaning and implementation of the policies. (NRS 388.121, *et. seq.*) A comprehensive school-wide program, based on the elements listed above, should comply with these requirements.

Nevada includes attendance and graduation rates in the determination of whether a school is making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind (NRS 385.361). Needless to say, a school that fails to address bullying, suffering poor attendance as a consequence, will find it more difficult to make AYP than a school which does.

(The West Regional Equity Network provides Olweus Bullying Prevention and other training in Arizona, California, and Nevada.)

#