

NO NEED TO FEAR: ENDING BULLYING IN U.S. SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Bullying is a problem in many schools in the United States. It is a problem that impacts millions of students of all races and classes, in elementary and secondary schools in every part of the country. Bullying affects every part of education, from a reduction in the quality of teaching to an increase in behavioral problems, and reduction in grades to increase in crime and victimization including suicides and homicides.

Educators and policy makers at Federal, State, and local levels of government have recognized the devastating effects bullying and bullying behaviors can have on teaching and learning and on behavior and have begun to take steps to prevent these behaviors from occurring. This presentation will: briefly outline the extent and nature of the problem of bullying in the United States; describe the affects bullying has on teaching and learning, and behavior; relate various actions and approaches being taken by Federal and State governments and local school districts to address the problem, with a focus on approaches that work or that have promise; and overview of issues that need to be addressed if we are to ensure that all students have the opportunity to attend a school that is safe and free from bullying or bullying behaviors.

Introduction

Everyday, thousands of children from every part of the United States wake up afraid to go to school. They are students in elementary schools, middle schools, and high school; in the nation's heartland and in schools in our major cities. Students of all ages and from all parts of the country are regularly denied educational opportunity, not because of academic deficiencies but because they are being victimized by their peers.

For instance, one little girl in elementary school had her lunch stolen everyday for several months by a bigger girl until her parents finally learned of it and got help from the school to stop the behavior.

In a recent letter to President Bush, another parent expressed her frustration:

Dear President Bush

I, as a concerned parent, am in need of help. This letter is in regards to our local school and my boys and their friends being threatened and bullied on a daily basis. I have been to my children's school, and our police department in _____, California more than once about his problem. I feel that the school system has and is letting down not only my kids, but all the

kids going through the same problem. I don't know where else to turn. If the schools and the police aren't going to protect them, who is? So far my children have tried many things at school to get this problem to stop. They have moved where they hang out, walked away and even reported the problem with no help from school officials. They have things thrown at them, [are] called names, hit and constantly threatened. I know, first hand how these other kids work, because my oldest child was jumped thirty on three. He ended up with six staples in his head, while his friends got six stitches in his eye and the other one a broken wrist. This took place at their home. Yet my other two sons and their friends get stuff thrown at them in class and throughout the day. My youngest yells in his sleep nightly. They are followed after school by at least four or more kids wanting to jump them. I as a parent, am doing everything to protect my children, but I can't always be with them.

As another example, investigation into the background of a student who engaged in a serious violent attack at school disclosed that he was widely described as "the kid everyone teased." He had been pushed around by many students, been tripped in hallways, had things thrown at him and had his head held underwater at the school swimming pool. Before the attack, he was reported to be more annoyed at and less tolerant of the teasing.

These are three individual stories of people crying out for help and sometimes frustrated with the system and its inability to solve what many believe is a relatively simple problem: changing the behaviors of a relatively small number of students in every school so that those that are their victims are no longer afraid to go to school, to walk the halls alone, or to enter a bathroom.

Definitions

These and many other students suffer from behaviors ranging from name calling and rumor spreading, to threatening and intimidating behavior and actual physical attacks. These behaviors are described by different terms but when they are coupled with an imbalance of power between the victim and offender (whether that imbalance is physical, psychological, or social), that behavior is generally referred to as "bullying." Bullying takes place when a student is exposed repeatedly and over time to the kinds of negative actions described above.

Prevalence

Research indicates that there are millions of other stories like those above in the United States as well in other countries. In The U.S., data from U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, School Crime Supplement (SCS) to the National Crime Victimization Survey, 2003 indicates that seven (7) percent of students ages 12-18, reported being bullied at school during the previous six months. The same survey indicates that bullying behavior is most prevalent in the middle grades (sixth and seventh

grade) with rates of 14% and 13% respectively. As students get older, the prevalence begins to decline so that only a small number (2%) of 12th graders are bullied.

Another study, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (April 25, 2001) reported that bullying affects nearly one in three American school children in grades six through ten. Almost thirty percent of the 15,685 public school students surveyed for the study reported occasional or frequent involvement in bullying either as a bully, a victim, or both. This study reported that more than sixteen percent of the students say they have been bullied by another student.

The survey also indicates that boys engage in more bullying behavior than girls (8% versus 7% in 2003). Research suggests that boys are twice as likely to use physical and verbal bullying and that girls are more likely to use social isolation and exclusion as a form of bullying.

Effects

We need to recognize that educators, parents, students, and community members need to find ways to curtail and prevent the behavior from happening because there is growing evidence that the bullying leads not only to short and long term consequences for the victim and the offender, but it also diminishes the moral climate of the school and its learning environment by sending the message that it is OK to hurt someone else, as long as that person is different.

While most persons do not engage in bullying-type behaviors the consequences or effects of this behavior are far reaching. We know that students who are bullied are at higher risk for truancy and subsequently for dropping out of school (Student Reports of Bullying, Results from the 2001 School Crime Supplement, 2004, page 8). Data from the 2001 School Crime Supplement (SCS) also indicates that bullied students were more likely than nonbullied students to skip school entirely because they thought someone might attack or harm them (4% versus 1%). Bullied students also miss out on extra-curricular activities—4 percent skip them out of fear of being attacked or harmed compared to 1 percent of nonbullied students.

In addition to physical harm, victims may experience decrease in self-esteem, feelings of isolation, and experience depression. A study by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service examined 37 incidents of targeted school violence and found that many of the attackers had felt bullied by others before the event.

A report by the NCSL indicates that offenders in bullying incidents are more likely to engage in crime as adults, have poorer grades, smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol. (Finessa Ferrell-Smith, *Tackling the Schoolyard Bully: Combining Policymaking with Prevention*, National Conference of State Legislatures, July 2003, p. 3-4.)

Bullying also has negative consequences for the school environment and for other students. The SCS reports that bullied students were more likely to be involved in physical fights at school. About 15 percent of bullied students reported being involved in a physical fight, compared to 4 percent of nonbullied students. Bullied students are also more likely to carry a weapon to school for protection (4%) than did nonbullied students (1%).

From an educational perspective, being bullied results in poorer test scores. This is intuitive—students who are concentrating on how to avoid being beat up or tormented aren't concentrating on math, science, or social studies. Research confirms this observation. The SCS reports that among students who reported that they received mostly A's, bullied students were less likely to report getting mostly A's than students who did not report or experience bullying at school (27% versus 34%). Also, of those students who reported lower grades, bullied students were more likely to report receiving mostly substandard or failing grades than their non-bullied counterparts (8% versus 3%).

Responses

While some believe that bullying is merely “part of growing up,” and something that has existed since the first school building was constructed that might even build character or at least not be very harmful; the U.S. Department of Education views bullying for what it really is—behavior that erodes the climate of a school, impairs teaching and learning, and is hurtful to individuals, very often leading to short-term and long-term consequences, including suicide and homicide. As such, we have decided to aggressively attack the problem.

The initiatives we are pursuing to address this problem include the following.

Coordinators. Since 1999 ED spent \$117 million to support 302 coordinator grants. The funds have supported 870 safe and drug free school coordinators that provide services to 1708 schools. The role of the coordinators is to help their schools to develop and implement sound and effective drug and violence prevention programs; by translating research into practice. To help the coordinators we have developed a series of training courses. One of the courses we recently developed is *Exploring the Nature and Prevention of Bullying*. The course is designed to enhance the coordinators' understanding of (1) the nature of bullying, (2) how to assess the problem in a school, (3) how to develop an effective bullying prevention strategy, and (4) how to access additional resources. The course is available to the public and can be accessed at: <http://www.k12coordinator.org/onlinece/onlineevents/bullying>.

Inter-Agency Campaign to Stop Bullying! We are also working with our colleagues at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Maternal and Child Health Bureau, on a campaign to stop bullying in communities and in schools. The campaign, *Take a Stand, Lend a Hand: Stop Bullying Now*, is a multi-faceted media campaign designed to increase awareness about the problem of bullying among the “tween” age group (children aged 9-13). It is important to note that the campaign was developed with participation and input

from persons representing a variety of disciplines including education, health, and safety, and from youth organizations and law enforcement. Input was also sought from a youth expert panel comprised of tweens.

The goal of the campaign is to teach young people that they can and should do everything possible to stop bullying. One unique feature of this campaign is the focus on the three groups involved in bullying—bully, victim and bystander. All materials developed for the campaign were developed with input from the youth expert panel and therefore reflect actual situations, language, and actions characteristic of children in this age group.

One of the most prominent vehicles for the Stop Bullying Now! campaign is a web-based animated story featuring a cast of young people who deal with bullies in the classrooms, hallways and grounds of a middle school. With help from teachers, parents and other adults, the bullied characters get support from fellow students who step up to make it clear that bullying is not “cool.” In addition to the “webisodes,” which have cliffhanger endings and will be updated every two weeks, the campaign will feature television and radio public service announcements (PSAs). The campaign website also offers camera-ready print PSAs and a Resource Kit which educators, parents and others can access for information on bullying prevention programs and activities that can be implemented at the school or community level.

The campaign also included a satellite teleconference, held this past April, which helped draw attention to the importance of bullying prevention as a societal and public health issue. The video teleconference also illustrated how the concepts described in campaign materials can be implemented successfully at the school and community levels. A key message of the teleconference is that schools and organizations must work together in efforts to prevent bullying.

Both the Department of Education and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau will be working closely together in Fiscal Year 2005 to both update the material that is included in the Resource and Communications Kits, and to distribute the material to educators throughout the United States.

Data Collection. We recognize the importance of continuously assessing the extent of crime and violence in schools, and the importance of performing assessments through those agencies that have expertise in this area. Accordingly, we have developed a rather robust data collection system. The system, which involves the Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), includes collection, analysis, and public reporting of data through the annual release of the *Indicators of School Crime and Safety (Indicators) Report*. Regularly included in the *Indicators Report* is information on bullying. The information, which is collected every other year by BJS as part of the School Crime Supplement (SCS) to the National Crime Victimization Survey, is used by educators, community officials, and policy makers at the local, state, and Federal levels to assess our success in keeping schools safe.

Essentially, the *Indicators Report* shows that we have been making significant progress in the area of school safety: violent crimes dropped from 1,148,600 in 1992 to 763,700 in 2001, while serious violent crimes dropped from 245,400 in 1992, to 160,900 in 2001. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, information from the SCS indicates that reports of bullying at school were not measurably different between 2001 and 2003 (8% of students ages 12-18 reported being bullied at school during the previous 6 months in 2001 vs 7% in 2003). A more in depth analysis of bullying data collected through the SCS will be released in_____.

Conclusion

At the U.S. Department of Education, we are very serious about responding to the problem of bullying in the schools of the United States. We have consistently said that education cannot take place in an environment of fear and that all students deserve safe schools. No student should have to be afraid of going to school because of the way he or she will be treated while there. The government cannot do everything, but we are committed to doing what we can do to make our schools safe for everyone.