

R.I. educators take on bullies

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Robin Wildman, a fifth-grade teacher at Broad Rock Middle School in South Kingstown, addresses the issue of bullying with her class by using the steps of conflict reconciliation taught by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

The Providence Journal / John Freidah

SOUTH KINGSTOWN — The spirit of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. is alive in Robin Wildman's fifth-grade classroom.

From the oversize poster of King to his six principles of a peaceful community, the classroom is steeped in the tenets of nonviolence. On a rain-soaked morning at the Broad Rock Middle School in Wakefield, Wildman's children sit in a circle to talk about reconciliation without violence — and about bullies. "Someone called me gay because I wore Abercrombie & Fitch clothes," one boy said.

"How did it make you feel?" Wildman said.

"Sad. I stopped wearing those clothes."

"Then you let the bully win," Wildman said.

Then she asked, "How many of you have been bullied?"

Nearly every hand in a room of 15 children went up. And these are 10-year-olds in a rural, mostly white community.

"Is it our responsibility to stop bullying from happening?"

“Yes!” the children said in unison.

“That’s what Dr. King would want,” Wildman said.

Experts agree that bullying spikes in middle school because of a perfect confluence of forces: the importance of belonging to a peer group, the dominance of hormone-driven emotions over rational thinking and the transition from a safe elementary school setting to the shifting landscape of secondary school, where students are constantly changing classrooms.

“At this stage, kids are trying to find a peer group. Social status becomes more important in middle school,” said Prof. Paul Bueno de Mesquita, who runs the Center for Nonviolence and Peace Studies the University of Rhode Island. “Kids participate in bullying because it’s a way to be in the in crowd. A social group finds cohesiveness by bullying.”

Plus, in middle school, the development of a child’s body rapidly outpaces the development of his or her brain. Middle school students are not thinking about consequences when they do or say something hurtful. That’s why punishment alone doesn’t work to stop aggressive behavior.

In many cases, the distinction between bully and victim is not clear-cut — experts say the aggressor may have been a victim at one point.

There are very few “bad seeds,” Mesquita adds. Bullying is a learned behavior. Children are immersed in a “criminal culture” where it isn’t cool to snitch, where modern-day heroes are often people who excel at aggression.

Bullying is tough to defuse because children are afraid to speak out. They fear the threat of retaliation, whether it’s physical reprisal or ostracism.

And sometimes, children are afraid to come forward because adults — the principal, the teachers, even the parents — are too busy to respond or brush it off as “boys will be boys.”

Lawrence P. Fillippelli, Scituate’s assistant superintendent of schools, has done extensive research and consulting on the topic of bullying. He also serves on the Rhode Island Senate Commission on Cyber-bullying.

Fillippelli describes bullying as the “persistent, invasive, deliberate and mean-spirited taunting of another person.” By contrast, he said, teasing is a quick, joking comment that is not meant to hurt someone’s feelings.

Experts say bullying is becoming more pervasive not because children have changed but because the culture has.

“Bullying never stops,” Fillippelli says. “It’s getting worse because of the absolute 24-hour-a-day contact with technology.”

No one agrees on which particular anti-bullying curriculum works.

They do agree on one thing, however: Unless you change the school culture — unless every teacher, principal and parent is on the same page — bullying will continue unabated.

The good news is that middle schools in Rhode Island are doing something about it.

Providence school officials recently wrote one of the most comprehensive anti-bullying policies in the state, according to Randy Ross, an equity and diversity specialist for the Education Alliance at Brown University. Ross, who helped Providence craft its new rules, says the district added language on cyber-bullying, including examples. The policy also covers adults on the premise that they must be held to the same high standards as their children.

Providence makes a distinction between bullying and harassment. According to federal policy, harassment is motivated by bias against a particular race, color, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or disability.

Wyatt Laprade does not look like a victim. An eighth-grader at Scituate Middle School, Laprade is as tall as most high school sophomores, and he carries himself with an athlete's grace. But he says he was heckled relentlessly by several members of the school's basketball team in the spring of 2009.

Like so much aggressive behavior, the bullying seemed innocuous at first. When Laprade would do drills, several teammates would chant, "Why?" as in, "Why did you ever make the team?"

Laprade ignored them. But the taunting intensified. The group began to spit at him.

"No one would warm up with me during drills," he said. "The coach had to assign me a partner. I thought the world was out to get me."

One day when the team was running laps, Laprade says, he was pushed and then tripped. When he got into his mother's car after school, Laprade was fighting back tears. His mother demanded to know what was wrong. He finally told her. She called the coach, who gathered the team and said, "This has to stop."

Laprade said he learned a valuable lesson from the episode:

"You need to stand up for yourself. You need to let them know that you're not worthless, that you have meaning."

A large banner hangs from the front of Bain Middle School in Cranston. It says "Hugh B. Bain equals Respect." Then, with the iconic red slash, it says that the school is a no bullying zone.

Few middle schools have taken on bullying the way Bain has. But it wasn't always this way.

In 2000, Bain had one of the highest middle-school suspension rates in the state. In 2002, a survey revealed that one out of five students said they'd been bullied, knew someone who had been bullied and/or had witnessed bullying.

For Bain's principal, Thomas Barbieri, it was a wake-up call.

Barbieri understood that if you want to change school culture, you have to start with the students. His social worker, Sheri L. Brown, created a peer-leadership program called Project Respect that teaches students to practice the Golden Rule, "Treat others as you would like to be treated."

Project Respect students began holding pep rallies and school-wide assemblies, prevention training and community projects. They created a program called "Bain Buddies," where middle-school leaders mentor elementary-school children.

By creating a cadre of student leaders, Bain transformed a toxic school culture into a climate of mutual respect, local experts said. Students and parents are now asked to sign a pledge to be part of the solution to end bullying.

Bain's students now describe a school where it is safe to walk into the bathroom or wait for a bus, a school where students trust the adults to protect them.

"I was always afraid to get involved," said Kristen Dove, an eighth-grader and a member of Project Respect. "Now I can be myself. I'm not concerned about what anyone else thinks."

Emily Ellinwood, an eighth-grader, said Project Respect has taught her how to stand up not only for herself, but for others.

"As soon as you come through the doors," she said, "there is an aura, the feeling that this is a good school."

Bullying thrives in silence, experts say. When students stick up for the victim and stand up for themselves, the bully loses his or her power to hurt — and his power over the peer group.

"When bystanders intervene," said John Reis, a retired police lieutenant who has done extensive training in this area, "more than half of the time, bullying stops within 15 seconds. Yet students only intervene about 22 percent of time."

Coventry Middle School, the largest middle school in the state, has taken all sorts of steps to make it easier for students to report aggressive behavior and escape from it.

The school has created "bullying boxes" where students can tip off adults without the fear of retaliation. It has set aside "bully-safe" classrooms where students who are being harassed can seek comfort from trained faculty members between classes or during lunch.

And this year, the middle school has adopted something called Positive Behavior Intervention and Support, a national program developed by the University of Oregon that rewards students for positive behavior.

"We have to recognize students for doing the right thing," said Principal Michael J. Almeida. "We identified three areas: the cafeteria, the classroom and the hallway, and identified how the students should behave in each area." Coventry also uses its weekly student advisory to deliver specific lessons on goal-setting, bullying and the three Rs: respect, responsibility and reliability. Schools are so obsessed with standardized test scores, Almeida said, they have lost sight of their original mission: to create thoughtful, responsible citizens.

“We are so hung up on NECAP scores,” Reis said. “If we don’t teach social skills and deal with the social issues in our schools, our scores are not going to get better. A kid can’t learn if he’s scared.”

In addition to providing safe havens and raising the expectations of the victims, schools are finding they have to confront the aggressors.

“We educate the bully,” Almeida says. “We believe he is uninformed of the consequences of his or her actions.”

For the chronic offender, the school assigns the child to a behavior specialist who works with that student’s particular issues.

Eighty-five percent of bullying occurs when adults are not present, research shows.

In large middle schools like Chariho, with 1,100 students, one of the biggest challenges was getting adults into the hallways and the hidden corners where the bullying took place.

Chariho did three separate surveys on bullying, including one with parents. What they learned astounded them. One-third of the 160 parents who responded to the survey said that their child had been bullied or had bullied someone else.

This year, teachers are in the hallways during passing time. They regularly knock on the bathroom doors. And students are no longer allowed to roam the hallways. Each child has an agenda with his or her schedule. Anyone found without one has to report to the main office.

Small steps can make a big difference. Students can’t go their lockers without supervision, release times are staggered to protect younger students from older, and all students enter the building through one set of doors to make it easier to monitor the conduct.

Chariho has also changed the way it deals with misbehavior. Students are now given in-house suspension or Saturday detention because school officials realized that some students actually liked being suspended from school.

Chariho has also brought in outside experts, held pep rallies, created a school pledge, trained teachers and introduced the topic of bullying in its student advisories.

“We started this whole push,” said Chariho Middle School Principal Greg Zenion. “The media blitz totally supported us. Here we were, talking about our surveys, getting e-mails from parents, and this is on the national news. It was a perfect storm. And the word is starting to get out.”

BY THE NUMBERS Snapshot of bullying in R.I.

Students across the state responded to a survey about school climate, including bullying

Elementary school students

57%

Say “kids at school have called me names or made fun of me”

24%

Say “kids on the bus have done mean things to me”

Middle school students

35%

Say “I have been pushed, shoved, tripped or spit on”

25%

Say “I have been excluded from activities on purpose”

High school students

21%

Say “I have been threatened with harm”

14%

Say “I have had embarrassing pictures or rumors spread about me by e-mail, text message or a social networking site”

Information from the R.I. Dept. of Education’s 2010 SurveyWorks

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