

Bay Schools Address

BULLYING & Harassment

When concerns about school climate began to surface among Whitefish Bay administrators, teachers, and parents last year, the matter became an agenda item for the district's Administrative Council. The Council, which meets weekly, is composed of Superintendent James Rickabaugh, the Directors of Instruction, Personnel and Pupil Services, Business Services, Recreation and Community Education, and the Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds as well as the principals and associate principals of each building.

According to Pam Ryder, Director of Personnel and Pupil Services, the Council decided after considerable conversation that no universal solutions were practical. They felt the broad range of developmental levels from kindergarten through high school required that the individual schools be given flexibility in designing appropriate interventions and responses.

While district policies on Human Dignity and Harassment should inform each building's response, they said, any initiatives must also fit a particular building's context and take into

account the personnel and programs already in place. The district's role should be to provide support and resources, Ryder said.

The following articles describe the various ways in which Whitefish Bay schools are addressing school climate within their buildings.

Cumberland School

At Cumberland School, school climate issues as they relate to bullying and harassment are addressed largely through guidance services, said counselor Laury Anstett, an 18-year veteran at the school.

Although Anstett has not witnessed any increase in violent behavior, she has noticed a gradual increase over time in the lack of courtesy among students. Nevertheless, she still thinks Whitefish Bay parents do a good job of teaching their children to treat others as they would like to be treated.

She attributes the gradual lessening of courteous behavior to children's

growing up faster and modeling their behavior after older children and teens. She also cited their exposure to the irreverence and cynicism of shows like *The Simpsons* and to video games with negative messages.

Anstett said that she now finds herself using the terms "bullying" and "harassment" even with first-graders.

Although she often gets calls from parents advocating for their children, she is still disturbed by the number of incidents that go unreported.

"I can only deal with it when I know about it," she explained.

She urges both victims and bystanders to ask for help when what they've tried is not working, but she said students are reluctant to come forward for fear of being labeled tattletales.

Anstett said her position as neither teacher nor disciplinarian gives her an advantage in investigating complaints. She especially appreciates when parents who

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When a report of bullying originates at school, Anstett said, the child's teacher first contacts the parent to get permission for Anstett to work with him or her. Sometimes parents want to deal with the problem at home, she said, but Anstett emphasizes that the child is at school for six hours a day, where peer influences play a role in bullying behavior, so a cooperative effort is needed.

She also urges parents to deal with problems at the elementary level before they escalate and the consequences become more severe.

Once given the parent's permission to work with a child, Anstett devises a plan, which may include individual counseling, small group social coaching, or even working with an entire class.

She cautions, however, that ingrained patterns don't change overnight and that real progress depends upon the willingness of all involved to change their patterns of behavior.

Anstett said that the district's recent assessment of guidance services convinced her that Cumberland continues to offer a good program. When she met recently with district counselors from other schools to brainstorm new ideas and to examine new materials, she was reassured that Cumberland's approach was still meeting the needs of the school's students.

Richards School

As a result of the Richards School Leadership Team's decision last year to make a year-long study of school climate, the school now has a formal statement of goals, principles, and measures aimed at reducing and preventing bullying both in and out of school, said Richards Principal Elaine Gehring.

The Leadership Team is a standing group of eight teachers and eight parents representing all of the school's constituencies. Although the group may address any issue of concern, Gehring said, they decided last year to concentrate on one topic.

Their study was based upon the

work of the Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus, whose findings are reported in his 1994 book *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*. The group's document, which is available at <http://www.advocatesforeducation.org>, spells out specific actions to be taken at the school level, the classroom level, and individual student level.

But even before the group convened, Gehring said, many of the strategies mentioned in the document were already in place as part of the "Richards Way," which emphasizes sharing, showing respect, and being responsible as the path to learning. What the study did, said Gehring, was to bring all the people and pieces together in one place.

As a result of the study, several staff members read Daniel Klindon's *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* and Stephen Nowicki and Marshall P. Duke's *Helping the Child Who Doesn't Fit In*. Developing new strategies to insure that all students feel comfortable also became the focus of several staff meetings.

Beginning this fall, a group of 22 parents has volunteered to help kids develop inclusive games at recess on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. The parents bring a bag of equipment and a list of games students have learned in physical education classes, but they are also free to share with the students any activities they enjoy.

Richards also continues to use its weekly all-school meeting, now in its third year, to set the tone, said Gehring. The meetings encourage students to see themselves as part of a larger group and allow everyone to hear the same message at the same time.

The meetings are also occasions to announce birthdays, to recognize student achievements, to introduce new students, and to hear other students perform. Gehring's personal favorite was a first-grader who could recite the first name, middle initial, and last name of every U. S. President. "At

school meetings," she said, "we celebrate who we are and who we would like to be."

Whitefish Bay Middle School

What has become Whitefish Bay Middle School's school climate initiative began last spring when concerned seventh grade teachers approached guidance counselors Jeff Treul and Judi Stadler. The counselors and the teachers decided that in order to foster a more caring and respectful school climate, they needed to energize the silent leadership potential of student bystanders.

So Treul and Stadler invited 22 students, representing both houses and genders as well as the diverse social groups and ethnicities in this year's eighth grade, to form the nucleus of what they hope will become a School Climate Club open to all eighth-graders.

After participating in an outing at Solid Rock Sports to build cohesiveness, the core group has been discussing leadership styles and how to expand what they learn to the rest of the school. They have also applied for a \$1,000 Wisconsin Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) grant to fund the activities of the 20-25 students who will replace them next year.

Realizing that he needed organized staff support as well, Treul also developed a volunteer staff study group.

The group, which has met three times, consists of Principal Barb Sonnenberg, the guidance counselors, and representatives from each grade level as well as from special education and the special subjects.

Treul and Associate Principal Chuck Orvald also addressed school climate at an all-school assembly earlier this year. Orvald defined what behaviors constitute bullying, and Treul explained how the bully, the victim, and the bystander all play a role in the abuse.

And because the role of the community is also critical, Sonnenberg has organized an open-ended parent

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study group, which began meeting Nov. 5. The group plans to read and discuss Margaret Sagarese and Charlene Giannetti's *Cliques: 8 Steps to Help Your Child Survive the Social Jungle* and to look for avenues where the community might contribute.

The parent group's next meeting is Tuesday, Dec. 4, at 6:30 p.m. in the middle school library, and interested parents are invited to join at any time.

Sonnenberg emphasized, however, that cruelty is not a new trait and that cliques and bullying are an issue in every middle school in the country. The causes are developmental, she said, and the insecurity of the middle school years fuels it.

"Most of the harassment and put-downs are impulsive," she said, "as students try on different behaviors and word choices."

Rather than emphasizing the negatives, Sonnenberg would like adults to concentrate on building the 40 developmental assets identified by the Search Institute (Minneapolis) as factors

which reduce the incidence of negative behavior and foster competence, caring, and success. The assets are described on the Institute's website at <<http://www.search-institute.org/assets/forty.htm>>.

Whitefish Bay High School

The staff at Whitefish Bay High School has for the most part taken a traditional approach to school climate issues, monitoring the people, places, and events where trouble is likely to occur and dealing with problems as they present themselves.

"Whitefish Bay trusts its kids a great deal and has faith in their decisions

and choices," said associate principal Leigh Wallace. "They are really good kids, and the majority know how to treat one another. If they slip up, we work with them on problem-solving strategies."

She said the school is fortunate to have a staff who are very attuned to the developmental and social issues of high school and who are alert to potential harassment.

Drawing students from a single community is also a plus, she said, as are the many school and community groups in which students can participate and through which they are able to find like-minded friends.

Cliques are prevalent at the high school, Wallace said, but they are less exclusive than those at the younger grades. Although friendship groups are pretty well set, their boundaries are more fluid.

The high school is also working to make newcomers feel welcome in the building. About 50 incoming freshman participated in a new freshman orienta-

tion program this summer, and the school hosted a luncheon for student transfers from St. Monica's, Holy Family, and schools outside the district.

At registration and on the first day of school, a group of upperclassmen designated "Team Frosh" wore identifying T-shirts and served as guides for the day.

Wallace feels such initiatives help newcomers build confidence and prevent them from becoming either bullies or victims as they search for acceptance in a new environment.

Many of the problems Wallace regularly deals with are of the "he said/she

said" variety, often involving bystanders who "keep things stirred up," she said. In such cases, Wallace tries to get all involved to understand the impact of their behavior.

She also has participants sign a "Cease and Desist Agreement" which defines intimidation and harassment. In signing, students promise to discontinue negative behavior or talk directed at one another for the remainder of the school year.

Wallace and Principal Bill Henkle have also tightened up rules about where students may eat lunch, and they regularly monitor problem areas like the cafeteria and the fieldhouse lobby.

They are also working to reduce the potential for abuse during Big Duke/Baby Duke activities, a homecoming tradition originally intended to pair seniors with freshmen and to welcome newcomers to the high school.

The Student Council this year drafted a set of guidelines for behavior and costumes, encouraging healthy creativity rather than hazing and humiliation. They also awarded prizes at an all-school assembly for the most creative costumes.

Participants also had to submit signed parent permission forms, and the upperclass Big Dukes were required to sign contracts agreeing to abide by the guidelines. Only 14 students were sanctioned for infractions, Wallace said.

Where Does This Leave Us?

The good news is that all Whitefish Bay schools are concerned about and actively addressing the issues of bullying and harassment in their buildings.

Administrators feel that teachers are alert to incidents of negative behavior and deal with them effectively, either by handling the problems themselves or by referring students to counselors or administrators. Parents of both bullies and victims are notified and, depending upon the age of the stu-

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RESPECT

dents and/or the severity of the behavior, invited to participate in problem-solving.

All of the staff interviewed for these articles are also aware of at least some of the recent research on bullying and harassment. They realize, for example, that in some instances the students who harass others may not think of their behavior as bullying, in which case the adults try to help them see their behavior through the victims' eyes.

They are also aware of research which says that some victims may inadvertently invite harassment through their own lack of social awareness, in which case the adults try to help the victims change their own behavior as well.

The administrators also recognize that insecurity fuels both bullying and victimization, so they have tried, for

example, to find ways to make newcomers feel more comfortable.

Moreover, they have examined the times, places, and activities which allow harassment to occur, and have established clear guidelines for behavior as well as increased adult supervision.

Nevertheless, current research suggests that a model school program should look beyond dealing with reported incidents and consider the larger picture drawn by experts in the field:

- Most incidents go unreported because students are embarrassed by their victimization and realize that being labeled a "tattletale" will only increase their isolation.
- Bullying takes many forms. According to the National Council of Crime Prevention, "Some bullies are outgoing, aggressive, active, and expressive. They get their way by brute force or openly harassing someone. . . . Other bullies are more reserved and manipulative and may not want to be recognized as harassers or tormentors. They try to control by smooth-talking, saying the "right" thing at the "right" time, and lying."
- All students-girls as well as boys, the popular and the unpopular, the advantaged as well as the disadvantaged-sometimes bully and are at other times victims of bullying.
- Bullying is a group behavior. According to parenting expert Margaret Sagarese, "Being mean is part of the portfolio of popularity. It's a dynamic that can't exist unless all

the kids buy into it."

- Bystanders are the largest group in any bullying situation and are potentially the most effective deterrent if

they are taught appropriate responses.

- An effective bully prevention program must include all participants-bullies, victims, and bystanders--as well as all parents and all teachers. The entire community must reject what

Sagarese calls "humiliation as entertainment" in favor of kindness and courage.

Obviously, bullying is not a new behavior, and it is probably no more prevalent in Whitefish Bay than anywhere else. Because it intensifies in periods of insecurity, most notably in early adolescence, it is also a natural part of the passage from childhood to adulthood.

This does not mean, however, that as a community, we do not want to mitigate its potentially destructive effects. Whether they admit it or not, children and teenagers look to the adults in their lives for leadership in confronting difficult issues. In addressing the issue of bullying and harassment in our schools, the message we want to send is the power of consensus coupled with the efficacy of individual action.

Experts have provided the model. It's left to the community to set the same high standard in this area that we have in other areas of student life.

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Let us know what you think about cliques and bullying. Send your comments to afe@advocatesforeducation.org

We hope to share your feedback in the next newsletter or at www.advocatesforeducation.org