

Education Week: The Best Antidote to Bullying? Community-Building

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COMMENTARY

The Best Antidote to Bullying? Community-Building

By Jim Dillon

Bullying doesn't wound students; it pours salt on a pre-existing injury, causing it to hurt even more. Most students who are bullied have already been hurt. They are wounded by exclusion when they find themselves without friends or allies. They are wounded when they fail in school, or when they don't gain the approval of their peers or, all too often, their teachers. They are wounded when they don't get the help they need. And they are wounded when they feel they have no place to go, or no one to talk to.

Preventing students from being hurt in the first place is the most effective way to thwart, as well as dramatically reduce, bullying. When students are members of a strong community, they feel accepted and supported, not isolated and excluded. They can trust that there will be someone to help them if they are in need. A school community is a place where people value each other and have a sense of responsibility for helping everyone feel safe and protected. Not all schools are communities, however.

Some schools focus solely on individual achievement. True, students need to be concerned about their own grades, about following the rules, and respecting their teachers; they should also be challenged, though, to care about the safety and the success of others. Students can learn how to support and defend their peers—and not just those with whom they share obvious similarities. Students should learn how to care about and defend those who might be different from them. As schools expect students to meet high academic standards, so can they expect students to meet high moral standards.

When schools lack a strong sense of community, the result is an environment in which students gravitate toward either "the winners" or "the losers." Students quickly learn the difference, as well as the importance of associating with the popular kids.

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Students who bully often seek to improve their social standing and demonstrate their social prowess to their peers. They carefully select as their targets the most unpopular students, those without friends or allies, in an attempt to earn a place in their desired social group.

Students who witness bullying often refrain from standing up for the victims, not from a lack of empathy but from the fear of being associated with the targeted student. Unfortunately, their reluctance to intervene or report bullying gives tacit approval to the student who bullies, giving that student license to continue. And the problem grows—other students are tempted to bully as a way to move up the social ladder.

The problem is compounded because students who bully strike beyond the radar of adult supervision. This is a subtle pattern almost impossible to detect by even the most caring

and competent educator. Under these conditions, bullying can persist in even the most successful and high-achieving schools. The methods that successfully control other inappropriate school behaviors don't work when it comes to bullying. In fact, educators who are effective classroom managers are often unable to control the bullying that can happen in plain sight.

For educators to be effective at bullying prevention and reduction, they must shift their attention from only disciplining students who bully to empowering students who could be in a position to stop it. When bystanders are given the skills, the confidence, and the courage to intervene or report abusive behavior, the student who bullies is disempowered. When the number of students who defend and protect their vulnerable peers grows, the school's social norms shift from the unspoken acceptance of bullying to one where bullying is not tolerated.

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Building a strong school culture in which this behavior violates social norms is a challenge—often, even more difficult than implementing policies or programs. But it is also a necessary goal for any school. It requires a commitment for changing how individuals see and treat each other. It requires the nurturing and strengthening of the school's social connections. When bullying prevention is reframed as community-building, it moves from a problem-solving scenario to an opportunity for improving the learning environment for everyone.

Schools can begin this healing and healthful process by asking staff members and students to consider and discuss the differences between a group of individuals and a community. Students should explore what their responsibilities and obligations to their peers are. Staff and students should talk about the existing challenges and the barriers to helping others. From these discussions, the school community can develop specific strategies for what to do and say when anyone witnesses an act of bullying. Students can and should play a role in planning how to make their school a better place, to insure that everyone is treated with respect.

When schools encourage these discussions, they send a message to students that looking out for others is one of their core values. Educating students to take ownership and responsibility for their learning environment is the best preparation for becoming good citizens.

As schools become stronger communities, they provide students with the protection and the platform they need for continuous growth and learning. This should be the goal of bullying prevention and for how we educate all students.

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