

Elementary Bully Prevention and Character Development

Bullying has risen to a level of national prominence in recent years. Research has shown that bullying has a negative impact on young people, including serious health and developmental concerns. While the national attention to this issue is recent, seven years ago Holland Elementary began a bully prevention/character development program as a means to prevent bullying and increase positive behavior. Two years ago Council Rock directed all elementary schools in the district to develop positive behavior programs to address bully prevention, tailoring research-based programs to match their school populations and focusing on character development and positive outcomes.

Norwegian researcher Dr. Dan Olweus, widely recognized as the founding father of research on bullying problems, whose research formed the basis for Holland Elementary's program, defines bullying as when a person is "exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons." He defines negative action as "when a person intentionally inflicts injury or discomfort upon another person, through physical contact, through words or in other ways." In a digital world, this can also include cyber bullying, defined by Merriam Webster as "the electronic posting of mean-spirited messages about a person done anonymously." The lack of personal accountability makes this type of bullying even more complicated.

Bullying can occur in school, on the playground, on the bus, in the community, and via electronic means. The solutions to bullying must include the school, home, and community, and involve teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members.

National and County Efforts

At the national level, the US Department of Education, under the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, has guidelines and curricular recommendations for schools, along with national conferences for creating and maintaining conditions for learning. The National Education Association (NEA) provides resources and educational materials through its "Bully Free: It Starts With Me" campaign.

A national campaign called "The Bully Project" (www.thebullyproject.com) was launched by Harvey Weinstein (The Weinstein Company) after acquiring the documentary film, "Bully," and partnering with writer, director and producer Lee Hirsh. The project seeks to enlist everyone, from hometowns across America to celebrities, to start the conversation about this national epidemic. Much controversy accompanied the launch of the film, as the Motion Picture Association of America initially gave the film an R-rating, due to strong language. This rating would have made it very difficult for teenagers, the most critical viewers of the film, to see it. Citizens is happy to report that the MPAA has changed the rating to a more appropriate PG-13, allowing the target audience the ability to see this film. The film opened nationwide on April 13.

In Bucks County, The Peace Center in Langhorne specializes in bully prevention. Having successfully helped students, parents, teachers and police officers, they recently received a federal grant to fund a bullying resource center. The Peace Center's goal is "to help anyone in Bucks County who is bullied or concerned about bullying." Through grant funding they have added counselors and will continue to meet with and empower victims. For more information, visit the Peace Center website at www.thepeacecenter.org.

The Holland Elementary Approach

The current 6th grade at Holland Elementary has been exposed to a program of bully prevention since Kindergarten, meaning that this program has been an integral part of the entire school's culture. Citizens sat down with principal Andy Sanko and leaders of their program, IST teacher Beth Pacitti and Teacher Assistant Andrea Mangold, to learn more about their successful program.

Seven years ago Mr. Sanko and Teacher Assistant Marianne Pavie received a grant from Today, Inc. to begin implementation of the well regarded, research-based, Olweus Bully Prevention Program (www.violencepreventionworks.org). In 1970, Dr. Dan Olweus started a large-scale research project, now generally regarded as the world's first scientific study of bully/victim problems. In the 1980s, he began the first systematic study of bullying intervention and documented the positive effects of this program. Accompanying his program is his book Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention program places the teacher as a key person, and classroom management as an important piece of the program. Maintaining an environment where learning can take place also serves to reduce the incidence of bullying. Students who have positive relationships and expectations within their classroom begin to view themselves as a group, with a "we" mentality. Key parts of the program include:

- Class-wide and/or school-wide rules and expectations against bullying. Studies show that having anti-bullying rules in class leads to less bullying.
- Positive reinforcement – Praise when a student is following the rules and supporting fellow students to reduce undesirable behaviors.
- Negative consequences – Should be directed toward the behavior, not the person, and include meaningful actions.
- Class meetings – Regular meetings to build a foundation for cooperative behavior. All students have a chance to participate and everyone's viewpoint is heard and respected.
- Role-playing - Helps young students to understand how their actions affect others and pose solutions to common classroom problems.
- Meetings with parents - Help to encourage reinforcement at home, and place the school and parents as cooperative pieces all pulling together.

Stan Davis, researcher, social worker, and school counselor, from Maine, was brought to Holland Elementary to act as a trainer for parents, students and staff. Davis uses the Olweus program and others to develop bullying prevention interventions and has authored two books, Schools Where Everyone Belongs (Research Press, 2nd edition 2007) and Empowering Bystanders in Bullying Prevention (Research Press, 2007). He is also the cofounder of the International Bullying Prevention Association. His workshops include the importance of the bystander in preventing bullying. Training was done with staff and a daytime session was run for students. An evening presentation was arranged for parents.

In 2008-09 the decision was made to take the program one step further by incorporating "character education" using the "pillars" of Cooperation, Respect, Responsibility and Sportsmanship. To decide on a model to use, the Holland team visited Groveland Elementary in the Central Bucks School District and Leary Elementary in the Centennial School District to see, first hand, how their successful programs worked. The Holland team conducted parent and peer surveys and decided on a course forward. With the PTO behind them, they launched their program, also incorporating programs from "Effective Playground" by Curt Hanson, allowing recess to be for kids of all abilities and interests.

The Holland team has seen, first-hand, how this program has changed the school climate, and has seen students using what they have learned out in the community, on ball fields, and other venues.

All Council Rock Elementary Schools

During the 2009-10 school year, all Council Rock elementary schools were tasked with developing a “positive behavior plan” to be implemented in the 2010-11 school year. Each school was required to submit their plan to Director of Elementary Education, Joy McClendon.

The schools used a template from the state called School-wide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBS) that has as its central tenets Cooperation, Acceptance, Respect, Eagerness to Learn and Staying Safe (CARES). All schools implement the same core principals yet shape them to reflect their individual cultures. Some use acronyms like Churchville CARES: C=Cooperation; A= Acceptance; R= Respect; E= Eagerness to Learn; S= Staying Safe, or Hillcrest’s ROAR: R= Ready to Learn; O= Obey Safety Rules; A= Act Responsibly; R= Respect.

With a goal to teach expected behaviors, schools incorporated a combination of 2nd Step, a program provided to Council Rock through a grant secured by the Council Rock Coalition for Healthy Youth, some form of Responsive Classroom, and Restorative Practices. Each school runs assemblies following the central tenets of the program and models appropriate behavior through roleplaying.

Responsive Classroom is a method of building community. It has been in the district in some form for many years, but some of the teachers that were trained in the program have since retired. Two teachers are now being trained to be Certified Responsive Classroom trainers to provide turn-around training for the district. It is important to have an internal person to train other teachers because of the need for follow-up. Additionally, administrators will be trained in Responsive Classroom so that they can effectively observe and evaluate teachers.

Restorative Practices is a means to address concerns. It provides a process for holding students accountable for their actions while proactively building a nurturing school community. At the elementary level this involves behavior contracts that allow the student to reflect on what rule was broken and how it affected others. This helps build empathy and a positive school environment.

The Elementary Guidance Counselors are a key piece to implementing these character building programs. Citizens For Education began advocating for the hiring of Elementary Guidance Counselors twenty years ago. Citizens continued through the years to point out the value of these positions in assisting students while they are in the younger grades, and preventing undesirable behavior and larger problems later on. In August 2004 the district hired the first two Elementary Guidance Counselors. Currently there are 5 counselors shared between ten elementary schools. Their role in bully prevention is to promote and improve the school climate. To that end, they visit classrooms to teach the lines between bullying and teasing, how to report bullying, the role of the bystander and strategies to address these issues. This was incorporated into the K-6 guidance curriculum written a few years ago. Counselors meet monthly to talk about their school’s initiatives and to share best practices. Principals do the same.

Ms. McClendon said that the challenge for these bully prevention programs is getting the word out to parents. Workshops that each school runs are not widely attended. Some parents are not receptive to advice on bully prevention outside of school and some do not understand the value of restorative practices, especially if they perceive their child is a victim of bullying. Additionally,

parent confusion between what constitutes teasing versus bullying compounds the solution. Education of all parties is paramount for success in providing a positive, nurturing environment for all.

Assessing Effectiveness of District Programs

The district is gauging the success of the elementary programs through surveys. Students are surveyed to see if they know the rules and accepted behaviors. Results are graphed and the data is showing an increase in knowledge of the rules. In some schools students were asked questions about bullying before the program began to serve as baseline data. Following implementation, they were surveyed again to gauge what they had learned. The results have been positive.

While much is being accomplished at the elementary level, Citizens would like to know how this is viewed at the middle and high school levels. In a subsequent newsletter we will be inquiring about how the secondary schools in Council Rock are building on their elementary counterparts to address bullying prevention and character development as students reach adolescence and, with so many different programs at the elementary schools, if the middle schools are providing feedback to the elementary schools as they see students merging from differing elementary programs.

Council Rock is addressing the issue of bullying on many fronts. Citizens For Education thanks Mrs. McClendon and Elementary Guidance Counselor, Alexis Schoen, as well as the Holland team of Principal Andy Sanko, IST teacher Beth Pacitti, and teacher assistant Andrea Mangold, for meeting with us and helping us to understand how the elementary schools are tackling this important issue.