



**National
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Educators Can and Must Weed Out Bullying

It is almost impossible to pick up a newspaper or magazine today and not come across an article about the pervasiveness of bullying in our American schools. Unfortunately, this destructive phenomena cuts across economic, gender, religious, national and international lines. Almost 78% of U.S. students in third through eighth grade reported being bullied (NASSP March 2002 Bulletin) with 6% of the bullying behaviors considered severe. This translates to 4.8 million students in our country who are threatened either physically or verbally by other students. With the advent of picture phones, the Internet, Instant Messaging, e-mail, text messaging, blogs and personal Web sites the potential for even more harmful behavior becomes a reality.

Bullying by definition is aggressive verbal or physical behavior toward another individual, defined as the victim, and occurs over a period of time. Bullying is intentional and intends to put the victim in distress. Cyber bullying uses information and communication technologies to support deliberate and repeated bullying of an individual or group with the intent to do harm.

Catholic schools are not immune to this social problem. As Catholic school educators we have a moral responsibility to provide an environment in which our young people are respected and feel physically and emotionally safe. Unfortunately, 45% of students are not even sure if their teachers and administrators are interested in solving this problem (NASSP March 2002 Bulletin). We need to let our students know that bullying behaviors will not be tolerated in our schools. We can and must weed out bullying.

Research has shown that the principal of the school is the single most important factor in eliminating this insidious social evil. The chief administrator of the school must lead the effort to eliminate bullying by openly addressing the problem with the school community and providing accurate data of the degree of student harassment.

This data should identify the ages of the bullies and their victims, the location where bullying is most prevalent (i.e. lunchroom, hallways, playground), how often, and type of bullying (physical, verbal, relational, cyber, exclusion, hazing). Once the staff, parents and students are aware of

the degree of the bullying problem they will be ready to work effectively with the administration on implementing a program to eliminate bullying.

Any program implemented, whether purchased or developed by the school community, should stress the Catholic values of respect, tolerance, kindness and caring. An emphasis on the teachings of Jesus as a model of acceptable behavior is essential. Student consequences, as part of the program, should be administered consistently and without hostility, with the intent to help both the bully and victim. Encouraging the victim and “silent majority” to take a stand against bullies should be included. Often times the guidance department can augment this with small counseling groups. Fostering a warm positive school climate for the entire community is beneficial to creating long lasting systemic changes. Collecting data on the effectiveness of the program and reporting the results regularly to the teachers, parents and students allows the principal to applaud the efforts of all stakeholders as progress is made. Creating anti-bullying presentations and activities that are age-appropriate allow the students to internalize the anti-bullying message. Skits and story-telling work well for primary children. Intermediate students learn from role-playing, real life stories and games. If possible, utilize advisory groups as a vehicle for reaching the middle school students with guest speakers, group discussion, original drama presentations, and videos as part of the program. If a particular class or grade has more bullying incidences than the norm, provide immediate intervention before the problem worsens. This can be accomplished with a special guidance activity, retreat day, prayer service, or even contracting an outside agency specializing in anti-bullying programs to work with the students. It is important that the students and parents recognize that the school is aware of the problem and is taking action to correct the situation as quickly as possible.

Once a program is in place it should be reviewed and evaluated on a regular basis. Reviewing collected data and surveying the teachers, parents and students as to the program’s effectiveness is mandatory. If something is not working it should be eliminated from the program and another activity selected. It is important that the program be allowed to grow and change so that everyone in the school community is aware that bullying behavior will be dealt with immediately and with Christian compassion and justice for all involved. We can and must weed out bullying in our Catholic schools.



*Nancy L. Genzel, Principal
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