Editor’s Note: Bullying can be a serious and dangerous problem in schools and online. This Spotlight focuses on how educators and policymakers are working to prevent bullying and the harmful experiences associated with it.

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Efforts to End Bullying, A Challenge to Leaders, Gain New Momentum

Practitioners and policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels are focusing fresh attention on eliminating the scourge of bullying from schools, inspired both by personal observations and by recent incidents that have received national attention.

In Massachusetts, Gov. Deval A. Patrick last week signed into law a bill that covers both verbal and electronic bullying and requires schools—public and private—to develop and teach a preventive curriculum. It also requires school employees to report bullying incidents and principals to investigate.

Its passage means that 42 states now have laws against bullying, according to the most recent data available from...
We need to communicate from the first moment students come to school on the first day of the school year that bullying and harassment will not be tolerated. We don’t tell kids to do a math problem once. We repeat the message. We have to do that around this.”

KEVIN JENNINGS
Assistant deputy secretary, U.S. Department of Education’s office of safe and drug-free schools

bullying requires changing the behaviors not only of students but also of the adults who supervise them.

“Bullying is just that hidden animal that is hiding in the woods sometimes that you have to address,” said Edward A. Boswell, the principal of Richard Ira Jones Middle School in Plainfield, Ill. “Kids are sneaky and passive-aggressive. A hidden nudge in a crowded cafeteria. A fry lobbed across the cafeteria.”

School leaders, he said, must create a climate where students know there are adults they can trust and to whom they can safely report information.

Students at Jones Middle School can call an anonymous tip line to report instances of bullying. Mr. Boswell started the program while at another school, and it is now used in other middle schools in the 29,000-student Plainfield district. The school system’s policy handbook makes clear that staff members must report acts of bullying and protect students who report bullying from retaliation.

John Kelly, a school psychologist at Comack High School in Commack, N.Y., said changing school culture and the “boys will be boys” attitude common among adults is important.

“We have to be the go-to people in the school for the kids to be able to trust us, and we have to respond in a way that is helpful, rather than hurting in any way,” said Mr. Kelly, a former president of the New York chapter of the National Association of School Psychologists. “Unless you are ready to address some of the underlying cultural issues, then you are going to continue to struggle with bullying in your school.”

Schools often fail to focus enough on bystanders—the majority of students, Mr. Kelly said. Those students can provide effective leverage against bullies, both by getting adults involved when they witness bullying and by protecting those most likely to be victimized.

“Oftentimes, victims don’t have friends, or are isolated in some way, and that makes them vulnerable,” he said. “The silent bystanders can intervene by bringing that person into a group and making sure they aren’t alone.”

The Online Factor

The advent of cyberbullying has made it more difficult for school administrators to track incidents, but Mr. Boswell, the Illinois middle school principal, said the trust he and his staff have built with students has
Tackling school bullying, especially against LGBT-identifying students, has become a major school safety priority in many communities, a concern that has grown as more students come out at a younger age.

Students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (or who other students assume are) experience not only taunting and ridicule, but physical violence from some of their peers.

A research brief, published last fall by GLSEN, found many LGBT-identifying middle school students were reporting harassment and the use of homophobic epithets at school on a regular basis.

Of course, because sexual identity is a sensitive topic, not everyone believes the discussion has a place in schools. In a story reported by Fox News in April 2010, some conservative family advocacy groups said activities such as the Day of Silence are a waste of taxpayer money and promote an agenda that may not be welcomed by all families.

The American Family Association called on its members to pull children from school today, a move much like the time groups called on parents to pull students out of school in September during President Obama’s lunchtime address to students.

“We send our kids there to learn the subject matter, not ... to be unwillingly exposed to political protest during instructional time,” Laurie Higgins, director of school advocacy for the Illinois Family Institute, told the news channel.

But others say schools must address this. For some students, the bullying has led to death.

Carl Walker-Hoover hung himself last April after he was repeatedly taunted by students in his Massachusetts middle school. Students, his mother told a Connecticut Family Institute, told the news channel.

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older sister, Dominique Walker, has taken up the cause, and is leading students at her
school, The MacDuffie School in Springfield,
in Day of Silence activities.

“I don’t really want to hear another
story about my brother or the next Phoebe
Prince,” Dominique said, referring to Prince,
an Irish immigrant who committed suicide
in January after alleged bullying at school
and online. “I don’t want to see the tragedy
that has fallen on my family on another.”
The 16-year-old ordered t-shirts and
bracelets for students to wear today and ex-
plained the concept to her fellow students.
Most of the school’s approximately 250 stu-
dents will participate, she said.

“The silence (that day) is amazing, and it
is really sad at the same time to notice how
students who are harassed don’t say any-
thing and bystanders don’t say anything,”
Dominique said. “If you see someone being
picked on, you don’t have to sit there and
watch. You can cut in and say, ‘This isn’t
cool’.”

REPORT ROUNDPUP

Published October 7, 2009, in Education Week

School Bullying

“The Experience of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Middle School Students”

By Dakarai I. Aarons

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in middle school experience
frequent verbal harassment and sometimes physical assault from their class-
mates, says a new research brief from an advocacy group for such students.
The report from the New York City-based Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educa-
tion Network, or GLSEN, draws on a survey of 6,209 students, 629 of whom
were identified as middle school students.
The survey found that 91 percent of middle school respondents said they had
experienced verbal harassment at school in the past year because of their sex-
ual orientation, and that 39 percent said they had been physically assaulted.
The brief calls for schools to implement anti-bullying policies that specifically
address bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Published May 21, 2008,
in Education Week

PRINCIPALS’ VIEWS
ON BULLYING

“The Principal’s Perspective: School Safety,
Bullying and Harassment”

By Lesli A. Maxwell

Half of public school principals in a
recent survey say bullying is a serious
problem in their schools, ranking it
above such other issues as peer pressure
to use drugs and alcohol and ethnic and
racial differences among students, ac-
cording to a new report.

Using an online survey of 1,580 K-12
public school principals, the report also
reveals that fewer than half the prin-
cipals, whether at the elementary or sec-
ondary level, believe that a lesbian, gay,
bisexual, or transgender student would
feel very safe at their school. Principals
in middle and junior high schools were
most likely to report that students are
bullied or harassed for how masculine
or feminine they are, or because they
are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, or perceived
to be so.
The 116-page report was released by
the New York City-based Gay, Lesbian,
and Straight Education Network, in col-
laboration with the National Association
of Secondary School Principals.
Bullying a Top Concern for New Safe-Schools Chief

By Michele McNeil

To lead the federal effort to keep schools safe, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has tapped a Southern Baptist preacher’s gay son who turned a childhood of prejudice, taunts, and harassment into an activist career that’s sought to expand tolerance, safety, and opportunities for gay and lesbian students.

The selection of Kevin Jennings as the assistant deputy secretary in the Department of Education’s office of safe and drug-free schools sends an important signal, experts in school safety and student mental health say, that safety is about more than keeping guns and knives out of schools. It’s also about improving school climate by decreasing bullying and teaching students tolerance.

“How can you perform in school if you’re worried about getting beat up and made fun of?” asked Stephen Sroka, a health education consultant and an adjunct assistant professor at the school of medicine at Case Western Reserve University, in Cleveland. “Violence is more than just physical; it’s verbal and very mental.”

As the founder and former executive director of the New York City-based Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, known as GLSEN, Mr. Jennings, a 46-year-old former history teacher, worked to make schools friendlier places for gay students. He also helped shine a spotlight on the prevalence and consequences of bullying among all students. He officially left GLSEN last October.

While that background and Mr. Jennings’ record on issues regarding sexual orientation have won him praise from many people involved in student-safety issues, his appointment has also sparked opposition from some socially conservative groups.

“It’s not the fact that he’s a homosexual, it’s really his record that makes us concerned,” said Peter Spriggs, a senior fellow for policy studies at the Washington-based Family Research Council, whose political arm launched a letter-writing campaign urging Secretary Duncan to rescind the job offer.

In his new job, which he started July 6, Mr. Jennings is in charge of overseeing the federal role in school safety—which, most recently, included a role in dealing with outbreaks of swine flu in school—and managing nearly $700 million in federal funding for grant programs that involve mental health, drug and violence prevention, and character education.

Mr. Jennings, who was a Barack Obama supporter, fundraiser, and donor during the president’s 2008 campaign, was not available for comment for this article.

But by picking one of the nation’s leading advocates for gay and lesbian students for this post, Mr. Duncan and the Obama administration appear to be signaling the importance of improving school climate for such students.

“This is a pretty big deal, and it says a lot about Arne Duncan,” said Bob Chase, a board member of GLSEN and a former president of the National Education Association.

In March, students from GLSEN chapters visited Mr. Duncan to share their personal stories and the data behind the bullying and harassment students are subjected to based on actual or perceived sexual orientation. In April, the secretary highlighted, in a statement about school safety, the need to protect students who are victims of harassment and bullying because of their sexual orientation. And earlier this month, Jill Biden, the wife of Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., spoke at GLSEN’s awards banquet.

As an assistant deputy secretary, Mr. Jennings is not at the top rung of the Education Department’s leadership, but his appointment hasn’t escaped critical notice.

In addition to the letter-writing campaign featured on the Web site of the Family Research Council, that group tried to find allies in Congress to fight the selection, said Mr. Spriggs, although the appointment did not need Senate confirmation.

He added that his group hasn’t taken such action regarding other posts filled by gay or lesbian appointees in the Obama administration.

The reason for the Family Research Council’s opposition in this instance, Mr. Spriggs said, was its view that Mr. Jennings and GLSEN promote a pro-homosexuality agenda in schools, and one that is hostile to people of faith.

Other groups, including Catholic Online and Americans For Truth About Homosexuality, had taken a public stand against the appointment.

Officials of GLSEN said they had expected such opposition. “The appointment itself is a wonderful affirmation of the fact that people are not buying these kinds of arguments anymore,” said Eliza Byard, the new executive director of GLSEN.

High-Profile Organization

Other groups, meanwhile, see GLSEN’s impact positively.

“On the national level, I think they have served as the conscience for schools to ensure harassment of all sorts is reduced and eradicated,” Susan Gorin, the executive director of the National Association of School Psychologists, based in Bethesda, Md., said of Mr. Jennings’ former organization.

Mr. Jennings started GLSEN in 1990 as a local, volunteer organization of 70 gay and lesbian educators in the Boston area. At the time, there were just two gay-straight alliances in the country; such groups bring together students of different sexual orientations to address issues affecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. Now, there are some 4,000 groups in U.S. schools, according to GLSEN.

The organization was an outgrowth of deeply personal experiences and torments Mr. Jennings experienced as a child in conservative areas of the South, growing up so poor that the good times meant living in a double-wide trailer, according to his 2006 memoir, Mama’s Boy, Preacher’s Son.

Mr. Jennings describes his father as strict and rather intolerant, and his mother as a passionate and dedicated woman who did not want her own lack of education to become her son’s fate. He writes that he was teased and bullied in school for being different—and for being smart—but muddled through and made it to Harvard.

He later got a master’s degree from Teachers College, Columbia University, and an M.B.A. from New York University. A high school history teacher, he recounts seeing gay students struggle with the same difficulties he had faced. He eventually gave up teaching to found GLSEN as a nonprofit organization, and became its executive director in 1995.

“Kevin is a classroom teacher who saw something was wrong and took the enormous step of taking his entire career and doing something about it,” Ms. Byard said.
A Tragic Lesson in Anti-Gay Bullying

By Joleen Hanlon

If you were taunted with words like “fag” and “dyke” daily in school, to what extent would this affect you? Perhaps the experience would keep you hiding in the closet for years, send you into a depression, or lower your academic achievement. Maybe the homophobic culture of your school would convince you that gay people are inferior, and you might start using the ubiquitous phrase “that’s so gay” to describe every unfavorable person, place, or thing.

Or, if the bullying were unrelenting, perhaps you might do the unimaginable: commit suicide.

That was the tragic consequence in April for a 6th grade Massachusetts student named Carl Walker-Hoover, a victim of anti-gay bullying. People who knew Carl described him as flamboyant and effeminate. He defied gender expectations. Although he did not identify as gay, students harassed Carl daily, calling him names and saying disdainfully that he acted like a girl.

Months of being taunted and harassed finally became too much for Carl to bear. On April 6, he hanged himself with an extension cord in his Springfield, Mass., home while his mother was cooking dinner downstairs.

This 11-year-old sent the world a powerful message, one demonstrating just how painful words can be. His death also provided educators with another illustration of the need to address homophobic attitudes in schools.

In fact, sexual orientation is, according to a 2005 nationwide survey, the second most common reason for repeated harassment in schools.

“Words such as ‘gay,’ ‘fag,’ and ‘queer’ are often used as the most hurtful insults students can throw at one another.”

Carl’s mother, Sirdeaner Walker, is doing what many educators are afraid to do: taking a stand against anti-LGBT bullying and advocating for schools to make meaningful changes. She is sharing her son’s story as a way of educating the public, and gave permission to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, or GLSEN, to discuss it within the context of the national Day of Silence, an event held in thousands of schools to raise awareness of anti-LGBT bullying. (This year’s Day of Silence was held April 17.)

My sister, Kaitlyn Hanlon, was Carl’s summer camp counselor. She organized the Day of Silence at Springfield College to commemorate Carl and to educate the community about the serious consequences of anti-LGBT attitudes in schools. The extended Walker family attended the event, which, ironically, fell on Carl’s birthday.

Tragically, the day prior to the Day of Silence, another 11-year-old boy took his life in Atlanta, after frequent anti-gay bullying. Fifth grader Jaheem Herrera’s circumstances were eerily similar to Carl’s. They both had reached out to school officials for help, but had no faith that enough was being done to change their situation. Both children decided that the only way to stop the harassment was to hang themselves.

Despite Americans’ changing attitudes toward LGBT people and the existence of more-positive portrayals of gay characters in the media, children are still receiving the message that it is abnormal for two people of the same gender to love each other. Words such as “gay,” “fag,” and “queer” are often used as the most hurtful insults students can throw at one another. Two men showing any affection is frowned upon. When I watched the presidential inauguration with 2nd graders, the children exclaimed, “Ewww! That’s gross!” as the male politicians kissed one another on the cheek.

At a young age, children begin to use the word “gay” as a put-down. Recently, a 2nd grade girl called her classmate “gay” because he was walking with his arm around another boy. I have heard children refer to the word “gay” as the “g-word,” implying a belief that this word is not appropriate to say when speaking with a teacher. This is not surprising, considering that most students have never heard a teacher use the word “gay.” Imagine how profound it would be for students to hear their teacher speak about gay people in a neutral context, rather than within the usual, negative context.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are a minority group that deserves to be acknowledged and respected in schools, in the same way that diverse ethnic and religious groups are. An increasing number of American families are headed by same-sex couples, and gay youths are coming out at younger ages. These children should be able to see themselves and their families represented in the curriculum. Educators need to respond to these changes in society and prepare children to interact with diverse people in respectful ways.

Instead, many teachers ignore homophobic language or avoid a candid dialogue on this issue. As a result, students learn that homophobic attitudes are acceptable. We
should address this problem by initiating conversations with our students about anti-gay bias, and by discussing LGBT people in the curriculum. It is very simple to tie these themes into lessons about family diversity, respect, the civil rights movement, the gay rights movement, the Holocaust, discrimination, and other contexts. Unfortunately, many aspects of U.S. history that involve LGBT people have been needlessly censored.

Why are these types of discussions being left out of our classrooms? Many teachers have told me that they are afraid of parent backlash and are unsure if their administrators would support them. Others are not prepared for how to discuss these issues in age-appropriate contexts.

Professional development would help mitigate some of these obstacles. If such programs were initiated by the school administration, members of the entire school community would understand that they are encouraged and expected to address anti-gay attitudes. This awareness would help decrease levels of fear and better prepare teachers to prevent and respond to such harmful language.

Carl Walker-Hoover was only one of countless students who have been hurt by anti-gay harassment. Many of them suffer consequences that can include risky behavior, depression, poor academics, and homelessness. But sometimes, as Carl's story shows, the consequences also can be fatal. Like Carl and Jaheem, a 17-year-old Ohio student named Eric Mohat committed suicide, in 2007, after being bullied for his perceived sexual orientation. The following year, an 8th grade California student, Lawrence King, was shot and killed in his school. The classmate who killed him had repeatedly harassed Lawrence for being gay.

According to research by GLSEN in 2007, 86.2 percent of LGBT youths reported being verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation, and almost half were physically harassed.

We can hope that educators will draw courage from the example of Carl Walker-Hoover's mother and do their part to help put an end to this bullying. The lesson from these tragedies should be clear: It is long past time that we create positive changes in our schools that can lessen hateful speech and avoid real heartbreak.

Joleen Hanlon is a New York City elementary school teacher and a member of NYQueer, an organization for educators.

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COMMENTARY

Reframing Bullying in Middle Schools

By Sarah Shulkind

The following article is dedicated to Dillon, who was tragically killed in a car accident last summer.

Lost “Loser” and “Fag” are scribbled on binders littering a classroom. A huddle of “popular” girls glare at the classmate they’ve chosen as outsider of the week. A broad-shouldered 9th grade boy shoves his scrappy, bespectacled friend of yesterday into the stretch of lockers.

Bullying. We know it when we see it. Though we bemoan such behavior, it’s almost as if we expect it from adolescents. Even educators rarely do anything about it. And when such incidents are publicized by the finger-wagging, tongue-clicking media, they implicitly blame the kids. “Watch out America!” the headlines warn. Adolescents are brutish, evil, aggressive, and immoral. Or are they?

Perhaps it is time we stopped pointing fingers at adolescents and look instead at the culture that has produced rampant cruelty in many public middle and high schools.

Many of our schools are anonymous and unproductive. The average California middle school has over 1,000 students, and many exceed 2,000. Classrooms are overcrowded, teachers overworked and underprepared, and buildings are falling apart. Bars on the windows filter the sunlight, metal detectors block the doors, and security guards watch over everything, their walkie-talkies crackling. More time is spent on discipline than on teaching.

Those who make a mistake are tossed out, the result of one-strike, zero-tolerance policies intended to make schools safer. When schools operate like prisons, why are we surprised that kids behave like convicts?

We live in an era of educational accountability, when it seems like all that matters to political leaders is test scores and the catchphrase, “No Child Left Behind.” But it just may be that our obsession with deciles and percentiles is getting in the way of the larger, more important goal of education—raising healthy, productive citizens.

Adolescents will not grow up to be caring and compassionate adults of their own volition. Kids are not good or bad. Kids make good or bad decisions. The trick is to teach our children to treat each other with respect. We can do that by infusing decency and compassion into everything we do.

Lessons from Bullying

We don’t have to accept bullying as a part of growing up. When the Los Angeles middle school where I work experienced a series of bullying incidents, my colleagues and I decided against simply suspending those responsible. Instead, we decided to take steps to change the school culture. We embraced the problem as a teachable moment. We facilitated a structured, student-centered discussion about their experiences with bullying. We did not view this lesson as
an unrelated interruption in the academic schedule. Teaching tolerance, we decided, was as much a part of our mission as algebra or social studies.

We knew we had been successful when Dillon, the coolest boy in the 8th grade, turned to Freddy, a socially awkward, stuttering peer, and said, “When I first got to this school, I was fat and wore thick glasses. All the kids were mean to me, and I used to sit alone at lunch everyday.” Dillon went on to explain that Freddy suggested they sit together, and it changed his entire middle school experience. Then, in front of incredulous teachers and fellow students, Dillon began to sob. And the room full of middle schoolers we so readily assume are insensitive, sat in a silent, respectful trance.

Later that morning, I witnessed students surround Dillon in support. Some sat next to him. Some stroked his hand or wiped his tears. Some were the very same students involved in the bullying incidents that spurred these conversations in the first place. Brutish or tender—we get the behavior we expect. It’s all in the messages we send, the attitudes we display, and the expectations we communicate. This scene is not pie-in-the-sky idealism. In fact, it’s pragmatic. It’s what you get when you teach kids, deliberately and explicitly, to care.

It’s time we reexamine our national priorities. We are focusing on test scores at the expense of meeting the needs of the whole child. Bullying is just a symptom of a sick school culture. Reading and math are important, no doubt about it. But it’s also possible to teach kids to consider the common good, to act ethically, and to work with their fellow students to make the school community safe and healthy for all. Gripping about bullying adolescents is not enough. It’s time for the adults to grow up and act.

Sarah Shulkind is the principal of the middle school at Milken Community High School in Los Angeles, California. She has worked as an educator at a number of schools across the country and written education policy for the U.S. Department of Education.

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Commentary

The Shadow Side of Schooling

What Jungian Psychology Can Tell Us About Bullying

By Kirsten Olson

On March 24 of this year, The New York Times ran a front-page article on a boy from Fayetteville, Ark., who has, since the age of 12, been the repeated victim of physical and emotional attack by his peers at school. The young man, Billy, tall and lanky, became the target of bullies when he was beaten up in a middle school bathroom for telling his mom he had received a prank call. That attack was followed by another beating on the school bus, and another in woodshop in which, his mother says, “he kept spitting blood out.” A student in Spanish class punched Billy so hard that “his braces were caught on the inside of his cheek.” Bullies moved on to creating a Facebook page for “Every One That Hates Billy.” School officials have largely ignored these incidents, according to the article, or have named Billy as part of the problem. In the face of school system inaction, Billy’s parents have sued the bullies themselves and are considering legal proceedings against the district.

The Times reporter is noncommittal about the reasons for targeting Billy: “Maybe because he was so tall, or wore glasses then, or has a learning disability that affects his reading comprehension. Or maybe some kids were just bored. Or angry.”

How are we to understand this boy and his plight? What should be “done” about Billy? How are we to make sense of incidents of egregious violence against a child in a school system that surely considers itself “safe”?

Looking around the blogosphere for reaction to Billy (the article almost immediately became one of the top most e-mailed articles on The New York Times Website), I found at least 40 Internet sites where the article was being discussed live. Such blogosphere responses run the gamut, but there was a recurring theme in some responses, many from individuals who were formerly bullied themselves. Said one: “Sounds like time for self-defense classes to me. … Break one or two elbows and they’ll lay off.” Another posted comment read: “You set Billy up with classes for a martial art that fits him personally, and then you take him there religiously and work with him at home. You teach that kid to kick the holy living crap out of those little punks, and then you tell him that if they start @$%# he doesn’t back down till it ends with the other kid in a cast.” One blog commenter said simply, “This is why God made 2 x 4’s.” (www.newsvine.com)

Several dozen posts looked at the role of parents in bullying, and were deeply disturbed by the school system’s lack of effective response. A strong majority, however, recommended that the victim strike back. “Billy needs to be a bit more proactive. He should hunt the thugs down and beat the sh** out of them with a baseball bat.” (www.freerepublic.com)

One post noted that time itself would take care of Billy’s bullies. “This is what school was like for me, almost the entire time, from kindergarten up. I took a lot of beatings, gave a few back. … If I could talk to this Billy kid, I’d tell him: Dude, Google these assholes in a decade. They won’t be there. They will have made no impression at all on the world, or any world that matters. … You will win, dude. Eventually.” (www.zenarchery.com)

Having just read a wonderful, although largely underrated book by Clive Harber called Schooling as Violence ( Routlege-Falmer, 2004), in which the author makes a scholarly, straightforward case for the fact that schooling itself is often responsible for violence—it initiates violence and reproduces and naturalizes violence, he says, through its authoritarian power structures, oppressive pedagogy, constant
control and surveillance—I wondered about the lack of this particular critique on Internet sites. (Perhaps I didn’t find it.)

School bullying is not new, as we know, and is a chronic institutional problem leading to psychological impairment, depression, and suicide. (See the site bullyonline.org for a definitive look at the ongoing effects of bullying on schoolchildren.) On the other hand, in a recent Education Week Commentary, Colby College professor Lyn Mikel Brown warns against the labeling of individual kids as “the problem” in incidents of aggression in school systems, and emphasizes how important it is to build coalitions of non-bullies and allies against cruelty. (Brown also notes that bully prevention is a huge for-profit business.) (See Education Week, March 5, 2008).

“What if we were to look at bullying as an expression of violence not just of individuals, but also of systems of individuals caught in an institutional order?”

Beyond our sense of sickening unhappiness with the particularities of the Arkansas student’s case—being attacked while working on a miniature house in woodshop, unable to accurately recall the names of all his attackers because there have been so many—what if we were to look at bullying as an expression of violence not just of individuals, but also of systems of individuals caught in an institutional order that can be psychologically alienating, disrespectful, and oppressive? That bullying is not just hostility and anger among individuals gone awry, but also an expression of the shadow side of schooling?

In Jungian psychology, our “shadow” side is the energy we repress when parts of us are rejected, controlled, hidden. The shadow can be personal or collective—shadow energy can emerge in great bursts of destructive force that can be personally annihilating when negative experience is not acknowledged. When children in school feel the need to victimize, torment, and attack each other, what institutional cues are they responding to? Where does all that negative energy in the system come from? In the case of Fayetteville and Billy, what makes boys want to approach someone waiting at a bus before 8 a.m. and punch that kid’s face, film it on their cellphones, and then watch it with friends at school?

While some psychologists make a case that bullying is a transaction between individuals, bullying is also a systemic problem, arising out of a culture of hostility, fear, shame, excessive competition, and lack of respect for difference. If we create school systems in which compulsion, coercion, hierarchy, and fear of failure are central features of the academic experience, and essential to motivating and controlling students, then the energy from those negative experiences will seek expression. In Billy’s case, parents and administrators have seemed unable even to agree that harmful psychological experiences are occurring. Do we, collectively, have that essential problem, too? Are we denying reality in our school systems?

One of the great obstacles in reforming American education has been our difficulty, as educators, in “owning” the negative aspects of schooling: the ways that, historically, schools have diminished students, denied them their individuality, forced cognitive conformity, and profoundly punished difference. Shadow energy can only be owned and made generative if it is seen and acknowledged. Bullying can be regarded as the shadow side of compulsory schooling when it fails to serve students with affirmative support, engaging pedagogy, and a sense of relevancy of instruction. The case of Billy may be an opportunity for us to look at the negative effects generated by some of our schooling methods, and to own and change them, for good.

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Ten Ways to Move Beyond BULLY PREVENTION (And Why We Should)

By Lyn Mikel Brown

Seven years ago, I helped found a nonprofit organization committed to changing the culture for girls. Our work was based on the health-psychology notion of “hardiness”—a way of talking about resilience that not only identifies what girls need to thrive in an increasingly complex and stressful world, but also makes clear that adults are responsible for creating safe spaces for girls to grow, think critically, and work together to make their lives better.

As a result of this work, I’ve grown concerned lately that “bully prevention” has all but taken over the way we think about, talk about, and respond to the relational lives of children and youths in schools. So, from our group’s strength-based approach, I offer 10 ways to move beyond whatever is too often being sold as a panacea for schools’ social ills, and is becoming, I fear, a problem in and of itself:

**Stop labeling kids.** Bully-prevention programs typically put kids into three categories: bullies, victims, and bystanders. Labeling children in these ways denies what we know to be true: We are all complex beings with the capacity to do harm and to do good, sometimes within the same hour. It also makes the child the problem, which downplays the important role of parents, teachers, the school system, a provocative and powerful media culture, and societal injustices children experience every day. Labeling kids bullies, for that matter, contributes to the negative climate and name-calling we’re trying to address.

**Talk accurately about behavior.** If it’s sexual harassment, call it sexual harassment; if it’s homophobia, call it homophobia; and so forth. To lump disparate behaviors under the generic “bullying” is to efface real differences that affect young people’s lives. Bullying is a broad term that de-genders, de-races, de-ethnizes school safety. Because of this, as the sexual-harassment expert Nan Stein has noted, embracing anti-bullying legislation can actually undermine the legal rights and protections offered by anti-harassment laws. Calling behaviors what they are helps us educate children about their rights, affirms their realities, encourages more-complex and meaningful solutions, opens up a dialogue, invites children to participate in social change, and ultimately protects them.

**Move beyond the individual.** Children’s behaviors are greatly affected by their life histories and social contexts. To understand why a child uses aggression toward others, it’s important to understand what impact race, ethnicity, social class, gender, religion, and ability has on his or her daily experiences in school—that is, how do these realities affect the kinds of attention and resources the child receives, where he fits in, whether she feels marginal or privileged in the school. Such differences in social capital, cultural capital, and power relations deeply affect a child’s psychological and relational experiences in school.

**Reflect reality.** Many schools across the country have adopted an approach developed by the Norwegian educator Dan Olweus, the “Olweus Bullying Prevention Program,” even though it has not been effectively evaluated with U.S. samples. Described as a “universal intervention for the reduction and prevention of bully/victim problems,” the Olweus program downplays those differences that make a difference. But even when bully-prevention programs have been adequately evaluated, the University of Illinois’ Dorothy Espelage argues, they often show less-than-positive results in urban schools or with minority populations. “We do not have a one-size-fits-all school system,” she reminds us. Because the United States has a diversity of race, ethnicity, and language, and inequalities between schools, bully-prevention efforts here need to reflect that reality.

**Adjust expectations.** We hold kids to ideals and expectations that we as adults could never meet. We expect girls to ingest a steady diet of media “mean girls” and always be nice and kind, and for boys to engage a culture of violence and never lash out. We expect kids never to express anger to adults, never to act in mean or hurtful ways to one another, even though they may spend much of the day in schools they don’t feel safe in, and with teachers and other students who treat them with disrespect. Moreover, we expect kids to behave in ways most of us don’t even value very much: to obey all the rules (regardless of their perceived or real unfairness), to never resist or refuse or fight back. It’s important to promote consistent consequences—the hallmarks of most bully-prevention programs—but it’s also critically important to create space for honest conversations about who benefits from certain norms and rules and who doesn’t. If we allow kids to speak out, to think critically and question unfairness, we provide the groundwork for civic engagement.

**Listen to kids.** In her book Other People’s Children, Lisa Delpit talks about the importance of “listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but also hearts and minds.” Again, consistent consequences are important; used well, they underpin privilege and protect those who are less powerful. But to make such a system work, schools have to listen to all students. It’s the only way to ensure that staff members are not using discipline and consistent consequences simply to promote the status quo.

**Embrace grassroots movements.** There’s nothing better than student-initiated
change. Too many bully-prevention programs are top-heavy with adult-generated rules, meetings, and trainings. We need to empower young people. This includes being on the lookout for positive grassroots resistance, ready to listen to and support and sometimes channel youth movements when they arise. We need to listen to students, take up their just causes, understand the world they experience, include them in the dialogue about school norms and rules, and use their creative energy to illuminate and challenge unfairness.

**Be proactive, not reactive.** In Maine, we have a nationally recognized Civil Rights Team Project. Youth-led, school-based preventive teams work to increase safety, educate their peers, and combat hate violence, prejudice, and harassment in more than 250 schools across the state. This kind of proactive youth-empowerment work is sorely needed, but is too often lost in the midst of zero-tolerance policies and top-down bullying-prevention efforts. And yet such efforts work. According to a study conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, or GLSEN, youth-led gay-straight alliances make schools safer for all students.

**Build coalitions.** Rather than bully prevention, let’s emphasize ally- and coalition-building. We need to affirm and support the definition of coalition that activist Bernice Johnson Reagon suggests: work that’s difficult, exhausting, but necessary “for all of us to feel that this is our world.”

**Accentuate the positive.** Instead of labeling kids, let’s talk about them as potential leaders, affirm their strengths, and believe that they can do good, brave, remarkable things. The path to safer, less violent schools lies less in our control over children than in appreciating their need to have more control in their lives, to feel important, to be visible, to have an effect on people and situations.

Bully prevention has become a huge for-profit industry. Let’s not let the steady stream of training sessions, rules, policies, consequence charts, and no-bullying posters keep us from listening well, thinking critically, and creating approaches that meet the singular needs of our schools and communities.

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**CHAT: Cyberbullying and Schools**

**SAMEER HINDUJA** and **JUSTIN W. PATCHIN** are Internet-safety experts who are co-authors of the new book Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying. Dr. Hinduja is an assistant professor of criminology and criminal justice at Florida Atlantic University, and Dr. Patchin is an assistant professor of criminal justice at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire. Together they maintain www.cyberbullying.us, an information clearinghouse on cyberbullying.

**Q** Is it wise to go on Facebook or other such venues in order to understand our students’ social network?

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: Yes, I think it is important that teachers have a good understanding about the kind of activities their students are into. You will definitely learn something about their interests and relationships. Be prepared for what you might find, though. If you see evidence of inappropriate behavior, what actions are you prepared to take? Another question worth considering is whether or not it is appropriate for teachers to become “friends” with their students on these social networking sites. We have been discussing this issue a lot lately and simply acknowledge that there can be some great benefits to such a relationship but not without some potential risks. In fact some districts are moving to prohibit such relationships. Certainly this is a discussion you should be having within your district.

**Q** How young are the children or at which grade does this begin?

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: We see children as young as 4th or 5th grade reporting experiences with cyberbullying though the behaviors really seem to jump between 6th and 7th grade. Accordingly, we think it is really important to educate 5th and 6th graders about these issues.

**Q** From my research concerning cyberbullying prevention education, helping young people to recognize that though there are not speed limits and stop lights online, there are indeed “cybernets” that all users need to abide by and that every action taken online has a consequence as the best message in prevention. Do you agree?

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: Yes, we agree it is important to stress to youth that there are rules and consequences associated with violations of those rules. One of the things we try to stress to students when we speak to them is the concept of integrity – doing the right thing, even when no one is looking. Of course very often no one is looking at what youth are doing online. The concept of integrity can be difficult for some younger groups to grasp, but we suggest that everyone knows what the “right thing” is—
they just need to be strong and do what they know is right. We also talk about the fact that it is actually very easy to track cyberbullying behaviors because there is always a written record. So, they need to be careful what they put online.

**Q** Do you have suggestions for materials to give parents to discuss bullying at school?

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: We have a lot of resources on our web site www.cyberbullying.us that teachers and parents can use to introduce the topic of cyberbullying. Feel free to download and disseminate these resources to folks in your community.

**Q** Do you have any activities or lessons that can really convey the notion that the Internet is a public place? That there is no such thing as anonymity? Despite the varied teaching styles and lessons, there are a few students who still believe they can ‘hide’ behind pseudonyms online.

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: We haven’t yet developed any formal lessons that other educators can easily use, but in our presentations with students we often use one particular example to stress this point. We obtained the AOL Instant Messaging screen name of a “friend of a friend.” With this one piece of information we were able to create an 80 slide PowerPoint presentation with various pieces of personal and identifying information that we found online, including: cell phone number, address, hundreds of pictures, medical history, picture of her car, location of her church, sibling names and pictures, etc. etc. So the point we stress is that anything someone puts online can often times be tracked back to them — and that once something is put on the Internet it is impossible to completely remove it. We also talk about IP addresses and the fact that every computer has a digital address that can be traced.

**Q** Some parents feel they are intruding on their child’s privacy to “spy” on his or her online activity. These same parents do not let their kindergarten child alone at the park or their pre-teen at the mall by themselves because they understand the danger. How do you compel parents to understand the dangers and the need for a parental presence with online activity?

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: I think it is important that parents monitor the Internet behavior of their children. Perhaps what is necessary is a presentation to the parents of your school/district that highlights some of the problems kids can get into online. We don’t particularly like the idea of secretly spying on a child’s online activities — what do you do if you find a problem? If parents choose to monitor the behaviors of their children, either through software or simply just by looking at the browser history, etc., they should definitely tell their kids that they will be doing these things. Violating the trust relationship by secretly spying is perhaps too great a risk (depending on your unique situation, of course). Besides that, telling them that you will be looking may act as a deterrent to them if they are tempted to do something inappropriate. So, in short, it is important that parents keep an eye on what their kids are doing online, but they need to make sure their children know that they are looking (and why they are doing it).

**Q** Do you believe that most cyberbullying occurs during or outside of school hours?

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: It is clear that the majority of cyberbullying behaviors are initiated away from school (while kids are at home using their own technology). That certainly doesn’t suggest, however, that this isn’t the school’s problem. As you all know well, what is done said away from school can often have a significant impact at school.

**Q** At what point does what appears on the Internet become a school issue/ responsibility in terms of discipline?

SAMEER HINDUJA: When it substantially disrupts learning, interferes with the educational process, compromises the value system that the school district and school are trying to foster, infringes upon another student’s rights (civil rights or their ability to learn without distraction and harassment), when it is obscene, when school-owned technology is used to mistreat others, and when it involves a school-sponsored activity or a school-spon- sored resource. With this said, we encourage informal responses and only suggest formal responses (changes of placement, suspensions, expulsions) in severe cases.

**Q** My students will admit that cyberbullying is common but won’t admit how hurtful and damaging it is. Therefore, some students think it’s ok because the receiver can just shut off the apparatus used to bully. How does an “adult” get to the kids to convince them about the damage inflicted by cyberbullying?

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: Well, the simple answer to this is just have them talk to John Halligan, Tina Meier, Debbie Johnston, and Mark Neblett. They all had children who committed suicide after experiencing cyberbullying. That’s evidence that it can be extremely dam- aging. The whole “just turn the computer” argument bothers me because that doesn’t necessarily stop the bullying. I guess it boils down to teaching empathy and trying to get youth to see the incident from the perspective of the victim. This can be difficult for younger children because the part of their brain that allows for this isn’t fully developed until middle or even late adolescence. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that bullying is bullying — no matter where it is occurring.

**Q** Is there any template for drafting a computer/Internet use policy for the students and parents?

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: We have a couple of resources available with this in mind. First, on our web site we have a sample Internet Use Contract and Cell Phone Use Contract that schools/parents can use to make sure everyone is on the same page about what is expected. Second, in our book we detail the elements of an effective school policy concerning cyberbullying and also talk about Acceptable Use Policies. It is really important that you involve all constituencies in drafting your own policy (teachers, administrators, parents, and yes, even students!)

**Q** What is the most important thing a child can do when he/she first suspects he/she is being cyber-bullied?

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: Talk to an adult! Parent, teacher, school counselor, or someone else they trust to help them.

**Q** What grades/ages are most affected by cyberbullying? And at what grade level does it usually begin?

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: We see most evidence of cyberbullying in 7th and 8th grade (not surprisingly this is also a time when traditional bullying is common). We see a dramatic shift from 6th to 7th grade though have had examples of it occurring in elementary school.

**Q** I work for a professional association that represents school principals at all school levels. What specific strategies can you recommend to school principals generally in this area and what strategies should principals use when faced with a specific allegation of cyber bullying?

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: First of all principals can convene an in-service or workshop to educate
the staff at the school about cyberbullying. The principal needs to make it clear to the staff that these behaviors will not be tolerated and get involved in investigating if something is brought to their attention. If the principal simply tries to dismiss these behaviors that sends a strong message to students and staff alike that cyberbullying isn’t a serious problem. So, principals should educate themselves about these issues and provide opportunities for the staff at their school to learn more about how to identify, prevent, and respond to cyberbullying.

Q Do you believe there is a way to safely use the internet in school to teach students about the dangers of cyberbullying?

JUSTIN W. PATCHIN: Yes, depending on the grade level, a facilitator could show examples of cyberbullying and then discuss the incident with students so that they learn the effects and consequences of such behavior. This would probably require a smaller group, but I think it could be effective. I would say this would be a good strategy for upperclassmen and once they are trained to understand the effects, they could give presentations to younger students.

Q Is one gender more susceptible to cyberbullying than the other?

SAMEER HINDUJA: Our research has found that both boys and girls are equally as likely to have experienced cyberbullying, though the types of behaviors can be different. I should point out that there is some research that we are aware of that suggests girls are more likely to be involved – it really just depends on how cyberbullying is defined.

Q What is the law regarding Cyberbullying?

SAMEER HINDUJA: The law regarding cyberbullying is ever evolving. Please see our fact sheets at www.cyberbullying.us/resources.php - we’ll continue to update these are new developments become known to us.
Resources on Bullying

NOW FEATURING INTERACTIVE HYPERLINKS.
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Bullies and Victims: Information for Parents
http://www.nasponline.org/resources/handouts/revisedPDFs/bulliesvictims.pdf
National Association of School Psychologists

Cyberbullying Research Center
http://www.cyberbullying.us/

The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Middle School Students: Findings from the 2007 National School Climate Survey
Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network

The Principal’s Perspective: School Safety, Bullying and Harassment
http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/2294.html
Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, in collaboration with the National Association of Secondary School Principals

Stop Bullying Now!
http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov
Department of Health and Human Services
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