

Schools take steps to protect students from bullying

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LAS CRUCES, NM — Christopher Burton understands how cruel kids can be. He said he was "tormented" for his appearance, experiencing beatings and receiving life-threatening letters from gang members.

"Bullying has always been a part of my life since I started going to school," said Burton, an openly gay senior at Las Cruces High School. "I was Tased in school - on school property - by another student. This was the same student who had just been bullying me the entire time I was in middle school."

According to statistics provided by the Family Pride Foundation, an advocacy agency for at-risk youth, 28 percent of gay youth drop out of school because of physical or verbal harassment, and gay youth are six times more likely than straight teens to attempt suicide.

Bullying not only targets youth who are gay, lesbian, transgender or bisexual, but all children considered different by their peers.

In Las Cruces Public Schools, between 15 percent and 20 percent of students have been bullied and between 15 percent to 25 percent of students have bullied others, according to Nancy Parker a counselor at Camino Real Middle School who is helping launch a districtwide, anti-bullying initiative. In middle school specifically, where bullying behavior tends to peak, 30 percent of students experience bullying.

"The district has made a commitment to revisiting this because right now it's a matter of life and death. That's just how serious this is," Parker said. "It's become pervasive, it is ongoing. It is almost the new normal. And that scares the dickens out of me."

12-point plan

The program, called Bully Proofing our Schools, involves a 12-point plan for addressing bullying, said Martin Greer, lead supervising school psychologist and supervisor of counseling and guidance services for LCPS.

"We are really trying to emphasize this isn't a one-time training. We want teachers and kids to understand that we are going to be consistently on this, we want to keep it up," he said.

The program includes updating the disciplinary plan, training students and staff and working with parents. It also involves collecting new data, and the district plans to launch an online bullying survey that schools can access. At Camino Real Middle School, there is a more extensive data collection project, involving focus groups to document student experiences.

"The message is that we're not going to support bullying and we'll exercise discipline on those that do," Superintendent Stan Rounds said. "We want a good road map so we're consistent and reasonable in our approach. The end game is we want to stop it."

Ebb and flow

Bullying escalates in third grade, becomes most prevalent in middle school and then starts to diminish in high school, Parker said. Statistics for high school students may be lower because students drop out because they feel unsafe, insecure and unhappy as a result of being bullied, she said.

Greer said that some students bully for social power, others because they come from dysfunctional families and others because of abuse. Greer said part of the Bully Proofing our Schools program involves psychological screenings to evaluate bullies for aggressive tendencies and victims for depression, anger, suicidal thinking, retaliation and the level of trauma.

If left unchecked, kids who are bullied can suffer from depression and anxiety into adulthood, Greer said.

This type of trauma led to a school shooting at Zia Middle School in 1992.

"Fortunately the other student survived and recovered, but essentially the kid was tired of being bullied," Greer said.

School programs

Along with the new districtwide initiative, schools handle bullying on an individual basis, hosting programs that inform students and encouraging them to speak out against bullying behavior.

At Picacho Middle School, a group of students participated in a two-day training with the Safe School Ambassadors program, a national program that trains bystanders to speak up. At San Andres High School, media students produced an anti-bullying video. At Valley View Elementary School, students performed skits on bullying and Conlee Elementary School students signed an anti-bullying pledge and marched in an anti-bullying parade.

Student groups are another important piece in creating a positive school environment. At Las Cruces High School, members of the pom squad and students with hair dyed pink participate in the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) which aims to promote solidarity, faculty sponsor Daniel Ruben said.

While the club's mission is honorable, it's not always easy.

"We can't keep up GSA posters on the walls at school," Ruben said. "They get torn down very quickly."

Ruben said that when he first decided to sponsor the club, bullying was not a primary concern, but since then it has become weekly topic.

"As trust was formed, that's when people started staying after and saying, 'Hey, Mr. Ruben, this is happening in this class,'" he said.

Christopher De La Rosa, president of the Las Cruces High School GSA, said he wants to create a safe haven for any student who needs it.

Burton, a senior, said the support of the GSA was "incredible."

"Just knowing there are people in the school that understand what we go through, and even though we suffer the slings and arrows of insults and horrific scenes, or beatings, we just know there are people there that can pick us back up and stand in front of us or beside us and tell these people, 'no, they are just like you and me, they just have an different opinion of life,'" he said.

"Bullying, I've seen it all my life. And it hurts, but I've learned that bullying has no affect on my soul because the people that I love and care about are there for me and are able to support me," Burton said.

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Warning signs of bullying

- Avoiding certain situations, people or places.
- Pretending to be sick so that he or she doesn't have to go to school.
- Changes in behavior, such as being withdrawn and passive, being overly active and aggressive, or being self-destructive.
- Frequent crying or feeling sad. •Signs of low self-esteem.
- Being unwilling to speak or showing signs of fear when asked about certain situations, people, or places.
- Signs of injuries.
- Suddenly receiving lower grades or showing signs of learning problems.
- Recurrent unexplained physical symptoms such as stomach pains and fatigue.