



Tackling bullying in school and online is a major concern for school administrators, teachers and parents.

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# No children left behind

With classes back in session, schools and experts grapple with bullying and its impact on learning

By **LU HANESSIAN**  
For the Courier-Post

Another school year is under way and as millions of students get settled into new classrooms with their teachers and learn to navigate the sea of new and familiar faces, there is one subject that may become an inhibiting factor in their education this year.

It's not teacher layoffs, fewer tech resources or concern about the economy.

It's bullying.

According to Stuart Green, founding director of the New Jersey Coalition of Bullying Awareness and Prevention, it's a very serious problem that "leaves a lot of children behind."

"Kids are inhibited and distracted," says Green. "They're preoccupied about self-protection. Bullying takes their eye off the ball of learning. Unless kids feel secure and included in the life of a school, they do not learn adequately."

"I think it's a very frustrating topic for schools because bullying is so covert," says Kim Pinto, coordinator of New Jersey Child Assault Prevention, based in Gloucester County.

"A lot of people don't consider it bullying until it's physical. The black eye. I don't think it's taken as seriously as it needs to be taken. Schools often don't want to deal with it."

But schools are faced with the reality of bullying — in all of its com-



In Washington Township, Orchard Valley Middle School Principal Steve Buono (far left) and faculty encourage a bully-free atmosphere and host a Challenge Day program. Also pictured are Nancy Mazgajewski (from left), Pat Narducci, Linda Wienckoski and Stefani Vanletuven.

FAYE MURMAN  
Courier-Post

plex forms — and many are at a loss for effective solutions. Part of this frustration lies in our perceptions and mythologies surrounding bullying, as well as our own personal stories.

Pinto says, "It depends on how the adult has processed their own history. If this teacher experienced bullying as a child and now has worked through it, he or she is going to be a great person to help a

child out.

"There's still a thought process that it's a normal part of childhood," says Pinto. "There's a perception that bullying makes you stronger in the end. Are there people who come out stronger? Yes. But that's not the majority."

Green explains, "Up until about 40 years ago, we knew nothing

# Bullying/Creative programs that inspire empathy show success

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about childhood bullying and everything we thought we knew was wrong. We had the 'Lord of the Flies' model, the notion that bullying is something that arises naturally and inevitably and that it's a characteristic of childhood, that it's a developmentally normal aspect of growing up. The idea that children will turn wild and hurt each other."

So, do children bully naturally or do children learn to hurt other children?

"Bullies aren't born. They don't come out of the womb. They're made," says Pinto. "They go home where violence may be a way of life. Violence can be emotional. Parents can teach kids to be aggressive."

"Bullying is something that children learn from the adults in their lives," Green adds. "They learn it through modeling. There has to be a principal and leader of the culture in the school that sets the bar."

## Zero intolerance

In a 2006 report by the American Psychological Association, the APA task force led by Cecil R. Reynolds of Texas A&M University, found zero tolerance policies throughout U.S. school districts have not been effective in reducing violence, drug use, bullying — or in promoting learning.

When a student doesn't feel safe at school physically, psychologically and emotionally, learning is interrupted and inhibited. In the worst cases, it can cost a student his or her life.

"We don't know how many students have ended their lives because of bullying. Children are choosing violence, either turning it inward on themselves or on to others," says Pinto. "We have to start seeing it as a loss to society. If we allow even one child to feel that desperate, that's not OK. We need to be more receptive. Be proactive. Zero tolerance doesn't work. It doesn't look at the big picture. And it doesn't look at why this is happening."

"One-time speeches and anti-bullying posters don't work either," Green says. "They are not indicators of a well-functioning climate of school. We actually find that these approaches can do harm and you have these demoralized kids who took you at your word while bullies walk out feeling empowered. We've also seen that kids get hurt worse a week after the anti-bullying speech at school."

So, if zero tolerance for bullying, anti-bullying posters and punishments are not effective ways of addressing the socio-educational crisis of bullying,



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**Bullying hurts more than feelings. 'Unless kids feel secure and included in the life of a school, they do not learn adequately,' says Stuart Green, founding director of the New Jersey Coalition of Bullying Awareness and Prevention.**

what kind of paths can be paved to reach — and teach — the bullied, the bully, and the ones who bear witness?

## Time works best

Of all the anti-bullying programs that have surfaced in the last few years, the ones which have been found to "work" are ones in which children, parents and teachers all are engaged for a long period of time.

"After the Columbine tragedy, CAP designed a program called 'No More Bullies, No More Victims.' It's a program of empowerment," says Pinto. "We teach skills, not avoidance. We don't believe in teaching children through fear. It's a three-step program, with staffing, parents and children."

"When we do our parent workshops, unfortunately the ones who show up are the parents of the victims. Parents need to teach their children how to be assertive instead of passive or aggressive. Children who are assertive in the early stages are far more successful in stopping bullying. There's a whole body language we can teach our kids that can help them understand what they're feeling and how to communicate that to others."

Embodied learning is one aspect of the body wisdom that is at the heart of Maryam Mermey's bullying prevention program.

"We're out of touch with our bodies," Mermey says. "The laptops, gadgets. What's the resource inside us? What's our body telling us? The arts, dramatic arts, offer kids a chance to develop insight. But before the insight, they discover something in their bodies."

"Through my work, I give kids a chance to explore all these roles theatrically with all situations," explains Mermey, a Maine-based expressive artist, trainer and the author of a book about the power of inclusion called "New to the Forests of Selay."

Mermey takes the roles of "Bully, Target, Witness

and Hero" and works with students through her unique integration of visual, literary and dramatic arts, in order to deepen their awareness, empathy and compassion.

"I was told this boy was the bully in a class and it took me weeks to actually observe him in the act. I told him he had a lot of power in his size and his understanding and I told him he could use this power to hurt or to help. At the end of the 10 weeks in which he had played the 'witness' role, the boy said to me, 'I know now that when you bully another kid, it makes them feel like they don't have a body, like they're invisible.'"

But what does "knowing their bodies" have to do with bullying prevention?

"Everything. I ask them to imagine what would it feel like to live inside the skin of a bully. And then I say 'Imagine a person who is bullied. Be in their bones, their face, their body and what would that feel like? How would you act that out?' In that instant, something so tender and sacred happens. I let the experience unfold."

## Challenge Day

For the last couple of years, Orchard Valley Middle School in Washington Township has adopted the successful international program called Challenge Day, a six-hour experiential program first created in 1987 by Rick and Yvonne Dutra St. John, which has served more than a million children across the country in grades 7 through 12.

Orchard Valley Principal Steve Buono says, "There's such a broad spectrum of bullying. I think it's been around a long time, but the biggest thing that has changed is the way it's done. Now bullying is taking place not even face-to-face anymore. That has a huge impact on a vast amount of kids."

Challenge Day addresses some common issues kids experience in school, including gossip, cliques, ru-

mors, judgments and teasing, harassment, isolation, stereotypes, bullying and more. "It's so successful in our school that we have now a whole committee of teachers who work on it throughout the year and do monthly follow-ups with students. We talk about being the change," says Buono.

If change is the goal, it must also be the process.

David Levine, a New York state-based teacher, facilitator, musician and author of "Teaching Empathy," says in order to change bullying we must change the way we see it. He works with schools across the country to share and cultivate his School of Belonging program using symbolic storytelling, role-playing and his guitar.

"I see bullying as anti-social behavior," Levine said. "The typical response in schools is to create anti-bullying policies. In my work, I look at it through the lens of creating a pro-social culture. We all have emotional needs and when they're unmet that will drive our behavior. If there's a child who doesn't have his place of connection and belonging, he has learned ways to make people take notice. A bully's behavior is a form of communication."

"William Glasser said our four emotional needs are belonging, power (recognition), freedom (having a voice) and fun (engagement). That's kind of a roadmap to decode behaviors. Punishment is coercive and it's about fear. If we can have conversations with kids, we seek to understand why that child is making that choice."

Green agrees a sense of belonging is a key to unlocking the door to bullying prevention.

"When Levine talks about a School of Belonging, he's right. You must have a structure in place in the school (the way we do things) and the climate (the way it feels here) on an ongoing basis, heighten the

## BULLYING RESOURCES

- David Levine, author of 'Teaching Empathy': [www.davidlevine.com](http://www.davidlevine.com)
- Maryam Mermey, author of 'New to the Forests of Selay': [www.thetransformativearts.com](http://www.thetransformativearts.com)
- (NJCAP) New Jersey Child Assault Prevention: [www.njcap.org](http://www.njcap.org)
- N.J. Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention: [www.njbullying.org](http://www.njbullying.org)
- Challenge Day: [www.challengeday.org/](http://www.challengeday.org/)
- Dan Olweus, 'Bullying at School,' The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP): [www.olweus.org](http://www.olweus.org)

support for students who are less engaged, and create a system that responds to incidents as an indicator of the school culture needing strengthening."

The process of strengthening a school culture requires that we ask good questions not simply of who did what to whom, but what we observe, how we feel and what drives our actions, experts agree.

"How can we see each other differently?" Mermey asks. "I've seen students experience themselves in each other in a way that won't allow them to stay where they were before. It's about collaboration. When they collaborate in small groups, it's giving everyone a voice and in the negotiating they create something together. That in itself is a transformational process."

"All the stuff that we do as adults — laws, policies, bully posters, consequences — they will not reach and never have reached the heart and soul of children or reach the inside of children who are entrenched in bullying. It makes it go underground even further. We must care and listen."