



Schools seek methods to eliminate bullying

One prevention program has become popular.

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How do middle school students torment each other?

"There are so many ways that you can't explain or describe it," said Kaitlyn Zona, an Azalea Middle School seventh-grader who has seen students ridiculed for their clothes or because they are poor.

Faced with classmates she described as bullies, Kaitlyn, 13, and five other students recently decided to form a "club" and avoid them.

"We have a group, and we sit together at lunch," she said.

Their solution appears to be in line with what the school district is preaching as part of a growing antibullying initiative under way at several Pinellas schools, including Azalea. Among the recommended strategies for coping with a bully: "demonstrate reasonable, cooperative, nonaggressive approaches to conflict."

Azalea has thrown itself into the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, named for a Norway psychology professor, Dan Olweus, who has researched bullying since the 1970s and worked to combat the popular notion that being a bully or a bully's target is a normal part of growing up. The program claims to have reduced student bullying complaints by 30 to 70 percent, depending on the school.

This fall, Azalea has trained its faculty and staff in the program, which focuses on elementary and middle school kids. Also in recent weeks, most of Azalea's students have received training designed to prevent bullying, and classes on the topic will continue throughout the year as part of a general push to improve the school's climate.

But an outsider wouldn't have guessed it earlier this month after an activist group, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, held a news conference across the street to accuse the St. Petersburg school of responding slowly and callously when a Muslim girl said a classmate humiliated and threatened her.

Police and district officials have said many of the group's claims contradict accounts by the school's students and staff. Still, said principal Teresa Anderson, the publicity hurt.

"To me, despite some of the things that you're hearing, I feel that Azalea Middle School is a safe place for the kids and for the teachers," she said.

Not everyone criticized the school. Among the responses as the public weighed in were comments urging the girl and her family to get over it, that "kids will be kids" and saying that bullying was part of life.

District officials strongly disagree, even as they say they are finding holes in the girl's story.

"That's probably one of the hardest myths that we have to overcome in bullying prevention," said Jan Urbanski, a district supervisor in charge of implementing the program. "And, yes, bullying has been around for a very long time. Wherever there are schools anywhere in the world there's bullying. But what's really different now are a couple of things."

One, she said, is the legacy of shootings at Columbine High and other schools, where the student shooters often acted out of vengeance against bullies.

Another difference is brain research showing kids don't learn well when they come to school afraid, Urbanski said.

"We have that information now where maybe 50 years ago we didn't," she said. "We now know the long-term consequences (of bullying), the short-term consequences, and it really can't be ignored."

A 2006 survey by the Juvenile Welfare Board found that large numbers of adolescents were being bullied in Pinellas public schools. For example, the agency estimated that more than 14,700 students had been hit, kicked, punched or shoved in school. An estimated 2,200 students did not go to school because they felt unsafe.

Azalea Middle is a particularly challenging school because nearly 70 percent of its 1,140 students come from families with poverty-level incomes. Anderson, the principal, said 65 percent of the teachers have three years of teaching experience or less, and the rate at which they write disciplinary referrals is one of the highest in the district.

Pinellas has instituted the Olweus program in nine middle schools and four elementary schools.

Part of the program is a schoolwide survey that identifies the kinds of bullying taking place. That helps tell violence prevention specialists like Moesha Senior where to target her efforts.

Recently, she said, an Azalea student asked if it was okay to challenge friends who were bullying another girl. The student was afraid her friends would be angry with her.

"How I responded to that is, 'Who cares if they get mad?'" said Senior, who showed the girl where her vocal cords were. "I said, 'You have a voice. Speak up for what's right.'"

The program tries to train students how to be more courageous in the face of bullying, but without resorting to physical contact.

It's a challenge that quickly became evident in a recent class on cyber bullying. Karmina Phaire, a violence prevention specialist at Azalea, presented a video describing the travails of a girl whose peers acquired her MySpace password and posted altered photographs of her on her page.

Phaire asked the class how they would react if something like that happened to them.

"I'd punch (the bully) in the face," one girl said.

One boy's solution: "Fight."

Another student told of a girl who fell victim to a text message sent to many Azalea students suggesting she would perform sexual acts. It included her phone number.

The victim shouldn't try to fight the bullies or even respond electronically, Phaire said.

"That's hard," one boy said.

"You have to stop and think," Phaire said, explaining that nothing good could come from fighting back. Better to keep the message and report it to an adult, she said.

One key strategy is getting kids to experience more empathy for their classmates.

Phaire said one teacher came up with an idea of his own, writing the name of a student on the board every day and telling the rest of the class to write a paragraph complimenting that student.

Officials say the program takes three to five years to fully sink in.

So far, it has worked "a little," said seventh-grader Courtney Beam, 12, who has been bullied on the bus. She said of her fellow students: "It doesn't matter how much you talk to them."

Kaitlyn Zona, the seventh-grader who formed a lunchtime club to thwart bullies, said the program is "kind of, and kind of not" working. "The kids think they're all grown up," she said. "They don't listen to the teachers."

Anderson, the principal, said it's starting to work in tandem with a new discipline system that rewards students for positive behavior. Disciplinary referrals are down so far and "we notice the kids are more sensitive to each other," she said.

"They're more tolerant of each other, they're more apt to share with someone about what's going on in their lives."

Who's in program

Here is a list of Pinellas schools that have implemented the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program or are preparing to implement it.

Middle schools: Azalea, Bay Point, Carwise, Dunedin Highland, Oak Grove, Osceola, Riviera, Seminole, Tarpon Springs.

Elementary schools: Garrison-Jones, Ozona, Pasadena Fundamental, Pinellas Central.

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