

Bullies Begone

From the *American School Boards Journal*, October 2011

By Adam J. Holland

As a newspaper reporter in northeast Texas, Jimmy Isaac regularly gets a firsthand look at the quirky, evil, sad, and funny sides of life. He has reported from the scenes of murders and devastating house fires, and has taken notes from inside the basket of a hot air balloon and experimental aircraft. Though his daily beat creates for him a very colorful world, the 34-year-old writer still has a dark thought that lingers from his childhood.

Isaac, like millions of others, was a victim of bullying in school.

Unlike a lot of adults, he doesn't have a long list of memories that involve violence on the school playground. Isaac's scars are emotional.

"I played soccer in second grade, and there was a girl on the team," Isaac says. "I kind of had a crush on her. She was white. I told a neighborhood friend, who wasn't happy that I, a black boy, liked a white girl. He turned on me."

The former friend began spreading a rumor that Isaac was gay. That his given name is Daniell (pronounced as Dan-yell) didn't help matters in his rural northeast Texas community.

"I became the 'gay-rod', the 'faggot' ... those are the names I can repeat in a fairly clean setting. And it continued," Isaac says. "I had not one single friend between second grade and Thanksgiving of the sixth grade, when I transferred to (nearby) Tatum. I had some friends at that time, but not too many."

About 18 million children will be bullied this school year on playgrounds, in classrooms, and in cafeterias, according to the U.S. Department of Education. In many cases, the act will involve physical harm, while some bullies will wield words. Then, of course, there is cyberbullying -- the use of social websites such as Facebook and MySpace to intimidate or embarrass someone through gossip.

But educators who are using the methods of Rachel's Challenge or the Trevor Romain Co. -- two similar national programs that are relatively new to the school scene -- are fairly confident that such episodes of violence and rumormongering are becoming much less frequent on their campuses. The reason: Both programs work to involve everyone in changing the culture -- the bullies and their victims, bystanders, parents ... and educators.

Changing everyone's thinking

Not that long ago, incidents involving bullies were pretty much treated in the same way. Even now, some educators refer to such behavior as "boys being boys," while some victims are still labeled a "tattletale" by teachers, and encouraged by others -- often older family members -- to fight back.

Trevor Romain, who founded the company that bears his name, says people should stand up for themselves, but he's learned that it's not so easy to do when you don't understand what's really happening.

"There are a lot of kids whose dads say 'Go face them,'" Romain says. "A lot of those kids don't have it in them to do it."

In Isaac's case, a well-meaning teacher did not understand how her actions impacted an already bad situation.

"I read on a higher level than the rest of the class and (she) would put me out in the hall to read my book while she taught them," Isaac says, noting that the many days spent sitting in the school's corridors contributed to his loner personality, which invited name calling, rumors, and some shoving from classmates.

According to a recent study from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, one reason that bullying continues is because people fail to understand the consequences of social trauma felt by the victims. The research, based on five experiments that simulated a socially painful event, suggests people have difficulty appreciating the full severity of social suffering unless they experience it themselves, according to Loran Nordgren, assistant professor of management and organizations.

The Rachel's Challenge and Trevor Romain models, albeit through slightly different angles, try to bring about such understanding.

Rachel's Challenge (www.rachelschallenge.org) is named for Rachel Scott, the first person killed in the Columbine High School shootings in 1999. Started by Scott's father in 2004, the initiative is based on the contents of her six diaries and essentially encourages participants -- teachers, students, and parents -- to begin a positive chain reaction. Programs, which are in use in schools in 48 states, Canada, and Bermuda, generally include school assemblies, student and staff training, and community presentations.

"We start out at an assembly where we try to reach their hearts," says Rob Unger, chief executive officer of Rachel's Challenge. "Then we have the training for everyone, ultimately with the idea of having them reach out to others with kindness and compassion."

Longview is among about a dozen Texas school districts that integrate the Trevor Romain lessons (www.trevorro.com) with English/language arts curriculum. The company also serves schools in several other states, and the U.S. Department of Defense uses the program at military bases worldwide, according to company officials. Its focus is on bringing more understanding about the bully's mindset.

"We have an assessment that we give students, parents, and teachers so the bystanders understand they are almost a part of (bullying)," says Lorna Harrison, a longtime classroom teacher and counselor who writes curricula for the program. "We are trying to help the bully, the victim, and the bystander simultaneously."

Understanding is accomplished through curriculum integration, Romain and Harrison say. Every student, whether he or she is a bully, victim, or bystander, learns about bully behavior through reading, vocabulary, and by writing in a personal journal, which keeps the lines of communication open with teachers.

"What we have found is, through the journal writing ... this is such a salient issue with them," Harrison says. "They are going into their journals before they get to their lessons."

Adds Romain: "And you'd be surprised how honest people are in their journals when it's kept between each student and the teacher."

Some unexpected benefits

Be it academics, sports, or discipline, statistics tend to tell much of the story. Though scientific efficacy studies are yet few and far between, these newer methods are showing some promise.

"It's the new norm for us, and it was a long time coming," says James E. Wilcox, superintendent of Longview Independent School District, which serves about 8,500 Texas students who live off the Interstate 20 corridor about 60 miles west of the Louisiana state line. "The climate here has definitely undergone some positive change."

In Rockwall, a Dallas-area school district that uses (and helped to write) the Rachel's Challenge curriculum, officials have experienced the same result. Unger says one Rockwall elementary school showed a 90 percent reduction in disciplinary referrals after three years in the program.

Longview, one of about a dozen Texas districts that uses Trevor Romain, implemented the program in 2007-08. Since that time, discipline referrals among the district's fifth- and sixth-graders decreased by almost 51 percent. Districtwide enrollment, meanwhile, has increased by almost 10 percent over the past two years.

Though Wilcox didn't credit the changes entirely to the district's anti-bullying curriculum, he believes the lessons have made a difference.

"Our school district offers some course options you can't find anywhere within hundreds of miles, so there are a lot of reasons parents would want to send their children here," Wilcox said. "But if a parent fears for their child's safety, everything is off the table ... and who can blame them?"

Perhaps the program's most unexpected benefit is seeing how students are responding to it.

"The Trevor Romain program looked great on paper, so we invested in it and put it to work," Wilcox says. "Within months, we started noticing the students policing themselves. You expect to see that in a football huddle or in the drama club, because those are tight-knit groups. When you see it happening across campuses, where backgrounds and interests can greatly vary, it gets your attention."

Unger says school officials throughout the country have contacted him with the same observation, and that the students themselves backed it up through a recent survey.

"We sent out 20,000 surveys this year and received back almost 10,000. We wanted an assessment of students' attitudes before (going through Rachel's Challenge) and afterward," he says. "The stat that really stands out is that there was a 78 percent increase in the number of students who would intervene in a situation (after going through Rachel's Challenge)."

After hearing about the hard and anecdotal data, a former victim offered his own praise for the newfound approaches.

"We didn't have programs like this 25 years ago," Isaac says. "I don't believe you will ever eliminate all bullying incidents, but it's fairly obvious that the number of people who find that type of behavior to be acceptable is on the decline. If these programs had been offered when I was a kid, I might be telling an entirely different story of my personal history."

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Bullying statistics

- In 2007-08, 25 percent of U.S. public schools reported that bullying occurred among students on a daily or weekly basis. Studies indicate that 15 percent to 20 percent of U.S. students bully others with some frequency.
- From July 1, 2008, through June 30, 2009, seven suicides of school-age youth (ages 5-18) occurred at school.
- In 2007, 32 percent of students (ages 12-18) reported having been bullied at school during the school year. Of those, 21 percent said they had experienced bullying that consisted of being made fun of; 18 percent reported being the subject of rumors; 11 percent said they were pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on; 6 percent said they were threatened with harm; 5 percent said they were excluded from activities on purpose; and 4 percent said that someone tried to make them do things they did not want to do or that their property was destroyed on purpose.
- In 2007, 7 percent of students (ages 12-18) reported that they had avoided a school activity or one or more places in school in the previous six months because of a fear of attack or harm.
- As many as 160,000 students might stay home on any given day because they are afraid of being bullied.
- Children with disabilities or special needs are at higher risk of being bullied than other children.
- Children who bully are more likely to get into fights, vandalize property, and drop out of school. And 60 percent of boys who were bullies in middle school had at least one criminal conviction by age 24.

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics; "Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2010"; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; www.findyouthinfo.gov.

In DeKalb County, Ga., a comprehensive but practical approach to bullying awareness

By Quentin Fretwell and Jennifer Errion

As conversations on the scope and impact of bullying in schools have increased exponentially, 46 states have passed anti-bullying statutes, with most requiring districts to address the issue through policy.

That has happened in Georgia, which passed a law in 2010 requiring school boards to create or revise local bullying policies by July 1 of this year. In DeKalb County, where we work, this has

provided our district with a wonderful opportunity to take a comprehensive approach to this important behavioral, safety, and health issue.

Our approach goes beyond just providing consequences for the behavior. It emphasizes awareness, knowledge, and training for everyone in an effort to bring a halt to bullying, hazing, and harassment.

Developing policy

When Gov. Sonny Purdue signed the anti-bullying statute into law last May, the DeKalb County Board of Education was in the beginning stages of a comprehensive board policy review initiative. Due to its urgency, the board moved up its discussion of the district's anti-bullying policy, eventually developing one that builds on the state law in several ways.

The new policy, approved by the board in December 2010, expands the list and descriptions of prohibited behaviors related to bullying, including cyberbullying. Among other things, it also:

- Provides specific procedures for reporting bullying allegations and a detailed protocol on how school staff should respond to reports or incidents they witness.
- Strictly prohibits retaliation against any person who reports or assists in a bullying investigation.
- Offers the ability to contact the superintendent or his/her designee if someone believes the school is not taking appropriate action to address the problem.
- Firmly states that a school employee who fails to comply with the policy may be subject to disciplinary action, which could include termination.
- Provides information on how to notify parents to all parties to a bullying incident.
- Affords follow-up and after care for both the accused and the victim.

However, our district recognizes that only responding to bullying incidents means that another child may be hurt. Preventing bullying is more effective, promotes student achievement and well-being through better school climate, and helps students to learn how to operate positively in a global society.

Developing partnerships

For the past four years, our district and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) have partnered on three comprehensive programs -- No Place for Hate, CyberAlly, and A Classroom of Difference. Middle school students have participated in the Power Over Prejudice Summit, and high school students have attended a yearly ADL-sponsored leadership conference. Students also have received other classroom guidance activities in bullying prevention and responsible behavior.

Revising the board's anti-bullying policy gave us an opportunity to both help students and educate the community. Since the board's policy review initiative included a notification and training component for school employees and the public, we had a platform to promote kindness, respect, and civility in our community.

In January, the board approved a "Bullying Awareness Month" proclamation with county officials, members of the Bullying Awareness Committee, and other guests in attendance. Over the course of the month, the district developed a comprehensive training timeline for employees, beginning with principals and central office leadership, and schools held class/grade-level meetings on bullying.

Parent/community awareness workshops were held to show how adults and society in general reinforce bullying behavior and what adults can do to reduce it. Anti-bullying resources and learning objectives -- including training modules and videos created by students for students -- were provided to schools. Internet and intranet sites with additional resources were created, and ongoing CyberAlly training was held.

Meanwhile, a number of school-centered activities were held as well:

- Students, teachers, administrators, and other school employees signed an anti-bullying pledge.
- Each week was devoted to a specific topic relative to bullying awareness, such as cyberbullying and hazing. Schools were asked to place the topic on marquees and local websites and to conduct weekly activities.
- Rallies, assemblies, and other gatherings were held at schools. Faculty and students wore "Stop Bullying" t-shirts, created posters and banners, performed original anti-bullying songs/skits/poems, held art and writing contests, conducted dance/ step routines, and listened to classmate testimonials.
- District and student bullying and hazing videos and PSAs played regularly on our cable TV station.
- News flashes, which pop up on each person's computer screen, were sent to all employees on the district's intranet system.
- The district held a "No Place for Hate" ceremony recognizing model student leaders and exemplary school programs.

We recognize that behaviors won't be transformed in a single month. Teaching kids to treat others with kindness and respect in and out of school is an ongoing effort that must involve everyone. However, we believe others can learn from our experience as they develop policies, regulations, and procedures to help children. Ultimately, we would like to contribute so children aren't physically and emotionally broken by bullying and hazing.

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