

There's Only One Way to Stop a Bully

By SUSAN ENGEL and MARLENE SANDSTROM

Williamstown, Mass.

HERE in Massachusetts, teachers and administrators are spending their summers becoming familiar with [the new state law that requires schools to institute an anti-bullying curriculum, investigate acts of bullying and report the most serious cases to law enforcement officers.](#)

This new law was passed in April after a group of South Hadley, Mass., students were indicted in the bullying of a 15-year-old girl, Phoebe Prince, who committed suicide. To the extent that it underlines the importance of the problem and demands that schools figure out how to address it, it is a move in the right direction. But legislation alone can't create kinder communities or teach children how to get along. That will take a much deeper rethinking of what schools should do for their students.

It's important, first, to recognize that while cellphones and the Internet have made bullying more anonymous and unsupervised, there is little evidence that children are meaner than they used to be. Indeed, there is ample research — not to mention plenty of novels and memoirs — about how children have always victimized one another in large and small ways, how often they are oblivious to the rights and feelings of others and how rarely they defend a victim.

In a 1995 study in Canada, researchers placed video cameras in a school playground and discovered that overt acts of bullying occurred at an astonishing rate of 4.5 incidents per hour. Just as interesting, children typically stood idly by and watched the mistreatment of their classmates — apparently, the inclination and ability to protect one another and to enforce a culture of tolerance does not come naturally. These are values that must be taught.

Yet, in American curriculums, a growing emphasis on standardized test scores as the primary measure of “successful” schools has crowded out what should be an essential criterion for well-educated students: a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others.

What's more, the danger of anti-bullying laws, which have now been passed by all but six states, is that they may subtly encourage schools to address this complicated problem quickly and superficially. Many schools are buying expensive anti-bullying curriculum packages, big glossy binders that look reassuring on the bookshelf and technically place schools closer to compliance with the new laws.

But our research on child development makes it clear that there is only one way to truly combat bullying. As an essential part of the school curriculum, we have to teach children how to be good to one another, how to cooperate, how to defend someone who is being picked on and how to stand up for what is right.

To do this, teachers and administrators must first be trained to recognize just how complex children's social interactions really are. Yes, some conflict is a normal part of growing up, and plenty of friendly, responsible children dabble in mean behavior. For these children, a little guidance can go a long way. That is why the noted teacher and author Vivian Paley once made a rule that her students couldn't exclude anyone from their play. It took a lot of effort to make it work, but it had a powerful impact on everyone.

Other children bully because they have emotional and developmental problems, or because they come from abusive families. They require our help more than our punishment.

The kind of bullying, though, that presents the most difficulty in figuring out how and when to intervene falls between these two extremes: Sometimes children who aren't normally bullies get caught up in a larger culture of aggression — say, a clique of preadolescent girls who form a club with the specific function of being mean to other girls. Teachers must learn the difference between various sorts of aggressive behaviors, as well as the approaches that work best for each.

Most important, educators need to make a profound commitment to turn schools into genuine communities. Children need to know that adults consider kindness and collaboration to be every bit as important as algebra and reading. In groups and one-on-one sessions, students and teachers should be having conversations about relationships every day. And, as obvious as it might sound, teachers can't just preach kindness; they need to actually be nice to one another and to their students.

Teachers also need to structure learning activities in which children are interdependent and can learn to view individual differences as unique sources of strength. It's vital that every student, not just the few who sign up for special projects or afterschool activities, be involved in endeavors that draw them together.

Look at Norway, where the prevention of such incidents became a major emphasis of the school system after three teenage victims of bullying committed suicide in 1983. There, everyone gets involved — teachers, janitors and bus drivers are all trained to identify instances of bullying, and taught how to intervene. Teachers regularly talk to one another about how their students interact. Children in every grade participate in weekly classroom discussions about friendship and conflict. Parents are involved in the process from the beginning.

Norway's efforts have been tremendously effective. The incidence of bullying fell by half during the two-year period in which the programs were introduced. Stealing and cheating also declined. And the rate of bullying remains low today. Clearly, when a school and a community adopt values that are rooted in treating others with dignity and respect, children's behavior can change.

Indeed, our analysis of successful bullying-prevention programs across the United States and abroad reveals that the key common factor is their breadth: both in terms of the people who participate and of the deep connection between specific policies and the larger social ethos of the school community.

Involving the legal system makes a strong statement that a society won't tolerate bullying. But for laws like the one in Massachusetts to succeed, they have to be matched by an educational system that teaches children not only what's wrong, but how to do what's right.

Susan Engel is a senior lecturer in psychology and the director of the teaching program at Williams College, where Marlene Sandstrom is a professor of psychology.