A school culture that exposes bullies

Some schools are taking steps to prevent bullying before another tragedy takes place

By Joanna Weiss, Globe Columnist | September 5, 2010

WHEN STUDENTS return to Great Oak Elementary in Danvers this week, they'll pass familiar posters in the hallway, outlining some of the school's most important guidelines:

1) We will not bully others.

2) We will try to help students who are bullied.

3) We will try to include students who are left out.

4) If we know that someone is being bullied, we will tell an adult.

Rules like this will soon be commonplace across the state, thanks to the anti-bullying law that the Massachusetts Legislature passed last spring. Now, all schools are required to report and investigate acts of bullying, and to come up with plans for prevention. These are tools that might have helped save Phoebe Prince, the 15-year-old who hanged herself in South Hadley last winter after other students harassed her for months.

But in Danvers, they didn't need a tragedy or a law to try to put an end to bullying. They just needed teachers, administrators, and parents to agree on a fundamental principle — that creating a

culture that's safe and humane is a part of every school's job.

This seems obvious, but it isn't, which is why bullying has flourished in so many schools for so long. As schools struggle with budget shortfalls and more demanding academic requirements, some administrators bristle at taking on the burden of bullying prevention as well. It's fair to ask how far schools' authority can reach in the age of Facebook — though Phoebe, and countless others, have been verbally harassed while other kids and adults looked on. Can schools ever combat the meanness that seems part of human nature?

Yet Gary Nihan, Danvers' director of health and physical education, sees moral education as a baseline skill — a prerequisite for learning. So he suggested that Danvers use the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, which he'd seen at work in another school district, and which served as a model for the Massachusetts law.

Created in Norway three decades ago, Olweus (pronounced ol-VEY-us) is one of the few anti-bullying programs with documented results. Its goal is to change the very culture of a school — to convince all students and adults, parents included, that they're responsible for treating each other well.

Great Oak and the other elementary schools in Danvers launched the program last year, beginning with training sessions and a kickoff assembly. There are weekly classroom meetings to discuss behavior, and a protocol in place for bullying response.

If an incident takes place, adults talk separately to all of the students involved, says Robin D'Antona, the Olweus consultant who works with Danvers schools. The bully is reminded that he broke the rules, that there will be consequences, that adults will be watching. The victim is told that he did nothing wrong. The bystanders are asked to think of things they could have done to help. A school official checks in with the bully and the victim, to see

how the bully is behaving and reassure the victim that he'll be safe.

And school officials constantly encourage all kids to do right by each other. On Fridays, Principal Matthew Fusco visits classrooms, handing out pencils to students who have stood up for classmates or helped out in class.

All of this takes time, and it also takes money, though not an outrageous amount; Danvers won a federal grant of $15,000 to pay for Olweus materials and training. The school system is now training more school nurses and bus drivers, and will soon expand the program to the middle school and high school.

Fusco, who embraces the new state law, says the program is worth the effort. "Children can't learn until they feel safe," he says.

That's precisely why we need to abandon the notion that some things are schools' responsibility and others are left for home. If we expect parents to read to their kids and help with homework, we ought to expect schools to teach morality — to turn out kids who aren't just smart, but good.

No one expects this to be easy, or instant; Olweus is based on repetition, reinforcement, and follow-through. Teaching math isn't easy, either. But that doesn't mean it can't be done.

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