

Chicago Tribune



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 14, 2010

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Combating bullying

The Tribune's editorial "Remember Phoebe" and the article "Suicides open eyes to reach of bullying; There is no break today from harassment, taunts — even at home, experts say" (News, April 5), call much-needed attention to worrisome problems and the profound effect a school's culture can have on the lives of students and families. The tragic death of Phoebe Prince is a warning, and it serves as yet another call to action for Chicago school leaders, parents and students.

Demand for violence-prevention programs, including those to combat bullying, are the highest ever, and rising, at the 170 Chicago Public Schools we work with. And even though Illinois requires each school district to maintain a policy on bullying, there are wide differences between districts and among schools on security, discipline and the involvement of the entire school community. Having a policy in place does not mean it is effective.

We need an intense focus on understanding what works and applying the lessons broadly — an approach that involves everyone, from teachers and counselors to bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers and parents and students. One program with encouraging results is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. Communities In Schools of Chicago is working with the Hazelden Foundation to connect Olweus with three schools in Chicago, with plans to add an additional 15 by the 2012-2013 school year.

Nationally schools that use the Olweus program have seen a 20 to 70 percent reduction in bullying instances, and 50 percent of students report a reduction of being bullied or bullying others. We're hearing encouraging results in Chicago. One principal reports that students are now intervening before school staff is enlisted.

What is the secret? First there is no quick fix. Reducing bullying is time-consuming and ongoing over many years. It requires the training of everyone in the school. Adults cannot be allowed to shirk their responsibilities, allowing any kind of violent behavior (or even more subtle social exclusion) to go unpunished. Rules and policies should be posted and discussed, regularly, by administrators, teachers and students. Olweus recommends setting up a student advisory group to provide feedback and advice to adults.

Assaults, threats, cruelty and bullying are not spectator sports. The Olweus program and others are essential to creating a school culture where students are safe and focused on learning. Programs must engage all members of the school community, demand shared responsibility and provide alternatives to violence that enable students to reach their potential. In Chicago and across the country, we can accept nothing less.

— Jane Mentzinger, executive director,
Communities In Schools of Chicago