

Bullying Is Never Acceptable

Whether on Maui or in Barrington, kindness is king

For most of my career in education, I have worked in high schools in the north or northwest suburbs, but what few people know is that I once taught for two years at a private school on Maui. Seabury Hall was a semi-boarding school for grades 7-12 located on the slopes of Haleakala Crater looking down on the Pacific Ocean.

At Seabury Hall, I taught high school geometry, AP calculus, and one section of seventh-grade math. That one section of seventh-grade math and one child in particular will hopefully provide a glimpse into what can be a challenging time in a child's journey.

Billy G. was by far the smartest student in this particular math class. His energy was boundless, and he always seemed to have lots of questions. While Billy was not the most popular child, he had his small group of friends and seemed to always have a positive energy surrounding him.

Sometime in February, something seemed to change in Billy's demeanor. He became more reserved, the provocative questions ceased, his energy was more subdued, and his academic performance started to wane. Since we were such a small school, we did not have guidance counselors. Instead the students were directed to ask a faculty member to serve as their official counselor. Billy had selected me at the beginning of the year, and by February we had built a strong connection.

But then our relationship changed. Instead of the easy banter that characterized our meetings, Billy seemed to shut down. No matter what I tried, Billy refused to talk about what was troubling him. I didn't know if it was an issue at school or at home, so my next move was a conversation with Billy's mom, who also agreed something was going on but didn't know what. While Billy was not able to open up to me, he was finally able to tell his parents about the three boys who had, for some unknown reason, decided that Billy was to be their target of ruthless bullying activities.

The next day his parents gave me the details, and I'm glad to report that our headmaster then had one of those "Sheriff Andy Tay-

lor conversations" (for those of you old enough to remember the *Andy Griffith Show*) with the three boys involved. With some counseling, some appropriate consequences, and a clear understanding among all involved, Billy's life returned to normal.

The middle school years can be an exciting time for pre-teens – developmentally, academically, and social-emotionally. It is also the time in a child's life when peer approval and opinions become as important as that of their parents. Bullying incidents tend to peak in sixth grade. Knowing this, we make every effort in District 220 to make sure we meet the needs of children during this critical time in their lives. To accomplish this, we provide several programs at both Prairie and Station middle schools.

Camp Sixth Grade is a two-week summer orientation for incoming sixth graders. Students meet staff, make new friends, and become comfortable navigating a larger facility. During the first two weeks of school, advisory teachers make it clear that harassment/bullying is not acceptable behavior. The staff explains students' rights and procedures for reporting and addressing bullying behaviors. Our goal is to make our school a safe zone where all students can develop and learn.

In addition, several assemblies are held throughout the year where middle school expectations are made clear. Students learn that everyone is responsible for creating a positive school environment; that older students are encouraged to be helpful and good role models for younger students; that any student can approach any staff member at any time for help or to ask questions, and that bullying will not be tolerated. Our staff also discusses the importance of getting involved in school and encourages demonstrating school spirit.

Our counselors provide monthly activities for each of the grade levels to discuss various elements of good character and citizenship. In addition, the counselors work with our students through both small-group and individual counseling sessions on the topic of bullying/harassment. The counselors visit all grade levels and discuss the topic of bullying through structured lessons and role-playing.



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

Dr. Tom Leonard is the superintendent of District 220 schools.

Through engaging speakers and activities our annual Snowflake event addresses making wise decisions regarding controlled substance teamwork, and citizenship, as well as a portfolio specifically on bullying. The students participate in a variety of activities in groups of ten and then reflect on their experiences individually.

Even with these programs in place, nothing will ever replace the positive relationships that our children form with their parents, teachers and coaches. In Billy's case, I was the teacher who noticed something was amiss, but Billy's parents had that deeper relationship that allowed him to reveal the cause of his pain. Billy's parents' willingness to share the details with the school eventually remedied the situation. As is so often the case, timely communication between school and family was key to meeting Billy's needs.

Every child has a right to feel safe in school and nothing should ever be allowed to interfere with a child's ability to learn in a safe and healthy environment. We know that is part of our responsibility as a school district, and we always seek to partner with students and parents to ensure we reach this goal.

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