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AMERICAN SCHOOL COUNSELOR ASSOCIATION

JULY | AUGUST 2021

VOLUME 58 | NUMBER 6

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THE CROWDSOURCED ISSUE



SCHOOLWIDE BULLYING PREVENTION



Student problems related to bullying are too vast and implications are too grave for school counselors to take them on without schoolwide support.

BY SHARON POWERS



If schools want to tackle bullying systemically, these efforts can't fall solely on school counselors' shoulders. We've all walked into a classroom and been met with glazed-over stares and unenthusiastic quips and groans from students about having to learn about bullying, yet again. To create a school culture that is welcoming, allows people to stand up to wrongdoing and empowers students to embrace compassion and empathy, bullying initiatives have to be schoolwide, yearlong and collaborative among staff, students and families.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 20% of students report being a victim of bullying, putting these children in a more vulnerable position when it comes to their well-being and academic potential. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that children who experience bullying are more at risk for mental health conditions like depression and anxiety. These same children are also more likely to struggle academically and drop out of school.

Bottom line, these problems born from bullying are vast, and the implications are too grave for school counselors to take them on without true systemic collaboration.

Compassion in Action

Ian Brodie, a middle school counselor in Fairfax County Public Schools, Va., began leading the charge to create a more dynamic approach to anti-bullying by launching a school committee devoted to bullying prevention and education more than six years ago. Committee members included teachers, students and school counselors. Although the school counselors led the movement by assembling the team and guiding the committee's purpose with data-informed practices and tangible goals, it was the team approach that made the undertaking a game-changer.

Committee members considered questions such as, “How effective has the school counseling program been at empowering students to stand up against bullying and harassment, ultimately preventing it from happening?” The committee met and discussed schoolwide bullying issues throughout the year; these recurring meetings cultivated a trusting environment where everyone could speak openly about real issues and feel heard. Staff and students were given an equal voice at the table during these honest conversations.

“Students would say, ‘This is what’s going on, this is what we need,’ and it would open up our eyes,” Brodie said. The team then crafted relevant lessons based on student feedback and launched a schoolwide campaign called Compassion in Action.

Inspired by the conversations and motivated to enact change, teachers began to share in the responsibility of creating the lessons – a duty that previously fell under the sole purview of the

school counseling department. With this enhanced approach, the school counselors provide a kick-off lesson in the fall for all students, but then teachers create schoolwide lessons delivered to all students throughout the school year to keep momentum going for Compassion in Action.

When bullying prevention is presented through generic definitions, unrelatable scenarios or the information delivery happens in isolation, students may disconnect from the instruction and not take it seriously. Even worse, students don’t feel compelled to share or report bullying when it happens to them or their peers. Brodie and his team wanted to ensure

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the efforts to prevent and squash bullying reached the most important parties – students themselves. These fresh and relevant lessons did just that.

The mission behind Compassion in Action was to get students to have meaningful conversations that would help them be more intentional about their peer relationships, behavior and treatment of one another, thus leading to more kindness schoolwide. Some of the themes woven into the Compassion in Action initiative include teaching students how to disagree and affording students an opportunity to examine their personal identity by helping them see the nuances of their unique identity. Students were asked to consider visible parts of their identity as well as those qualities that can’t be seen. Then conversations ensued about how people may be perceived based on physical qualities and the assumptions that follow.

Here are some examples of some of the thought-provoking discussion questions that students were able to talk through in their classrooms.

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- What has happened when you've made assumptions about people based only on what you could see?
- If someone makes assumptions about you, what's the best way to respond to that?
- What can you say or do if you are a bystander and you see someone else making assumptions about another person?
- Imagine being in the shoes of someone who has to experience assumptions based on their looks every day. How do you think that will affect them long-term?
- How can you show compassion to someone when there's only a few things you can see and a lot you don't know about them?

These lessons became eye-opening and led to some poignant conversations about race, cultural awareness and equity, all of which tied in nicely with the school district's charge to promote equity, eliminate racism and close opportunity and achievement gaps for all students. How



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students treat one another is a big part of a child's educational experience that affects learning, opportunities and one's overall attitude toward school.



The school's ongoing efforts to address bullying made a lasting impact and led to some stunning data discoveries. As Brodie and his team pored through data over a five-year period from 2015–2020, they discovered there had been an inverse relationship between the number of students who self-reported being bullied

and the number of discipline incidents related to bullying. In other words, many students were being bullied but never reported the bullying. The gap between the two data points decreased, until they nearly merged during the 2019–2020 school year.

Brodie credits the schoolwide approach to shifting the school culture. "We don't simply teach kids what not to do; we also talk about what to do," Brodie said. "Being kind becomes the cool thing to do. If anyone was being mean, the kids would give the side eye to each other." This peer accountability transformed how students treated one another and allowed Compassion in Action to come to life.

Social/Emotional Learning


At the elementary level, social/emotional learning forms the core of bullying prevention initiatives. Although it's crucial to educate younger students about the definitions of bullying and what it can look like, teaching young children empathy skills and tools to handle peer concerns

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can be protective factors against bullying behaviors.

Diane Ramia, an elementary school counselor in Fairfax County Public Schools, Va., has watched how a parent-led initiative born more than five years ago at her school has created a lasting impact on her students and community.

Margaret Behrns, an elementary parent at Ramia's school who was serving as a special education parent liaison, collaborated with the PTA, school counseling department, administration and other staff to bring a hands-on, empathy-building experience to students called Walk in My Shoes. The program simulates how a child may experience a learning difference, developmental challenge or medical issue.

According to Pacer's National Bullying Prevention Center, students with disabilities and learning challenges are bullied at higher rates than those students without disabilities. Equipped with this knowledge, Behrns wanted to help students understand what life is like for students with disabilities, while also teaching students ways they could support peers facing challenges.

Through interactive stations, students take on the perspective of students with a particular disorder, disability or health condition as they attempt a particular task. For example, to simulate what it would be like to have challenges with visual motor integration, students would be tasked with completing a worksheet with their nondominant hand while looking in a mirror instead of looking at their paper. Through this exercise, young students could understand how the school day may feel to students with this type of learning challenge and learn what they might say or do to encourage a classmate facing such challenges.

The program is robust and offers simulations on a number of disabilities and conditions such as ADHD, color vision deficiency, dyslexia, fine motor delay, food allergies, movement disorders and sensory processing issues.

To demonstrate having a food allergy, a scene is set as though the students are dining out at a restaurant. Clad in an apron to excite the students, the facilitator presents an appealing menu to them. The



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students get excited as they talk about all the different food items and share what they might choose. Then the students are each given a paper plate that has a food allergy on the back of the plate. Students are told to make their menu selection as if they had that particular allergy, which creates a palpable experience for the students in coping with disappointment and then having to be flexible. Afterward, the experience moves into talking about what it might be like for a child to be excluded or even bullied for having a food allergy and what they might do to support a peer in that situation.

Ramia sees the program paying off. "I think it sends a message to our students that talking about and acknowledging differences is important. It also tells them that we are going to 'walk the walk' by really immersing our students and teachers into experiencing what it is like for students who struggle with certain skills or disabilities. Their awareness has grown as a student body, and I observe much kinder and accepting behavior toward other students who clearly struggle with a disability."

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ramia's school offered the Walk in My Shoes program as an annual assembly for students in third-sixth grade. To prepare for the event, the school librarian selected books to begin educating students about various learning disabilities and challenges. After the hands-on experience, the school counselors debrief with the students. The program has given students a chance to better understand challenges

their peers may be facing in their everyday lives. In addition to building empathy and understanding, student participants can feel empowered to learn useful strategies to support a classmate.

"Students remember the program and the impressions it has left on them," Ramia said. "For example, when talking with the school counselor during a class meeting to discuss topics such as empathy and bullying, students will often reference the assembly and how the activities gave them a greater appreciation for what they could do and helped them realize their classmates could be struggling with some of these skills."

Behrns has expanded the program beyond her child's school, and Walk in My Shoes is now a nonprofit organization that has reached more than 100,000 students. Behrns is launching new models so the program can be adapted to COVID-19 guidelines and can be delivered by teachers and school counselors.

Meaningful Experiences

What can we learn from Brodie, Ramia and Behrns? Meaningful and novel experiences are most likely to reach students in a profound way when it comes to bullying prevention and education. To pull this off, school counselors must employ a collaborative approach.

When students can be part of the process and share their voice, there's so much promise for what can happen. We all have data available to us, both national statistics and the stories told through numbers at our own schools, but along with the data, we need opportunities for students to feel personally connected to our anti-bullying instruction. We can't do it alone, and we must tap into those critical stakeholders all around us who care about the students just as we do as school counselors.

The end goal will help shape students who are thoughtful, kind, compassionate, empathetic and helpful. The societal gains from that kind of work are long-lasting and immeasurable. ■

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