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Helping teens: Age-old plague of bullying takes new forms, with tragic results

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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Saturday, January 23, 2010

Bullying never leads to good results.

A fight between two Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School classmates on a city sidewalk 13 years ago led to the death of one student and the criminal conviction of another. It was widely reported at the time that the assailant had been subject to taunts in school. Last year, a sixth-grade student in Springfield hung himself. News reports indicated that he had repeatedly suffered homophobic taunting.

This month, a South Hadley High School freshman committed suicide in her home. School officials say Phoebe Prince, new to school, had faced cyberbullying on Facebook and in text messages before she took her life.

All vastly different situations, but each with tragic outcomes. When it comes to bullying, it's fair to say educators take the approach of how to lessen its damage rather than stamp it out entirely. Youth seem to see it as unavoidable, even while they may not fully comprehend the toll it takes.

Sometimes the bullying is hidden behind jokes.

"People don't intervene because they think it's just joking," said Scott Labrie, 16, of Westhampton. "You don't realize it until too late."

"I think some people don't realize they're bullying," said Jessica Lewis, 17, of Chesterfield. "They do it because they're insecure and they're trying to make themselves feel better."

Lewis said that much of the bad blood between students takes place in whispers in the hallway.

"It's more rumors and gossip," she said. "But it can still be bullying I guess if it makes people feel bad."

The forms it takes

Hurtful words in school hallways and fights by the flagpole are age-old bullying tactics.

It takes new twists in the age of the Internet, and for the young people known as Generation "Z." Experts say while there are more lawsuits and suicides as a result of it, there are also fewer dollars and minutes in schools to take measures to prevent it.

"Finding the time in the school day to have group counseling or discussion groups with kids is a real challenge because the focus is so much on MCAS and MCAS prep," said Ann Marie Zanfagna,



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guidance counselor at White Brook Middle School in Easthampton. "Teachers feel pressured to raise scores and to be held accountable in that way. It's a huge issue."

In addition, there are more ways than ever for students to bully one another. Students pick on their peers at school, on the bus and at home through text messages, instant messages, social networking Web sites and online video game chats.

In these forums, there is name calling, gossip and "sexting," which is when photos and texts of a sexual nature originally intended for one person's use are shared with others online. In addition to talk and texts, young people can taunt each other through photos they send to others and comments they post on fairly public Facebook photos.

"The anonymity of the computer allows kids to say really outrageous things to one another," said Zanfagna. "Usually in middle school, you're either gay, a sped or a retard."

"Our kids are spending up to eight hours a day on hand-held devices" and computers, said Cindy Boyle, director of community education and outreach at the Northwestern District Attorney office. She runs workshops aimed at educating teens about cyberbullying and its legal consequences in local schools. She also oversees a program in which local teens mentor first- and second-graders on Internet safety.

"Cyberbullying on the technology that's come into play is popular to say the very least."

Arguments that start in school often surface online and vice versa. In addition to codes of conduct in student handbooks, area schools attempt to steer students away from bullying by implementing anti-bullying programs, educating about differences via school assemblies and offering workshops on how to handle being bullied.

But programs like those simply are not enough to fix the problem, according to Nan Stein, senior research scientist at Wellesley College. The first problem Stein finds with such programs is that the term "bullying" has no boundaries.

"Bullying is a euphemism," Stein said. "It means everything and nothing. You can say 'you're not my friend' or grab somebody's clothes and that gets called bullying. Kids like precision."

Malicious name-calling and acts related to someone's gender, sexual orientation and race is actually harassment, Stein said. And while laws prohibit these specific discriminatory behaviors, there is no law against "bullying." In other words, the generic term "bullying" can hide what is illegal - she suggests that if authorities would treat the most malicious types of bullying as the criminal behaviors she believes it is, it might be a deterrent.

"School administrators love to carry on the bullying discourse because it doesn't make them accountable to federal civil rights laws because no one can really define what bullying is," Stein said. "We don't have laws about meanness. I think we need to call the behaviors for what they are."

How schools respond

Dan Smith, principal at South Hadley High School, recently acknowledged the "generic term means different things to different people" in a letter to parents following the suicide of freshman Phoebe Prince last week. Students reported Prince was bullied in the months and days leading to her death, Smith noted.

"To be certain, people demeaning other people just because of their characteristics or background is bullying by any definition and we need to keep trying to find ways to stop this abhorrent behavior," Smith wrote.

Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School also does not take bullying lightly, particularly since the 1998 fatal stabbing of a Smith Voke student in retaliation to homophobic teasing, according to Leslie Skantz-Hodgson, curriculum coordinator. On the first day of school, Smith Voke teachers try to set up an atmosphere of respect and zero-tolerance for bullying, Skantz-Hodgson said.

This year, faculty at the school received a copy of The Guide to Bullying Prevention issued by the Governors Task Force on Hate Crimes. They also attended two full days of training about bullying, where they learned about conflict mediation, de-escalation techniques and other ways to prevent conflicts between students.

"It's all very timely," said Skantz-Hodgson. "You can never lighten up on bullying, but you think about it more when tragedy strikes."

Meanwhile, Easthampton and Northampton middle schools have research-based life skills programs like All Stars and Second Step, and to peer mediation initiatives. These programs are designed to help young people create and sustain a healthy lifestyle and positive character development. Students are given homework assignments that include discussions with parents about substance abuse, goal setting and community service. Parents give feedback on student responses and sign the paperwork.

"All Stars is so effective because it pulls everyone together to talk about these things," said Karen Jarvis Vance, director of health services, health education and safety in Northampton. "I think the take-home message is that schools and kids and parents and communities need to be working with each other. It takes a village to raise a child."

At Amherst Regional High School, bullying has largely moved from the hallways to Facebook postings and anonymous emails, said Principal Mark Jackson. "Kids being muscled for lunch money is not on our radar," he said. "It's more electronic than in-person."

Administrators sometimes hear about bullying from parents of victims, he said. The responses vary; some bullying can be a police issue, while guidance counselors can intervene in other instances, he said.

In Amherst, seventh graders learn about "defining ways that bullying can happen, identifying situations, how it hurts, how to be an ally, and ways we can make school a safe place for everyone, support the targeted person, and work the bully," said health teacher Kathy Neal. "Also included is how online bullying is hurtful, illegal, and how things that a person posts online can stay in the archives forever."

The message is that bullying is unacceptable and sometimes illegal, she said. "We also want the victim to know that it is not their fault, and we want people to feel safe about reporting instances," she said.

At Hadley Elementary School last spring, fifth and sixth graders learned about cyber-bullying from a police officer at the University of Massachusetts, said Principal Philip DiPietro. He plans to teach third and fourth graders about it as well.

The school actively educates students in bullying, DiPietro said. They learn that bullying is deliberately hurtful, not just one-time teasing, and involves a power imbalance. The protocol is that victims should first ignore bullying and walk away, ask that it stop in the second instance, and finally tell an adult. Students who observe bullying are asked to report it to a teacher, he said.

Student accounts

Boys on the Easthampton High School basketball team said while they almost never see physical violence in their school, name calling is common. Most name calling is done in a joking manner, and sometimes it is even welcomed. Teasing fellow teammates forms bonds, according to basketball players.

"It builds team chemistry," said junior Bryant Bishko.

"We've been around each other so much for so long it's more of a comical thing," said Peter Gilbert, a senior.

Meanwhile, freshmen and sophomores in Easthampton said bullying was more problematic in middle school than high school. Jake Ingraham, a high school sophomore, said he was verbally bullied in sixth grade, but it eventually "wore off."

"I didn't feel good about it," Ingraham said. "I mostly ignored it."

Ingraham added sixth graders new to the middle school usually fear older students will say mean words more than they actually do.

"In middle school, the whole focus is on belonging and wanting to be accepted," said Zanfagna. "There's identity issues, figuring out who I am, what are my values. That gets addressed in the curriculum but not enough."

In high school, boys fear being bullied about their weight or what they do for fun, the athletes said. Pokeman playing, Ingraham said, is a target subject for bullies. Meanwhile, high school girls are bullied for their clothes, their looks and their weight.

"If they don't like each other, they find a reason to pick on each other," Ingraham said.

Race also plays a factor in bullying, according to Kenneth Lumpkin, a freshman. When Lumpkin moved from Springfield to Easthampton in sixth grade, he got picked on because of his skin color.

"I had people ask me, 'you're black, are you going to shoot me?'," Lumpkin said. "They thought it was joking but it's not joking if the person you're saying it to isn't laughing."

Both Lumpkin and Ingraham said they intervene if they see students being bullied now.

"I tell them to chill out," Lumpkin said.

Staff writers Nick Grabbe and Rebecca Everett contributed to this report.

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Comments

Sun, 01/24/2010 - 19:28 — [gztrdr](#)

Perhaps we can set an example

Here in the Happy Valley we are all about progressive thinking, right? Perhaps our district attorney can press charges against the girl who threw the can at Phoebe, pull text message records and IP addresses for Facebook comments... lock up these brats for murder. That would make us all proud, to set an example for other cities all over the country where this same behavior is allowed to run rampant.

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Sun, 01/24/2010 - 18:19 — [reader01](#)

Good link

Thank you, Sweetie, for the link to the article. I just read it and was amazed at the lack of reporting here. Gazette, perhaps instead of Flaherty's drivel week after week, we could have real reporting on real stories like this.

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Sun, 01/24/2010 - 16:33 — [Sweetie](#)

THERE ARE NO excuses for these "mean girls"

So cut out this BS attempt to dilute the guilt for this crime, and get your head out of the happy valley sand!! It would depress the heck out of anyone to be treated in the way that Phoebe was treated. She was a lively, vibrant, charming girl. Some girls were jealous of her. They killed her with the cruel remarks they made, online and to her face, and with abusive treatment.

The Gazette has given us the "toned down" version of this story. Read what really happened here:

http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/01/24/the_u...

There is no excuse. The mean girls should pay, and pay dearly.

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Sat, 01/23/2010 - 11:11 — [Punno](#)

What happened to Phoebe

What happened to Phoebe Prince is a tragedy. But has anyone investigated what factors beyond bullying may have played roles, e.g., depression? I think someone should before it is assumed that bullying, however awful, was the main cause of her suicide.

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