

**The Geography of Bullying:**  
**Where Have We Been, Where Are We Now,**  
**and Where Should We Be Going?**

The subject of bullying is big again these days, at least in some venues. There are two recently released feature films: an animated movie, *The Ant Bully*, as well as *How to Eat Fried Worms*, a kids' bullying picture that trumpets its particular brand of torment right up front in its title. Rockstar Games, infamous for the violent and controversial *Grand Theft Auto* series, is unleashing a new video game called, simply, *Bully*, and is banking on it being the smash hit of the upcoming holiday season. And, of course, on the ubiquitous Internet, where a Google search for "Bullying in New York State schools" will offer up, on this particular day, 1,670,000 possible sources, dramatic and informative sites run the gamut from tragic instances of bullycide (student suicide as a result of protracted bullying), through NYSED-sponsored calls for school honesty in submitting reports of violent incidents, and on to testimonials for sure-fire educational training programs that will enlighten even the most benighted student body. Something dramatic must have happened recently to excite this renewed interest in the topic, right?

Not really. Of the many public school administrators, guidance counselors and teachers in various parts of New York State that I spoke with about bullying, most of them felt that the issue was now so well addressed that it had become almost a non-issue. They conceded that bullying definitely still existed in their schools, and most enumerated specific ways they respond to the problem, but it was clearly a topic that

had lost its punch for them. A number of administrators said they were too busy, early in August, to even want to talk about it.

Ask officials at the New York State Education Department, though, and you'll get a different story. Rebecca Gardner, Team Leader for Student Support Services at the State level, has been distraught about this issue for years: "I'm talking about the phone ringing off the hook from parents – crying parents, angry parents, really hysterical parents -- calling us about situations in schools where their children are being bullied. Their kids don't want to go to school, and they're exhibiting symptoms of trauma, ulcers, sleeplessness, all kinds of things. And I hear their stories about how they have done everything they can possibly think of -- they've gone to the teachers, the administrators, the superintendent, the school boards, and no one seems to care or know what to do."

I also talked with 30 high school students from all over New York State, and each one could immediately produce a painful instance of experiencing or witnessing a significant incident of physical or emotional harassment in school or on a school bus, and most of them said they usually didn't tell any adults about it.

At this point, the old story of the blind men and the elephant may provide an important, cautionary note. In the original parable, three blind men tried to construct a mental image of an elephant by feeling specific parts of the animal. One touched the ear, likened it to a fan, and concluded the rest of the animal was "wispy;" a second, having touched only two of the legs, decided it was just like "two big trees without any branches;" and the third grabbed the tail and declared it was "long and round and

very strong,” like a snake. Finally, in the discussion that ensued, each one insisted he was correct, and their literal blindness became figurative as well.

Can everyone I spoke with be telling the truth about his or her particular experiences with bullying? Of course they can. And it would be foolish to extrapolate from a relatively small sampling of interviews and generalize about a problem that is so specific yet pervasive at the same time. However, on the complicated social and political ocean that all schools have to navigate now, it’s becoming harder to put in at some quiet port and live unobserved. Reporters are always digging for a story; parents are more aware and demanding than ever; NYSED is tightening the monitoring screws; and, as long as power differentials exist, intimidation, bullying, harassment, menacing – call the behaviors what you will -- won’t just disappear because we’ve created some new strategies to address them. Like viruses, they often mutate and learn to hide better, and are often more virulent when they reappear.

Bullying happens at every school, to some extent, and if we’re honest we’ll admit that we’re missing a lot of what goes on – so what’s the most effective way to handle it? Should a school swallow the expense of hiring, for instance, Olweus anti-bullying trainers, or stick with home-grown, participatory witness-statements from victims and bystanders and contractual agreements for students who bully? Does it make any sense to bring in a name-brand, outside program, if developing and implementing a common-sense, respect-oriented and discipline-based behavior curriculum may actually work better in the long run and build more school unity?

There was clearly less public pressure on administrators in the pre-Columbine days. The tragedy created by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold awakened the entire country to what could ultimately happen when bullying wasn't adequately addressed, and it also muddied the waters by forcing us to acknowledge the paradox that some horribly violent perpetrators may actually start out as sympathetic victims of bullying.

One website, JaredStory.com, set up and maintained by a grieving mother, tells the story of her sixth-grade son, Jared, who was brutally assaulted by an older and much bigger boy she calls Brutus in May of 1998. The attack was classified as an assault by the County Deputy, and Jared's chiropractor, examining before and after-assault X-rays, said, "It looks like he's been through a major car accident." However, a Vice Principal at Jared's middle school questioned him and Brutus together, concluded that Jared was responsible for provoking the attack, and suspended both boys for three days for fighting. Four months later, hearing voices in his head and suffering from severe depression, Jared killed himself. His mother speculates that if this had happened after Columbine, maybe the school would have reacted with more concern and compassion.

Similarly, in 1995, in Le Roy High School, a rural school 25 miles from Rochester, New York, a student named Crystal Shelby told an assistant principal named Neil O'Brien that she had been threatened by three girls who were known to be hard cases – girls who had been suspended time and again. Mr. O'Brien told Crystal to go to her homeroom, and took no further action. Later on, Crystal was beaten so badly by these three girls in a hallway that she developed hydrocephalus, a dangerous pooling of fluid inside the cranium that, up to now, has required seven

hospital stays and six brain surgeries to treat. Subsequently, in 2002, a Genesee County jury found that the administrator “had acted with reckless disregard for the student’s safety,” and awarded the family an 11.4 million dollar judgment.

According to Jim Canfield, who was Executive Principal at W. K. Doyle Middle School in Troy for the last several years, events like those are much less likely to happen at his school today. “I don’t think that much bullying gets dismissed today. My teachers do a pretty good job of reporting, because today you have to worry about the after-effects. There’s no question that Columbine changed all this.”

What Jim instituted at Doyle was a shift from immediate punishment -- “Okay, you bullied this person? Two-day suspension -- the punishment. Boom!” -- to a more preventive system of discussions and follow-up agreements and rewards for good behaviors. “We changed our behavior referral forms and attached a follow-up agreement. Now in the discussion with the student, we were writing down what the appropriate behavior was, and then the student signs a contract saying he won’t do it again. That’s not saying the kid *isn’t* going to do that again, but we’re hoping that if the child hears it over and over again, there will be change.”

So Jim Canfield, at least, thinks bullying is an important concern. But for him and for other administrators in tough, urban middle schools, though, violent incidents are a constant reminder to be on guard for bullying or for other harassing behaviors that can spiral into worse situations. Doyle Middle School received a preliminary classification as a Persistently Dangerous school last summer, based

on the Uniform Violent Incident Reporting (UVIR) System data that was submitted to NYSED for the 2004-05 school year.

Maybe that's why Jim, while he spoke positively about the educational and behavioral changes they've made at Doyle, remained realistic about the challenge: "There is a sense of urgency to be very observant of victims. For instance, we had one kid who was being picked on who wrote a detailed map of how when he was leaving class he was going to use a knife to attack these kids who were harassing him. He had drips of blood coming from one kid he had killed on this map, by stabbing him in the chest. Teacher saw the kid writing this stuff down and told me and then this is big-time stuff. There's a lot of mental illness and a lot of build-up."

By contrast, Bolton Central School, on the west shore of Lake George, is a quiet K-12 school with less than 300 students. They do have bullying, mostly in the form of isolating certain students from a group, but no serious violence, as far as Guidance Counselor Michelle Borgh is concerned. "Because of our size, we just don't see a lot of physical violence, or even threats of it. I think, last year, we had one actual fight." That probably sounds like an impossible dream to beleaguered, inner-city administrators, but Michelle contends emotional bullying can be just as bad as physical violence. "I think, in a larger school, you always have someone to hang out with. When you have so few kids, you can be isolated."

Michelle admits that Bolton doesn't have a specific policy on bullying, but adds, "We do a lot of education, and students know different people that they can go and talk to. With bullying, a lot of it is learning to communicate, and giving those kids who are bullied a voice."

Luke Carnicelli, Principal of Central Square Middle School, a district ten miles north of Syracuse, oversees a population almost five times larger than all of the students at Bolton. There are 1400 students in Grades 6 to 8 at Central Square but, remarkably, little serious violence there either. “We don’t have a fight that often, and we really don’t have weapons like knives here,” Luke asserts. “There are buildings with fights every day, but in our building of 1400 students, we might have a serious physical altercation once a month. And that’s something we feel very proud of. We don’t want a fight to occur, so how can we intervene? What can we do so nobody is going to get hurt? How do we reduce the physical violence in our building to zero? That’s our goal. If you don’t set your goal at zero, you’re not doing the best thing for students.”

Luke relies on two strategies to shoot for that goal of zero: he employs a New York State trooper as a school resource officer to provide education and intervention for his building, and he relies on what he calls Witness Statement Forms. “If a student is feeling any pressure from another student that’s not appropriate, we encourage the student to write a statement. The student needs to tell somebody, and the writing process weeds out the concerns that are not valid. If they want us to intervene, they’ll write it down. They can come into the guidance office; they can come into the principal’s office. And it’s very relaxing when they do write it. There’s no pressure.”

There may be no pressure, but students do have to provide names: Who was the victim? Who was the bully? Who was standing around, watching? And Central Square administrators react to a witness statement the same day it’s written. “If you

let it fester, the rumors can get the best of you and spin out of control,” Luke says. “You read it, you prioritize: do we need to address it today or can we address it tomorrow?”

“Are we going to stop bullying? Absolutely not. But we’re trying. I think that’s the most important thing. So when parents are looking at all the scary things that are happening globally, they can look at what’s happening locally, with their kids at school, and be positive about it.”

Cathy Welling, a Prevention Coordinator for NYSED, agrees that bullying “is here, it’s present, and it’s not going away. In some schools it’s being dealt with, and in others it’s just sort of being swept aside because it hasn’t really reared its ugly head or because they haven’t had a lawsuit yet. We have known forever that if kids don’t feel safe, they can’t learn, but now we have some hard data and research to back it up.” Cathy primarily handles bullying prevention for SED, and she confides that she’s really busy these days, especially with the proactive districts who feel that addressing bullying is a major priority.

But she is also a Certified Trainer for the Olweus Bullying Prevention program, which is based on changing the social norms in a school. “The Olweus Program is really trying to address the whole school and say, ‘Look, we have to become a place where we do not tolerate this behavior. And not only we as adults don’t tolerate it, but we have to bring the kids to the point where they don’t tolerate it either.’” Cathy pointed to the Guilderland School District as one that’s really trying to approach this problem from a systematic and systemic perspective.

Jim Dillon, Principal of Lynnwood Elementary School in that district, formed a task force several years ago to address concerns that parents had raised and to research the problem of bullying. As they read the literature, they concluded that it wasn't a discipline issue, but a culture and education issue. "One huge mistake that is made in dealing with bullying," Jim explains, "is if you get it mixed up with conflict. It's important to keep the distinction. Not every mean word is bullying. You have to understand about the power differential – the big aspect of bullying – and that sometimes is overlooked by students and parents. If you try to do a conflict resolution between a kid who is truly a victim and a kid or group of kids who are bullies, you're going to traumatize that victim even more so."

What Jim also discovered was that much of the bullying wasn't happening in school: it took place on the bus, often initiated by kids who were outstanding citizens in the building. "I think what happens on the bus, to briefly summarize it, is kids get on there and they're used to having a teacher in front of them all day. Okay, then they go on the bus and the adult in charge has his or her back to them, and all the frustrations and all the things that happened during the day – it's sort of like a *Lord of the Flies* type of thing. Survival of the fittest. The older kids claim territory, and the noise level is high, and kids can get pretty good at doing things and not being noticed. If you were to create an environment that would invite a mosaic of inappropriate behavior, it would be a bus."

So Jim invented a program called "The Peaceful School Bus," and he has just signed a contract to produce an instructional book and DVD about it. Part of that program involves raising the status of the bus drivers, and another part

creates an identity for the group of students who ride each specific bus, to get them to take ownership and to see that everyone is in it together.

Four years into the Olweus Program and seven into his “Peaceful School Bus” initiative, Jim feels that they’re successfully addressing the problem and moving ahead, but that “kids are works in progress, and I think we forget that. It’s when you change the school culture, that’s when the hidden information will come out. If you don’t change the culture, the bullying will build up over time and you will end up with violence.”

Mitch Hahn, an English teacher at Guilderland High School who has been involved with the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network for a number of years, also believes that enlisting administrators, counselors, and teachers in the battle against bullying is only a first step. “We have to empower students to take on the issue of bullying and respect, especially as it works toward diversity,” Hahn insists. “If you speak to gay and lesbian students, who are minority students in many schools, I think you will hear they’ve been trying to bring light to the issue of bullying and harassment since long before Columbine.”

Through his Leadership Training Institute, Hahn conducts all-day workshops with high school students, guiding them through activities that honestly examine difficult and persistent social problems. “I don’t think the issue of bullying is dead at all,” Hahn continues. “To me, that would be like saying the issue of prejudice is dead. Just because we’re responding to the issue doesn’t mean that it’s not alive and doesn’t mean that we don’t need to keep finding new and different ways to address the problem.”

So what are the new and different ways? It depends on whom you ask. It's a complicated issue, and we've only begun the discussion here. But at the very least, what was overlooked in the past can serve as a necessary spur for future action. As Cathy Welling advises, "The problem is that to tackle a problem like this, it's not that you can just do one assembly and assume that it's going to be done. You really need to have a continuous effort – it can't be the *programme du jour*, you know? We're talking about changing a school culture, and that doesn't happen over night. It takes time. It takes effort."

