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Going Back To The Basics To Address School Bullying

by Dr. Brandie Oliver, Butler University School Counseling Program

Despite the increase of public attention, awareness campaigns, and legislative mandates, bullying continues to negatively impact the lives of students in our schools and communities. Awareness is a first step, but it's action that changes the world.

October is National Bullying Prevention Month, a perfect time to ask these questions: What action is *your* school community taking to address bullying? How does *your* school culture impact bullying? What are the components of an effective comprehensive bullying prevention and intervention program? What can *I* do?

A comprehensive program begins with a focus on prevention. A "back to the basics" approach to prevention is to focus on student relationships. Taking time to create a school community where relationships are the foundational building blocks will help create learning environments where students feel safe, supported, and secure. While I recognize the enormous demands placed on educators, I want to challenge all of you to make time to grow and foster both student-to-teacher relationships and peer-to-peer relationships. How can we expect our students to show empathy, advocate for others, and make good choices when we do not provide them the time or space to develop relationships? We must lead by example and model the behaviors that we desire and expect from our students.

When relationships are at the core, a positive school culture and climate is established. However there are other layers to consider. All school employees, parents, and students need to have training on this issue. While we are fortunate to have excellent speakers in our state that provide motivational and educational presentations on this topic, it is important to develop ongoing activities, lessons, and student projects that reinforce the key messages so it becomes embedded in the culture of the school. Additional layers of a comprehensive program would include improved supervision (i.e., playgrounds, cafeteria, locker rooms, etc.), non-punitive disciplinary methods providing students opportunities to learn new behaviors/responses, classroom management, culturally responsive training, classroom norms informed by student-voice, and embedding social and emotional learning principles in every-day instruction and practice. The more components adopted in a school, then the greater the reduction in bullying behaviors. When a student exhibits bullying behavior, it is necessary to address this inappropriate and intolerable behavior and provide the student with opportunities to learn appropriate prosocial behaviors.

Action can begin in your own office, classroom, and school. It is as simple as engaging students in a conversation to begin to learn their stories and discover our connections to one another. So take a moment and "go back to the basics," as this strategy is free!

"It's the little conversations that build the relationships and make an impact on each student."
~Robert John Meehan

Additional information can be found at www.doe.in.gov/student-services/bullying-prevention-intervention-indiana.

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