

General Focus: Violence in Schools

From *When will schools take bullying seriously?*

By Daniel B Weddle

Trial

Washington

Oct 2003

...When I was a high school teacher, we had a saying: Put out matches, not forest fires. One child making fun of another was a lighted match. A student throwing a punch in the hallway was a forest fire. We worried about the little acts that led to larger acts, and we responded early, while we could still prevent a child from getting hurt....

Unfortunately, too many school officials behave as if little acts of aggression deserve little attention. Compounding the problem, they often underestimate the seriousness of patterns of aggression-bullying-that do real and long-lasting harm to children. Victims are left with three unhealthy options: to continue to suffer, to stay away from school, or to retaliate.

Bullying can destroy victims' desire to learn-and even to live-and can leave them debilitated well into adulthood. The magnitude of the problem and the seriousness of its effects have been thoroughly documented. There is no longer any real debate that bullying is one of the most pervasive and damaging threats that exist in the schools....

Bullying, as it is usually defined in the studies conducted over the past decade, means persistent, pervasive harassment targeting a specific individual. Typically conducted behind teachers' backs, it may include threats and physical assaults. It may consist of daily cruelties designed to make a child appear weak and vulnerable in front of his or her peers. Bullying may be a systematic isolation that strips a child of friends and leaves him or her shunned by everyone in the class. It often involves the acquiescence and even participation of the larger group. It is an ongoing type of abuse that usually requires a seemingly insurmountable imbalance of power....Other bystanders frequently join in the bullying and begin to view the victims as somehow deserving of the treatment. The bullies themselves have a remarkably high probability of a criminal conviction by the time they reach their early 20s....

Unfortunately, school officials have little legal incentive to embrace significant reform because they are seldom held responsible even for serious outbreaks of violence among students, much less for the ongoing harassment that occurs routinely in their halls and classrooms. Courts, hesitant to hold teachers and administrators liable for the intentional acts of third parties, leave most victims of student violence and harassment without remedy against the adults in whose care they were injured....

...For example, a Louisiana court held that despite a virtual absence of supervision in a locker room where a student was violently attacked by three other students, the injuries were not foreseeable. According to one witness, "[A]lmost every day . . . somebody [was] getting pushed

or shoved into lockers, rolled around, thrown around . . . hair being pulled, arms twisted...."

...the court reasoned that because there was "no prior history of any violence" between the plaintiff and his three attackers and because the school had no knowledge of the daily "roughhousing" in the locker room during that particular class, the school could not have foreseen the injury....

Schools officials must be given real incentives to vigorously confront the problem of bullying and related violence. First should be a new definition of reasonable supervision, one that bases school officials' liability on their failure to take deliberate, research-based action to provide a bullying-free environment for their students....

Victims' advocates should direct courts and legislatures to the substantial body of educational research concerning bullying and its prevention. Once courts and lawmakers align the definition of reasonable supervision with that research, the schools will rethink their own concepts of what is reasonable. Schools will no longer be willing to set the bar so low that children are virtually guaranteed to suffer torment at the hands of their peers, with all of the attendant injuries for the victims, the bystanders, and the bullies....

From Commentary; Silly Laws Are No Way to Fight Bullying

By Kay Hymowitz
[HOME EDITION]
Los Angeles Times
Apr 18, 2004

You know for sure the state of California is serious about school reform when it threatens to withhold money from a district for refusing to institute a policy to protect second-grade boys who want to wear skirts.

That's right. The state may show its deep commitment to education by holding back millions of dollars from Westminster schools in Orange County because three board members voted to reject the state's wording in an antidiscrimination policy designed to protect transgendered students (all .001% of them) in the district's 13 elementary and three middle schools.

This latest example of political correctness run amok may sound like another kooky California story, but in fact the flap, whose origins lie in the lofty-sounding California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000, taps into a serious misunderstanding about how to improve school discipline, a misunderstanding that reaches far beyond the Golden State....

In an attempt to address youth violence in the aftermath of the massacre at Columbine, the bill's architects sought to ensure all students "the inalienable right to attend campuses that are safe, secure and peaceful."

To this end, legislators required that schools stop discrimination and harassment of students based on qualities like race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or -- and this is the sticking point in Westminster -- "perceived" gender.

Problem is, despite the gut instincts of liberal legislators, there's little evidence linking school violence -- or bullying, which educators these days usually see as a prime cause of that violence - - with racism, sexism and homophobia.

Sure, there is racial tension in the schools. And there's no question that schoolyard bullies look on gay kids the way hunters look at a grazing deer. A recent study titled "Safe Place to Learn" by the National Center for Lesbian Rights says that 27% of students say they are harassed for not conforming to sexually stereotypical behavior.

But as any 10-year-old knows, all kinds of kids who don't fit into neat, socially acceptable categories get harassed: kids who are short or fat, who wear dorky clothes or geeky glasses, who smell bad or walk funny. What legislators don't seem to grasp is that kids bully -- and turn, in some cases, to more serious forms of violence - - not because they are prejudiced in any familiar adult sense but because they are crude, Darwinian creatures trying to stake out territory and proclaim their dominance.

A UCLA study published in the December issue of *Pediatrics* found that bullies are usually "cool" kids "high in social status." These are kids who reinforce their social power by lording over their peers who are for whatever reason perceived as weak or vulnerable. This explains why so many bullies are jocks and so many of their victims are 90-pound weaklings.

It also explains why state legislatures, or laws like AB 537, can't solve the problem. In order to deal with bullying, harassment and violence, educators have to smash the peer-driven hierarchy that sets the tone in most middle and high schools. Schools without bullies -- and though rare, there are such things -- are places where dynamic principals build a supportive but serious community whose norms are set by adults.

Instead of promoting the personal touch and adult-driven ethos essential for healthy school communities, laws like AB 537 add to the regulations and paperwork that turn principals into distracted bureaucrats and quasi-police officers....

The truth is that laws, bureaucrats and legalistic, politically correct policies imposed from the top down can't stop harassment and violence in the schools of Orange County or anywhere else. Only front-line educators can do that.

From Foiling a Bully

Jon Marshall

Parenting

Apr 2004

As many as 50 percent of all grade-schoolers are bullied at some point, but that doesn't make it any easier to know that it's your own child who's being harassed by another kid. Taking the bullying seriously is the first step toward helping him. And as much as you might like to, you can't be there to stand up for him. You can teach him how to deal with his tormentor, though....

Remind your child that it's not his fault he's being hounded, then explain that it might help to find an alternate route home or a different place to sit at lunch, says Michele Borba, the author of *Don't Give Me. That Attitude! 24 Rude, Selfish, Insensitive Things Kids Do and How to Stop Them*.

Stay calm. Bullies love to see their victims get upset, so help your grade-schooler come up with coolheaded ways to respond. He can simply walk away or offer up a reply like "So?" or "Just stop it." Have him try out his lines on you, and coach him to hold his head high and speak firmly. Advise him not to insult the bully back—it'll only make things worse.

Stick with friends. There's safety in numbers. If your child doesn't have pals he can rely on, sign him up for activities where he can meet other kids with similar interests.

If he's not able to stop the pest, you may have to step in—especially if things get worse or the bullying gets physical. Talk to your child's teacher or principal. Make sure there's always a grown-up around when the kids are on the playground or in the cafeteria and that the school has a policy for dealing with bullies. As angry as you may be about the situation, the best way to help your child is to work with the school staff. That's setting a better example, and protecting your child too.

From *In Class and in Prison; By seeking to avoid trouble on high school campuses, Los Angeles school leaders are letting gangs call the shots--a practice that sends the wrong message to the district's students.*

[HOME EDITION]

Los Angeles Times

Apr 11, 2004

...In a sign of the pervasive presence of street gangs in this city, the nation's second-largest school district has been forced to bend to the gangs' mob-like influence. Police officers patrol all 49 high school campuses. Administrators rely on student informants to warn them when gang feuds are brewing. Student transfer plans are color-coded to keep kids from rival neighborhoods apart, whether or not they are gang members. It is no longer just the locked gates, chain-link fences and metal detectors on campuses that evoke a penitentiary comparison, but the machinations required to blunt the effect of gang rivalries in classrooms and schoolyards.

It's youth relations counselor Joel Juntilla escorting a 14-year-old with gang ties around his new school, so the "shot-callers" of a resident rival gang can meet him and let Juntilla know whether the kid's likely to make it through lunch without getting jumped. It's a San Fernando Valley vice principal turning away a transfer student because he hails from a neighborhood that is at war

with a gang whose members already attend the school. It is understanding that you can't send a Crip to Fremont High; that Jefferson High is home to the Bloods; that kids crowded out of Manual Arts, considered "mostly blue," will be bused past closer uncrowded schools out to Chatsworth or Taft in Woodland Hills, because Crips are safe on those campuses. It's a dress code that is dictated by danger: no baggy pants, caps or bandannas, no shoelaces that are red or blue -- nothing that might signal gang ties.

And it's not a problem confined to the inner city or to black and Latino kids. "We've got violent Korean youth gangs, and these are kids earning A's in school," said Debbie Leidner, superintendent of the district's northwest Valley region. "The reality is there is no high school that is free of gangs within the [surrounding] community ... so we have to be incredibly careful."

This preoccupation with gang affiliation is not new. School attendance boundaries, and even the dividing lines for the system's governing mini-districts, have been drawn in the past with gang turf claims in mind. But the situation has become more complicated -- and more volatile -- in recent years because of several colliding factors: rapid demographic shifts in the district and accompanying ethnic tensions; overcrowding that sends almost 7,000 high school students to campuses outside their neighborhoods; the territoriality that results from gang control of the narcotics trade; cheap, easy access to guns on the street; and a youth and media culture that glamorizes the gang lifestyle.

Understanding the gang calculus is now part of the equation of being a principal. "You could have a campus of 3,000 kids and you get one or two players [from the wrong gang], and that campus becomes electric," said Bruce Takeguma, who organizes the district's busing program. For students, the threat of gang rivalries complicates the most basic decisions and colors the simplest interactions. A small slight -- stepping on someone's shoe, bumping into a gang member's girlfriend -- can turn into a major conflagration.

School district officials say they are boxed in by competing agendas: the need to maintain campus safety and the responsibility to give gang members a chance at education. "We make these accommodations with a very clear understanding of what we're doing," says Supt. Roy Romer. "We have to run this institution so that every kid has a right to come in this door and get an education."...

We know that the school district didn't create the gang problem. But its make-do attitude of managing the situation allows everyone to avoid dealing with the fact that Los Angeles, with an estimated 100,000 gang members, endures the worst gang violence in the nation. It's a perverse moral argument to suggest that, in the name of keeping kids safe, control be ceded to street gangs to dictate who is allowed to attend which school and who is to be kept away. Sanctioning the segregation only institutionalizes the gangsters' power. What's happening in the public high schools of Los Angeles is a direct reflection of the dangerous climate of gang-controlled streets. What's required from our leaders is not capitulation. What's called for first is outrage.

From A teacher fights back against unruly kids ; As educators face more abuse, some are turning to courts to restore order in classroom

By D.J. Burrough

[ALL Edition]

Christian Science Monitor

Apr 23, 2004

Elizabeth Anne Moore, a reading teacher at a west Phoenix high school, has a new ending and a new title for the 350-page book she has written about being an educator. She'll call it, "Violated No More."

This week, Ms. Moore won a court injunction against a 15-year- old student who had been harassing her in class - including, by her account, telling her daily to "go [expletive] myself."

In an era when teachers often have little recourse to deal with unruly students, Moore decided to use the legal system to restore order in the classroom - and her life. It worked: A justice of the peace ordered the student not to have any contact with her on or off school grounds.

It's an unusual tale of a teacher fighting back and offers a look into how difficult it can be for educators to protect themselves from abusive students at a time when many schools have "no touch" policies and teachers are afraid to discipline kids for fear of lawsuits.

From 1997 to 2001, teachers were the victims of approximately 1.3 million nonfatal crimes at school, according to a survey published by the National Center for Education Statistics.

...Public school educators around the country are turning to the courts in a final attempt to protect themselves from children who can't be kept in check by the existing disciplinary rules.

"It shows just how far things have gone," said Nancy Udell, a lawyer with Common Good, a nonprofit group that is lobbying for legislation that would give teachers greater latitude in meting out classroom punishment. "The days when the teacher could give a stern look to a student and have that child sit up and take notice are clearly gone."

...The vast majority of public schools now preclude school employees from touching any students, whether it's to give them a friendly hug or to force them to sit.

In November, Philadelphia teacher David Pitone, established "Teachers and Students for School Civility" after failing to secure a court order to eject unruly students from his classroom. He had sent the students to the principal's office; they were promptly sent back.

Since the mid-1970s, handing out a suspension or expulsion has become difficult. In a landmark case, the Supreme Court ruled that students were protected by the 14th Amendment and couldn't be denied a public education without due process. In the New York school system, the form required to start a suspension is 100 pages long.

In Moore's case, she first complained to school officials on March 18. The student was placed in a three-day after-school detention program, but the behavior continued. On April 7, the same day she filed for the injunction, Moore filed a new complaint with the school and the student received a five-day suspension and was not allowed back into her classroom when he returned to campus.

"I am sexually harassed and abused by his vulgar language and unable to protect my other students from him," Moore wrote in her complaint. "His father tells me he cannot control [his son]."

Teachers who don't have the support of parents, the administration, or the district have nowhere else to turn but the courts, said Alice Finn Gartell, an attorney for the Arizona Education Association - a teacher lobby - and author of "Violence and Threats in the Classroom." "When things become impossible for a teacher they have to count on the administration for support," Ms. Gartell said. "Sometimes it's there and sometimes it's not."

It's not unheard of for school administrators to ask teachers not to report assaults or threats. "There are many instances when school employees were told not to call the police because they didn't want a bad reputation," she said.

Teachers and principals alike are fearful of taking disciplinary action against a student because of legal reprisals from angry parents. A recent Harris Interactive poll found that 77 percent of principals and 61 percent of teachers "avoid decisions that they think are right simply because they might be challenged legally."

Educators had hoped to get help from President Bush in 2002, when he signed, as part of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Teacher Protection Act - which says that K-12 school employees are immune from liability for injuring a student. The immunity only applies if the injury occurs while the employee is engaged in "efforts to control, discipline, expel, or suspend a student or maintain order."

Teachers feel that the law doesn't do enough to shield them from frivolous lawsuits and provides no funding for mounting a legal defense....

Moore has received widespread support from teachers throughout the state.

From Merchants of death: Media violence and American Empire

By David Trend.

[Harvard Educational Review.](#)

...Pick up any newspaper or turn on the TV and you will find either violent imagery or a story about violent media. Like the wars on poverty, drugs, and terrorism, campaigns to stem the tide of media violence have failed. By current estimates, a young person will witness 200,000 simulated violent acts and 40,000 dramatized murders by the age of eighteen. Paradoxically, this

growth in simulated violence has occurred as the lived experience of physical violence continues to decline in the Western and more privileged parts of the world....

Significant in contemporary television, movies, and computer games that feature hyperviolence is the extent to which harm strikes outside of suburban America. Violence mostly happens to "someone else." It tells audiences, often inaccurately, that brutality and suffering exist in some far away place, but not at home. This is what has afforded recent sniper attacks, child abductions, and office bombings such emotionalism: the recognition that bad things don't only happen to other people. Yet contrary to speculation following the events of September 11, 2001, that a fearful public would avoid movies and television about "homeland" atrocities, the opposite has occurred. Fed a daily diet of sensationalized news stories and color-coded terrorist attack warnings, the public craving for tales of war and apocalypse has grown, as evidenced by the popularity of recent films like *Collateral Damage* (2002) and *The Sum of All Fears* (2002). Connections to the 9/11 events can be quite explicit; currently, a leading computer game among U.S. teenagers is "Counter-Strike," in which players choose roles as terrorists or counter-terrorists....

As much as people crave violent media, they still worry about media's effects. To a great extent this concern has been fed by a small number of tragic and highly publicized shootings by teenagers and children. In May 2001, a 15-year-old boy killed two students and injured thirteen at a school in Santee, California. In May 2000, a 13-year-old murdered a teacher at a school in Florida. One of the most publicized of these events occurred in April 1999, when two students used guns and bombs to kill thirteen people at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Earlier killings by teenagers took place in Arkansas and Mississippi. Accounts of these incidents have offered a variety of explanations for why these shootings occurred. All of the assailants were boys with ready access to guns. Most of the boys had become alienated from school. Like almost every teenager in the country, these boys had consumed copious amounts of violent media.

Many analysts of the school shootings see the media as a background issue at best. But for others, the verisimilitude and timing of the recent shootings is just too close to films like *Basketball Diaries* (1995), in which students imagine going on a shooting spree similar to what later happened at Columbine. The apparent connection to the film is simply too compelling to resist, despite the lack of evidence to support it. This is how public anxieties are mapped onto the media violence debate - by inference, association, and circumstance, rather than reasoned analysis. Typical of media violence discourse, the concern is greatest for groups perceived as highly impressionable, most often children or teenagers. However, people of color, the undereducated, the mentally ill, and the poor are also targeted. Driven by media-fed anxieties about crime and social decay, America's White middle class readily accepts the idea that these "other" groups need to be protected from the poisoning effects of violent images or music....

From Does Video Game Violence Sow Aggression? Studies Probe Effects of Virtual Violence on Children

By Brian Vastag

The Journal of the American Medical Association
Apr 21, 2004

THE TWO COLORADO TEENAGERS who killed 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School in 1999 spent endless hours blasting opponents in violent video games. Millions of children and adolescents who will never touch an actual firearm continue to do the same....

"Little kids do imitate video games, but the question is whether it leads to realworld violence," said Juliet Van Eenwyk, PhD, who studies the issue for the Washington State Department of Public Health, Seattle. Van Eenwyk and others addressed the topic last month at a roundtable on the topic sponsored by the National Academies (formerly the National Academy of Sciences), in Washington, DC....

A 2001 literature review by Van Eenwyk and colleague Lillian Bensley, PhD, tallied just 28 journal articles on the topic (J Adolesc Health. 2001;29:244-257). The most consistent finding: children younger than 10 years show increased aggression immediately after playing violent video games.

"You'll see an increase in aggressive cognition, aggressive action, a decrease in pro-social behavior," said Susan Calvert, PhD, who studies how children learn from video games at Georgetown University, Washington, DC....

If video games do increase violent tendencies outside the laboratory, the explosion of gaming over the past decade—from \$3.2 billion in sales in 1995 to \$7 billion in 2003, according to industry figures—would suggest a parallel trend in youth violence. Instead, youth violence has been decreasing. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that adolescent weapon-carrying and fighting decreased substantially in the 1990s (MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep. 2000;49(SS-5):1-94). Homicide rates among youths also dropped substantially in the 1990s, from 20.5 to 11.7 per 100 000 for middle and late teenagers, and from 2.5 to 1.5 per 100 000 for early teens.

But between 1998 and 2000, a handful of massively publicized school shootings ratcheted the topic onto the agendas of concerned parents and law-makers. One researcher, Craig Anderson, PhD, a psychologist at Iowa State University in Ames, garnered a large amount of media attention as a "go-to" expert who campaigned against violent video games. In July 2000, a coalition of health groups (including the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Psychological Association) issued a statement that named all violent media, including video games, as contributing to youth violence (<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/jstmtevc.htm>). At a press briefing, Sen Sam Brownback (R, Kan), who had pushed the medical associations to make the statement, flatly stated that "violent entertainment is a public health hazard."

...Outside of the National Science Foundation project, scattered research is appearing more frequently. The *Journal of Adolescence* devoted its February 2004 issue to the topic, publishing a handful of new research reports and a meta-analysis from Anderson.

The largest study in the issue comes from Douglas Gentile, PhD, Iowa State University, and colleagues, who studied 600 seventh and eighth-graders at four schools in the Midwest. They found large sex differences: boys reported 13 hours of game play per week while girls reported 5 hours of play; half of all boys named a game with "high violent content" as a favorite, whereas 20% of girls did.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

But the most significant correlation between "trait hostility" and aggressive behavior came not from the amount of time spent playing violent video games, but rather from the level of parental involvement in purchasing and playing games. Children of parents who set limits and monitored game purchases were much less likely to fight or argue with teachers....

New, unpublished research from the Washington State Healthy Youth Survey supports the notion. The 10% of 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th graders who say they play video games for 4 or more hours each day were more likely to be aggressive than their less thumb-stressed classmates....