

An “A” Sample

Writing Prompt: What, in your opinion, is the best way to stop bullying in schools?

Changing Hearts, Not Laws

In Phoenix, a high school teacher has to take a student to court in order to prevent him from “harassing her, including, by her account, telling her daily to ‘go [expletive] herself.’” In New York public schools, the form to get a student like this suspended “is 100 pages long” (Burrough 6-7). These strange examples point to the difficulty of dealing with bullies in schools across the country where violent harassment of students and teachers has become common, although teachers and school administrators often do little to stop it for fear of being dragged into court themselves. This has caused some to call for yet more laws to hold principals and teachers responsible for doing nothing about bullying. New laws, however, will do little to solve the problem without establishing well-organized anti-bully education programs which include students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

Even if a law could make clear how much supervision should be required, this would not do very much to stop most of the harassment unless we spend huge amounts of money to make schools feel like prisons. Anyone who has worked or gone to a modern public school will tell you that most bullying is hard to spot. It doesn’t simply happen in open lunch areas or right out in hallways. It starts with remarks about a kid that are repeated by other kids until it causes a general feeling that it is all right to harass that kid and even that he or she deserves it (Weddle 1). The acts of bullying that teachers or administrators can see are only the most obvious symptoms of that general attitude. Anybody who has spent time in public school will also tell you that most bullying goes unreported, and it’s hard to get witnesses even when it is. This is because there is a code of silence, a belief that you just don’t tell on other kids, even if you’re the kid being bullied. So what could laws do about it? Nothing, unless of course we install cameras to watch every inch of the school and a lot more security people to patrol. As Kay Hymowitz says in “Silly Laws Are No Way to Fight Bullying,” “laws like AB 537 add to the regulations and paperwork that turn principals into distracted bureaucrats and quasi-police officers...” (3).

But even if schools do become more like prisons, all the policing won’t solve the basic problem. Only well-organized education programs can do that. As Hymowitz says, “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” (3). A UCLA study showed that harassment is started mostly by “cool kids” who are admired or feared by other kids. They bully weaker or less popular kids to show their power and status. That’s one reason why so few kids do anything about it, since they themselves do not want to lose status and become unpopular (Weddle 2). No amount of policing is going to change this. As Jon Marshall says, parents “may have to step in” (4). But they have to step in a long time before the bullying starts if they really want to protect their children. They must insist that schools form discussion and education programs that involve all students, all teachers, all administrators, and as many parents as possible, because we need to change the attitude and beliefs that support this “peer-driven hierarchy.” And we can’t do that

without constantly reinforcing that to make yourself feel powerful by making others suffer is a sign of weakness, not strength, as if the person doing it is afraid he or she doesn't really have that power or status. We need to change the reasons kids admire other kids. That can only happen by creating a new kind of school community, not with a law or more security guards or cameras.

If politicians want to commit tax money to the problem of bullying, they should give it to schools with the requirement that it be spent on programs that involve students, teachers, administrators and parents in a real effort to change attitudes. We need to change kids feelings, not add more pointless laws that make politicians feel good.

Commentary on the "A" Sample

Paragraph One: The essay begins with relevant, compelling anecdotes, brief examples taken from the readings that illustrate the problem and get the reader interested. The writer then applies these anecdotes to a direct, clear explanation of the problem. The thesis sentence demonstrates a depth of critical thinking in presenting the writer's main objection to the opposition's view and links that objection to the main argument. The writer demonstrates both good sentence variety and transition, utilizing phrases such as "These strange examples point to..." and "This has caused..." to emphasize a logical connection of ideas.

Paragraph Two: The paragraph not only begins with a topic sentence that is clear, effectively worded and slightly more specific than the thesis point, but guides the paragraph toward an analysis of the opposition's views with the most important points of criticism. The writer counters the opposition's claims, thoroughly explaining how bullying really begins and spreads and why increased security measures would not be effective, then finishes the criticism with a well-chosen quotation. Throughout the paragraph, the writer varies the sentence patterns and links the sentences and ideas with transitional words and phrases such as "This is because" so that readers clearly see the coherent steps in the argument. The writer makes use of and correctly cites both paraphrase and quotation. Although there are minor breaks in wording and style, the paragraph is free of major errors.

Paragraph Three: The paragraph begins with an effective transition from the previous idea and clearly introduces the main argument regarding "well-organized education programs." The writer then introduces a relevant and effective quotation concerning the "peer-driven hierarchy" and applies a UCLA study as evidence, suggesting that "no amount of policing is going to change this." The writer clearly explains the hierarchy that causes and supports bullying, then just as clearly explains the approach that would be necessary to break that hierarchy, finishing the paragraph with an effective closing sentence which strongly emphasizes both the main argument and previous criticism of the opposing view. The paragraph once again displays sentence variety, effective transition, and a combination of correctly-cited paraphrase and quotation. Although there are minor breaks in wording and style, the paragraph is free of major errors.

Paragraph Four: Although brief, the conclusion suggests appropriate action and effectively summarizes the writer's main points. The essay finishes with a strong closing sentence that reemphasizes both the criticism of the opposing view and the writer's central argument.

Grammar and Punctuation: The essay is free of major errors, although it has a few awkward sentences and breaks in the voice reference, particularly the use of "you" as a general voice.