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Experts: Bullying is a community problem

Experts say it will take everyone, not just the schools, to find a fix.

By Lindsey Ziliak

Tribune staff writer

— Experts say as many as 160,000 kids in the United States stay home from school every day because they're scared of bullies.

Representatives from Bully SafeUSA recently told Howard County families that bullying is a complicated problem that will take the whole community to fix.

“Everyone has a role to play in preventing bullying,” said Dorothy Crenshaw, with BullySafeUSA, an anti-bullying organization.

Schools have an obvious role, she said. They're often the first line of defense.

Crenshaw recently worked with an Indianapolis school to come up with a detailed anti-bullying plan.

Most schools have anti-bullying policies, she said. The problem is, they're often vague, and teachers or other employees don't know how to put them into practice, she said. That makes the policies essentially useless.

If schools are going to have a plan, teachers, custodians, bus drivers and any other person who has contact with the children should be trained in how to use that plan, she said.

Bus drivers can be a real asset in curtailing the problem, Crenshaw said. Buses are a hot spot for bullies.

So are bathrooms. She said a custodian cleaning a restroom might be able to stop a bully from attacking a student.

But when bullying does occur, schools should document what happened and to whom. They should track that data to gauge how big the problem is, Crenshaw said.

Crenshaw acknowledged that schools only have so many resources available to them. That's where parents can step in and help, she said.

Right now, Crenshaw is training parents at the Indianapolis school she's working with.

The simplest thing parents and even neighbors and relatives can do is model good behavior, said Tracie

Wells, who also represents BullySafeUSA.

“There are little eyes watching you everywhere you go,” Wells said.

If adults model aggressive, bully-like behavior, then children will likely follow suit, Wells said. And if adults don’t step in and help when they see other people being bullied, children are less likely to step in when they witness a similar incident at school.

Wells said parents can also spend time in their children’s schools.

“How many times are you in the school volunteering and making sure those problem areas are manned?” she asked parents. “It’s worth a vacation day every now and then to help out at the school.”

Wells said the students themselves have the greatest power. Bullying won’t end until they take ownership of the issue, she said.

She said 70 percent of students are witnesses to bullying. Many of them don’t step in because they’re afraid they’ll become the bully’s next target.

Wells reminded children there’s other things they can do. They can report it to a teacher without anyone knowing they did. They can approach the victim later and offer to be a friend to them, she said.

“When kids start owning this problem, that’s when things will change,” she said.

She said they need to be addressing the issue on Facebook, through text messages, video announcements at school or YouTube videos.

Students need to tell their stories. It’s going to be a viral effort, she said.

Wells said she just hopes it happens soon.

“Hopefully, it won’t take a tragedy for us to come together,” she said.

- Lindsey Ziliak, Tribune education reporter, may be reached at 765-454-8585 or lindsey.ziliak@kokomotribune.com.