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# excellence & ethics

The Smart & Good Schools Education Letter

## Prevent Bullying, Promote Kindness: 20 Things All Schools Can Do

by Tom Lickona

**P**hoebe Prince, 15, moved to the U.S. from Ireland in summer, 2009. At her high school that fall, some students called her an “Irish slut” after she had a brief relationship with a popular senior boy. They would knock books out of her hands, attack her on Facebook, and send her threatening text messages, day after day.

On January 14, 2010, students harassed her in the library, lunchroom, and hallways, and threw a canned drink at her as she walked home. That afternoon, her sister found her hanging from a stairwell in their home. Six students, two boys and four girls, were charged with felonies including statutory rape, harassment, and violation of civil rights.

**C**arl Walker-Hoover had always enjoyed sports, Scouts, and school. In 6<sup>th</sup>-grade, however, he began acting out in class. He eventually told his mother that some other kids had been picking on him, saying he acted “like a girl.” She complained to the school, but he wouldn’t tell on his classmates. The harassment continued. On April 6, 2009, his mother found Carl hanging from a rafter.

It took a rash of “bullycides” like these to finally galvanize society’s resolve to deal proactively with school bullying. Nearly every state now has some form of bullying prevention legislation.

New Jersey’s 2010 law is one of the toughest. School personnel must report bullying incidents to the principal on the same day they learn about it. An investigation must begin within one school day and be completed within 10 school days, after which a solution must be carried out. The law applies to all school-related functions, and to bullying off school grounds (such as cyberbullying) “whose effects carry into school.” Finally, there must be “year-round anti-bullying instruction appropriate to each grade.”

### The High Costs of Cruelty

**S**tudent suicides are the most tragic consequence of peer abuse, but far from the only cost. On any school day, an estimated 160,000 U.S. students stay home because they don’t want to face peer persecution. Many become anxious and depressed; others have sought revenge. A U.S. Secret Service study found that most school shooters had been bullied.

Kids who are habitually cruel are deforming their own character, with long-term costs for society. By adulthood, one study found, 60% of school bullies will have a criminal conviction.

The academic costs are also high. Peer exclusion in kindergarten is associated with decreased class participation



and lower academic achievement in later grades. In a study of 2,300 middle schoolers, bullying victims had significantly lower grade-point averages than their non-victimized peers.

### Defining the Problem

**C**learly, schools must take strong steps to curb bullying that involves dominant aggressors preying upon weaker victims who cannot stop the aggression. But a moment’s reflection tells us that schools face a much broader problem than bullying of this kind. The broader problem is cruelty and disrespect of *all* kinds, including that between social equals and near-equals.

In a 10-year study of 70,000 middle and high school students, the National Center for Student Aspirations found that only 37% agreed with the statement, “*Students in my school show respect for one another.*” Powerful bullies who target defenseless victims are a subset of this larger category of negative interpersonal behaviors. Bullying feeds off a wider peer culture that permits or promotes disrespect and unkind behavior.

New light on the problem faced by schools comes from *The American Sociological Review* (Feb. 2011). Researchers asked 4,000 students (grades 8-10) whether they had ever engaged in peer aggression (physical violence, verbal harassment, rumors and gossip, or ostracism). The surprising findings:

**Fully one-third of students admitted engaging in one or another kind of aggression (social aggression being twice as common as physical aggression). The more popular kids displayed more frequent social aggression.**

Many popular kids appear to climb the social pyramid by using exclusion, rumor-spreading, etc. against their social rivals. This finding is consistent with recent research identifying *socially marginalized bullies* (who may be victims of bullies themselves) and *socially connected bullies* who often have many friends and strengths such as social skills, athleticism, and physical attractiveness.

#### What Can Be Done?

If the broader problem is a negative peer culture, the solution must be multi-faceted enough to change that culture.

An effective bullying prevention program can be one component of a culture-changing strategy. Schools must be careful to select a comprehensive program with research support (such as the positive results Sue Limber cites for Olweus, p. 5). *Educational Leadership's* Sept. 2011 issue, *Promoting Respectful Schools*, reports: "In a meta-analysis of 44 bullying prevention programs, **fewer than half (19) were found to be effective.**" By contrast, effective programs:

**enlist the support of the entire school community, including teachers, parents, and student bystanders; include increased playground supervision and firm sanctions for bullies; and change the overall school climate through ongoing messages that help students recognize social aggression and stick up for victims. Ultimately, bullying becomes not socially beneficial but rather socially unacceptable.**

But even state-of-the-art programs such as the Olweus model don't come close to eliminating bullying or other anti-social behaviors; they just *reduce* them. In Norway, where the Olweus program was first developed and implemented, there were reductions in bullying of 50% or more. However, in the most recent U.S. implementations, the reductions

in verbal and physical aggression thus far have been more modest, 22-23%.

So the challenge for schools is this: *What to do about the cruelty and disrespect that remain—even after implementing a good bullying prevention program?*

#### Comprehensive Character Development

There's an old psychological principle: If you want to suppress a negative behavior, promote its psychological opposite.

For example: A junior high school in Washington, D.C. had a big problem with students vandalizing property on the way to school. As part of a 5-year character education plan, the school required all students to give service to the community in some way. Vandalism dropped dramatically. If you're building your community up, you're much less likely to tear it down.

The implication for combating cruel and disrespectful behavior?

**Promote their opposites: kindness and respect. This is the core of effective character education: promoting positive behavior through all phases of school life. Bring out the best in students. Teach what's right before something goes wrong. Set high standards; hold everyone, kids and adults, accountable. Celebrate success.**

**To reduce cruelty and disrespect, promote their opposites.**

What would it look like if a school combined a research-supported bullying prevention program with a comprehensive character education initiative aimed at creating a culture of kindness and respect? Let's look at 10 schoolwide strategies and 10 classroom strategies for doing this.

### 10 SCHOOLWIDE STRATEGIES

**1. Assessment.** Schools can use two kinds of assessment tools to get baseline data and measure progress in creating a safe and respectful school: (1) a survey focused on bullying (Olweus offers one), and (2) a broader survey that assesses overall school culture (e.g., the Respect and Responsibility School Culture Survey, p. 8).

**2. Staff vigilance and support.** In a large survey by the Youth Voice Project, students in grades 5-12 said that when adults took their complaints about cruelty seriously, maintained effective supervision, gave them advice and support, and regularly checked in with them to make sure they were safe, things more often got better.

Things got *worse* when adults said they should solve the problem themselves.

**3. A school touchstone.** This is a set of "we" statements expressing the core values school members agree to live by, e.g.:

**We show respect and caring by our words and actions.**

**We defend those who can't defend themselves.**

**Whatever hurts my neighbor, hurts me.**

Involve staff, students, and parents in developing the touchstone. Talk with students about the touchstone every day.

**4. A schoolwide curriculum.** A research-supported character education curriculum can prevent cruelty and promote respect by teaching prosocial skills such as empathy, listening, and conflict resolution. *Second Step*, a K-9 curriculum, is one such program. See Resources (p. 4) and *What Works in Character Education* ([www.characterandcitizenship.org](http://www.characterandcitizenship.org)) for others.

**5. Service learning.** Studies show that meaningful opportunities for service not only improve school attendance and test scores, but also foster kindness and positive attitudes toward cultural diversity. Service with the greatest potential to produce such outcomes involves face-to-face helping relationships sustained over time.

**6. Peer support.** In most cases, bullying occurs with an audience of peer bystanders who either do nothing or encourage the bullying. Hence the need to develop what Jonathan Cohen and colleagues call "upstanders," students who intervene ("Hey, leave him alone"); see Resources, p. 4.

Other research indicates that onlookers can help without necessarily "standing up" to the bullies. In the Youth Voice Project survey ([www.youthvoiceproject.com](http://www.youthvoiceproject.com)), victims of peer cruelty said that other students who became their allies—spending time with them, listening to them, giving

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them advice, helping them get away from the bullies and tell an adult—were actually a bigger help to them than peers who directly confronted the bullies. Bullying victims who get this kind of peer support, studies show, are less likely to become anxious and depressed.

**7. Reporting options.** Telling a trusted adult is one way to report peer cruelty, but students also need an anonymous hot line, drop boxes around the school, and annual anonymous surveys.

**8. Participatory student government.** Psychologist Kurt Lewin found that victimization and scapegoating were *highest* in an *autocratic* group atmosphere and *lowest* in a *democratic* group atmosphere. Schools can create a democratic peer culture by maximizing opportunities for student voice—e.g., by designing a student government that gets the whole student body involved in solving real-life problems.

Birch Meadow Elementary School (MA) set up a Little SAC (Student Advisory Council), with two delegates elected from each K-3 classroom and a Big SAC, with two delegates from each 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>-grade classroom, plus officers elected by the whole student body. The elected vice-president of Big SAC served as chair of, and link to, Little SAC. Both groups met weekly with the principal over lunch. He comments:

*In one Little SAC meeting, classroom delegates complained that the older kids were “hogging the playground equipment” and generally not being very nice to the little kids. The 5<sup>th</sup>-grade boy who chaired Little SAC subsequently conveyed the younger students’ complaint at the next Big SAC meeting.*

*Big SAC delegates then sought suggested solutions from their respective classrooms, brought those ideas to the next Big SAC meeting, and formulated rules for fair use of the playground equipment. The new rules were then presented to Little SAC by the 5<sup>th</sup>-grade liaison for their consent. The playground problem was thereby solved.*

See *Smart & Good High Schools* ([www.cortland.edu/character](http://www.cortland.edu/character)) for high school examples of increasing student voice.

**9. Involve students in welcoming new kids.** At one high school, freshmen had been hazed—humiliated and harassed—during the first two weeks of school. Determined to change this, the school’s new principal showed all of his seniors a documentary about the Columbine High School shootings that took the lives of 12

students and a teacher, and that stemmed from a culture of peer cruelty. He asked the seniors to create a new tradition that would make every freshman feel welcome. He explains what they came up with:

*Every senior was given the names of 3 freshmen and asked to write them letters with tips on how to succeed at the school. In a half-day ceremony before the first school day, seniors served the freshmen breakfast in the school hall, the football team and cheerleaders did funny routines, and freshmen were called up individually to receive their welcoming letters on a personalized foam board. This new tradition has redefined who we are. There is no more hazing.*

**Peer allies help victims to withstand cruelty.**

**10. Respect diversity.** A school must be safe for all, regardless of sexual orientation or other differences. To prevent anti-gay bullying, some educators have urged schools, in their curricula, “to promote positive attitudes toward gay families, celebrate Gay Pride week,” etc. Critics of this approach have raised two objections: (1) a school does not have to affirm the sexual identities of its students to defend their dignity as human beings and their right to go to school without fear of harassment, and (2) affirming homosexuality does not respect the views of students, staff, and parents who, as a matter of conscience, hold traditional moral and religious beliefs regarding sexuality.

A public school should respect diversity of convictions about homosexuality by not promoting a single ideological perspective. It should instead require respectful behavior, rather than “correct attitudes.” A school can do this by teaching:

*We uphold standards of behavior which honor the dignity and worth of all individuals regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, age, physical or mental abilities, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic background.*

## 10 CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

**1. Two-minute interviews.** Students are more likely to be respectful and kind when all classrooms promote positive peer relations. Award-winning, former high school teacher Hal Urban, author of *Lessons from the Classroom*, explains how he helped his students get to know each other:

*I used the first 4 minutes of every class during the first two weeks of school to have students do paired 2-minute*

*interviews. They each asked their partner several questions and recorded their answers. What’s an achievement you’re proud of? A special interest you have? A goal you’re working on? Who is a hero for you? We did this until every student interviewed every other student in the class.*

**2. Compact for Excellence.** Students are more likely to follow rules when they share responsibility for creating them. At The Shipley School (PA), every teacher begins the school year by involving the class in creating a Compact for Excellence that includes rules for best work and rules for treatment of others. Fifth-grade teacher Wendy Eiteljorg explains:

*I set up stations with magic markers and a large sheet of paper with one of the following headings:*

*To help everyone feel welcome and respected, STUDENTS will . . .*

*To help everyone feel welcome and respected, THE TEACHER will . . .*

*To help everyone do their best work, STUDENTS will . . .*

*To help everyone do their best work, THE TEACHER will . . .*

*After students write their suggestions at their station, they rotate at my signal to another station, read the entries there, and write others they think are needed. Then we have a class meeting, look at all the ideas, and synthesize them into our Compact for Excellence. At the end of each week, we evaluate how we’re doing on our Compact.*

High school chemistry teacher Marc Hermon has all of his students sign their Compact for Excellence, posts it prominently, and reviews it daily.

**3. Character-based consequences.** When students are mean to others, the disciplinary consequence should include restitution: doing something positive to set things right. Teacher Molly Angelini says:

*If a student calls someone a name or is unkind in any other way, I ask that child to write a sincere letter of apology to the person he or she has offended. They show it to me first.*

Behavior contracts have proved helpful with kids who bully. For example:

*I will not hit or hurt anyone. If I do, I will have to call my parents and report what I did.*

**4. Class meetings.** Weekly class meetings play an important role in sustain-

ing a positive classroom culture. In an effective meeting, the teacher creates guidelines for communication (“*What rules do we need for good talking and good listening?*”); invites students to describe a problem (“*What’s been happening lately when we line up for lunch?*”); encourages shared responsibility for finding a solution (“*How can we, working together, solve this problem?*”); and plans a follow-up meeting (“*When shall we meet again to evaluate how our solution is working?*”).

**5. Cooperative learning.** Studies show that well-designed collaborative learning—having kids work in pairs, 3s, or 4s in interdependent ways—increases academic achievement and fosters empathy, friendships across racial and ethnic groups, and appreciation of others’ talents.

**6. Anonymous compliments.** Teachers can give kids regular opportunities to affirm each other. Says teacher Rick Mansfield:

**Every Monday, my students draw a classmate’s name and have the week to think of a sincere compliment. They show it to me; I sometimes help them make it more meaningful. Then they write it, unsigned, on a colored strip of paper and put it our Compliments Box. On Friday, I post all the compliments on the bulletin board. They love this activity.**

**7. Critique circles.** In *An Ethic of Excellence*, Ron Berger shows how to foster performance character (best work) and moral character (best behavior) simultaneously through peer feedback on academic work. Students bring an essay, science project, or piece of art work to the critique circle. There are three rules: “**Be kind. Be specific. Be helpful.**” Berger explains:

**First, the presenting student says what he or she would especially like feedback on.**

**Then, classmates offer comments on what they see as strengths of the work.**

**Next, students then offer suggestions. They do this respectfully, asking, for example: “Have you thought of doing this...?” “Would you consider doing that...?”**

**Along the way, I make suggestions, pose questions, and teach relevant skills.**

Students then revise their work based on the feedback. Through this process, classmates have ongoing opportunities to help each other do their very best work.

**8. Good Deeds Journal.** To develop the *habit* of kindness, build opportunities for practicing it into the school day. St. Rocco’s, an award-winning K-8 school in

Rhode Island, has all students write in their Good Deeds Journals:

**At the start of each day, students enter a good deed they did the day before (in their class, school, neighborhood, or family). Teachers reinforce the good deeds theme by commenting on good deeds performed by someone in the news or by a character in a story.**

Says one mom: “My kids now shovel snow for an elderly neighbor without expecting or accepting payment in return.”

**9. Teaching empathy through literature.** A good story can be a compelling way to show the suffering caused by cruelty and the compassion and courage of persons who try to stop it. *Teammates*, for example, tells how Brooklyn Dodgers captain Pee Wee Reese stood by Jackie Robinson when Jackie faced racism, even from some of his fellow Dodgers, for being the first black man to play major league baseball. See Joy Mosher’s article (Recommended Resources) for many more such books.

To get the most behavioral impact from a good book, teachers can use the **4 KEYS**:

**1. Other-Study** (“*What can we learn from the actions of the characters?*”)

**2. Self-Study** (“*Has this ever happened to you?*” “*What will you do the next time you see someone being excluded?*”)

**3. Public Presentation** (“*Share your goal with a partner.*”)

**4. A Community That Supports & Challenges** (“*Be prepared to report progress on your goal next week. We’ll share our experiences.*”)

**10. Daily self-assessment & goal-setting.** At the day’s end, students at Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter School (MA) use their **Character Record Book** to answer 3 questions regarding the week’s focus virtue, e.g.:

**1. How did I show kindness today?**

**2. How did I *not* show kindness today?**

**3. How will I show kindness tomorrow?**

See Mark Schumacker (p. 6) for examples of weekly character goals. See Michele Borba (p. 7) for what parents can do.

Taken together, these strategies can make schools what they ought to be: ethical learning communities where respect and kindness are the norm—and where every student is able to learn in a safe and supportive environment. ■

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## Recommended Resources

(click on red text for hot links)

- [www.pacer.org/bullying](http://www.pacer.org/bullying)  
Digital-based resources
- <http://www.stopbullying.gov/>  
Tip sheets and assessment tools
- [www.wiredsafety.org](http://www.wiredsafety.org): cyberspace safety

### PUBLICATIONS/CURRICULA:

***Building an Intentional School Culture*** (touchstone resource), C. Elbot & D. Fulton

***Character Matters***, Thomas Lickona

***Character Quotations***, Tom Lickona & Matt Davidson (Kagan Publishing)

**"Children's Literature and Character Development,"** Joy Mosher; <http://www2.cortland.edu/dotAsset/199292.pdf>

**"Creating a Climate of Respect"** (developing upstanders), J. Cohen, R. Cardillo and T. Pickeral; <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept11/vol69/num01/Creating-a-Climate-of-Respect.aspx>

***Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility***, Thomas Lickona

***Educational Leadership***, Promoting Respectful Schools, Sept. 2011 issue

***Kagan Cooperative Learning***  
[www.kaganonline.com](http://www.kaganonline.com)

***Lessons from the Classroom, 20 Things Good Teachers Do***; [www.halurban.com](http://www.halurban.com)

**Olweus Bullying Prevention Program support materials** ([www.olweus.org](http://www.olweus.org)):

- *Class Meetings That Matter* (K-8)
- *Cyber Bullying Curriculum* (6-12)
- *The Peaceful School Bus Program* (K-12)

**Power2Achieve** (high school curriculum; see units on relationships and communication) [www.excellenceandethics.com](http://www.excellenceandethics.com)

**School-Connect** (high school curriculum for social, emotional, and academic skills) [www.school-connect.net](http://www.school-connect.net)

**Second Step Violence Prevention** (K-9 curriculum); [www.cfchildren.org](http://www.cfchildren.org)

**Smart & Good High Schools** (100 promising practices), [www.cortland.edu/character](http://www.cortland.edu/character)

**Social-Emotional Learning Assessment Measures for Middle School Youth**, Kevin Haggerty, et al; <http://raikesfoundation.org/Documents/SELTools.pdf>

**Heartwood Institute: Teaching Life Lessons Through Literature**; [www.heartwoodethics.org/](http://www.heartwoodethics.org/)

***Think, Care, Act: Teaching for a Peaceful Future***, Susan Gelber Cannon