

# Creating the cougar watch: Learning to be proactive against bullying in schools.

Despite reticence from the central office, strong middle level teacher leaders worked together to develop an effective anti-bullying program that addresses a significant need for safety and inclusion for all middle school students.

*Robert W. Smith & Kayce Smith*

## **This we believe: The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.**

According to a nationally representative survey conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD, 2001), approximately 30 percent of American school children in grades 6 through 10 have been bullied or have bullied other children "sometimes" or more often within a semester.

These data are supported by a more recent study in 2010 by Clemson University in which 17% of K-12 students indicated that they had been bullied with some frequency (2-3 times /month) and 10% of students indicated that they had bullied others with a similar frequency. Increased awareness of the problems of bullying in our schools has led most states to introduce new laws regarding bullying. A primary goal for schools in many states is the provision of a safe, secure, and orderly school. However, even with requirements to provide a safe and orderly school, and with new laws about bullying, schools and school districts are often unsure how to take action. Some school communities, especially schools of academic distinction or who have a good reputation in their community, may believe that their schools are safe and that bullying is not a problem. Principals and teachers might not question whether they have effective policies in place for dealing with bullying.

While some schools are safe, principals may more easily assume that their schools are safe places than to have to deal with any negative publicity related to

uncovered incidents of bullying. Moreover, some bullying incidences are microcosms of greater societal issues that certain parents and citizens may view as "controversial" or even justified because some groups "deserve it." Such possible controversy makes the challenge for how schools respond even greater. This article describes how one teacher's concerns changed her school's attitude with regard to bullying from assuming that "bullying is not a major problem at our school" to "bullying is a priority issue included in the school improvement plan with a school-wide program to address bullying."

As we explored the complex topic of bullying, we pondered a statement from *This We Believe*, which states, "The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all," (NMSA, 2010). The most obvious connection is the need for schools, and middle schools in particular, to provide a safe environment for all students whose emerging identities often include significant vulnerability. We contend that bullying reaches to the heart of the school culture and specifically the extent to which middle school environments support the physiological, emotional, social, and academic development of adolescents (Scales, 2003). The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), formerly National Middle School Association (2010), provides a good description of this preferred environment: "A successful school for young adolescents is an inviting, supportive, and safe place - a joyful community that promotes in-depth learning and enhances students'

physical and emotional well-being....Students and teachers understand they are part of a community where differences are respected and celebrated....the safe and supportive environment, students are encouraged to take intellectual risks, to be bold with their expectations, and to explore new challenges” (pp.33–34). This description conveys the multiple ways in which school culture impacts student development, especially since young adolescents often spend as much or more time with teachers and peers as with parents or guardians.

Another perspective identifies the importance of this period for student identity development (Anfara, Mertens & Caskey, 2007). The authors state that questions of identity are of great importance to young adolescents. The authors describe that the search for identity and self-discovery can “lead young adolescents to be easily offended and be sensitive to criticism of personal shortcomings” (p. xx). Identity can be affected by “questions about physical changes, relationships with peer and adults, one’s place in the world, and global issues (e.g., poverty, racism, and wealth distribution) [which] help shape what adolescents are interested in and how they view the world” (Brinthaup, Lipka & Wallace, 2007, p. 207). Lane (2005) in her study of girls and aggression notes, “Middle level students’ primary concerns are focused on their peers and what others think of them. It is a time of tremendous insecurity for both boys and girls, and most of them experience some kind of rejection or exclusion exactly when being included is of utmost importance” (p. 42).

Finally, Pollock (2006) identifies the challenges faced by adolescents with regard to sexuality: “Adolescents have many issues surrounding their emerging identities, sexual drives and sexual orientation” (p. 31). She notes that too often these are forbidden topics in school. Fostering greater understanding among educators and the community about the emotional needs and identity crises that some students are going through is exactly what influenced us to explore the topic at the school where one author teaches.

### **Southeastern Middle School**

Southeastern Middle School (a pseudonym) is a fairly large middle school with just over 800 students that serves a largely suburban and rural district in southeastern North Carolina. The school population is predominantly white; 13% of students are of color. About 54% of the students receive free and reduced lunch. As

one of five middle schools in its district, Southeastern serves students from two feeder elementary schools. During the previous year, a low incidence of crime was reported at the school. For the last five years the school has been classified as a school of distinction by the state. Finally, Southeastern Middle has a relatively low teacher turnover rate, and teacher working conditions surveys suggest the school receives high support from teachers.

All seasoned teachers at the school agree that in comparison to other school settings, students at this school show a high level of respect toward adults in the building; students get along reasonably well with one another. In fact, little evidence of gang or group hostility asserts itself. Southeastern Middle is, in general, an excellent place to teach. However, during Kayce’s fourth year as a teacher of grades 6–8 at Southeastern Middle, she started to pay more attention to incidents of bullying that were occurring in the hallways and occasionally in her own classroom. She and other teachers would hear students use negative terms in referring to other students, but they would not always know an appropriate or affirming, impactful way to respond. While some teachers talked often about cultural differences in the curriculum and opposed discrimination against marginalized people, these were individual decisions and were not part of a larger school-wide discussion. Further, while many students and schools have accepted that discrimination based on race or ability, for example, is unacceptable, other groups too often lack such strong support. Students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), overweight, and students of lower socioeconomic status are especially and emphatically among those groups who receive little support. So even though Southeastern Middle School has a reputation as being a good and safe school, Kayce wanted to find out about students’ experience with bullying, how they felt about their safety at school, and how they perceived teachers’ responses to bullying. After all, the research shows that a student’s safety and emotional comfort play a huge role in her/his overall progress and development in other areas of middle school life and beyond. Thus Kayce was able to conduct the present study of bullying at her school as part of an independent study toward a graduate degree. Robert Smith, co-author, served as a resource, helped to guide the study, and provided a knowledgeable perspective from outside our school and district. Kayce and Robert worked together to compile the relevant literature and to evaluate the data from surveys at the school.

## Research on bullying

Bullying generally is defined as aggressive behavior or intentional harm by an individual or group repeated over time that involves an imbalance of power (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2007). Further, bullying is viewed as falling into three different types of aggression: physical aggression, which includes hitting, kicking, or pushing; verbal aggression, which includes name calling, teasing, or abusive language; and relational aggression, which consists of spreading rumors and social exclusion (Varjas, Henrich, Meyers, & Meyers, 2009). A 2013 Department of Education report on bullying in West Virginia found that students are most likely to be bullied in middle school with middle school students accounting for 56% of all reported incidents of bullying K–12 (Eyre, 2013). In a study of students in grades 7 and 8 in urban, suburban and rural schools, 24% reported either bullying or being bullied; 14% of students reported being called mean names and others reported being hit or kicked, being teased or being threatened (Seals & Young, 2003). In a separate study of students in grades 7 and 8 at three middle schools that differed significantly by race, socioeconomic status, and urbanicity, “being overweight” and “not dressing right” were the most common reasons that identified why a student might be bullied (San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007). The second most common reason, identified at two of the three schools, was being perceived as gay. Based on student responses, one of the main conclusions from the study was that “most students want adults to see what is going on in their world and respond to bullying in caring, effective, and firm ways” (p. 35).

Kayce’s initial questions for students revolved around their perceptions of how much bullying occurs at Southeastern Middle, which types of students are bullied, where bullying is occurring, and what support the school is viewed as offering in preventing and responding to bullying. Olweus (1999), who is widely considered the pioneer in bullying research, describes conducting a needs assessment as a way to gather data and inform the process. This approach, which also included focus groups with students, was successfully implemented in a study of bullying at an elementary school (Orpinas, Horne, & Staniszewski, 2003). Surveys concerning student and teacher perceptions regarding bullying have also been used (Beale & Scott, 2001). Based on the different responses to bullying from their study of students at three middle schools, San Antonio and Salzfass

(2007) argue that a needs assessment is an important starting point. Their findings coincide with the various researchers who claim that multiple types of reporting and surveying are necessary when diagnosing a school’s need for an anti-bullying program (Bowllan, 2011; Varjas, Henrich, Meyers, & Meyers, 2009).

## Surveying students and teachers

Kayce read several articles on bullying and searched for existing surveys that would provide greater reliability and address questions with regard to bullying than might have otherwise been considered. In developing questions for the student survey, Kayce was aware of the rural community surrounding the school that might lead to complaints from community members if too much positive attention was focused on gay identifying students.

While the building principal was supportive of such a project, this was also his first year and he wanted to make sure that student surveys had the support of the local school district. The district reviewed the survey and replied that, as it involved student’s beliefs, the survey would have to be approved prior to the start of the school year, per a school board policy. The district also suggested that the wording of some of the questions revealed bias. The district’s response initially confirmed our fears that bullying can be a politically sensitive topic and school officials would prefer not to have certain controversial aspects of this issue examined.

This response appeared to end the project, at least for that year. However, after further thought we disagreed with the district’s interpretation that the survey questions asked about student’s beliefs rather than their opinions and observations about bullying and whether bullying occurred at the school. We decided to submit a revised survey, changing the wording of some questions, and we replied that we did not view this as asking about students’ beliefs but about students’ observations in regard to their daily experience. At this point, district officials said that the decision ultimately remained with the principal. We realized then that a better way to begin data collection on this topic would be to survey the teachers rather than the students. We suspected that the responses from the teachers might help pave the way to survey the students.

The teacher survey included questions about the frequency with which they observed bullying, the locations on campus where bullying occurs in any capacity, and the extent to which they address bullying

with their students both formally and informally. Open-ended questions probed teachers' comfort levels with responding to bullying incidences as well as their opinion on whether the school should be doing more to combat bullying. An impressive return rate resulted, with 48 of the school's 55 teachers responding to the survey; 79% of respondents stated that they observed bullying incidences between one and three times per week. In response to questions about the frequency with which particular groups of students were bullied, most answers reported that many of the groups were bullied at a lower frequency of "sometimes." However, six groups had frequency for being bullied with the highest number of respondents who chose "frequently" or "constantly." These included students "with few or no friends" (35%); students who are "overweight" (33%); students who are "poor or perceived to be impoverished" (21%); students "who are gay or rumored to be homosexual" (23%); and students "who act like the opposite gender" (25%). Although 77% of teachers said they were confident in responding to incidences of bullying, 44% of teachers indicated that they would like to receive additional resources or guidance on how to respond to bullying. Finally, 65% of teachers agreed that the school should be doing more to reduce incidences of bullying.

### **Senseless Bullying Must Stop Task-Force**

Teachers' responses indicated both that bullying is an important issue and that the school could be doing more to address bullying. Their responses also supported the need for further investigation. In completing the online survey, teachers could indicate if they were interested in being part of a solution to bullying at Southeastern. Four teachers and the two school counselors volunteered and formed the Senseless Bullying Must Stop Task-Force (the nickname was a student's idea and coincides with the acronym for the school's name). The task force quickly recruited a parent, six students, and two members of our three-member administration to join in our review of the data from the teacher responses and in our discussions to consider our next step(s). At the task force meetings, small groups were created to examine possible solutions to specific problems that emerged from teacher responses. Very quickly the group identified the need for data from students, which could be compared with the teachers' responses. A student survey was created that modeled the survey given to teachers. It included

additional questions that were created based on the input of the students on the task force. Four months after the teacher survey was administered, the student survey was completed by 620 students out of a total of 810 students, with a similar number of responses received from all three grade levels. Student responses indicated that approximately one third of students had been bullied, with 13% indicating they were unsure about whether they had been bullied. Eight percent of students (58 total students) indicated they were bullied daily and seven percent (49 students) said they were bullied 2–3 times a week. Eighty percent of students reported that they see bullying occurring at the school, and 18% stated that they see bullying more than once a day. In response to which groups of students experience the most bullying, the following four groups had the highest percentages of students who are frequently or constantly bullied: students who are gay or rumored to be gay (53%), students who are overweight (50%), students with few or no friends (43%), and students who act like the opposite gender (34%). In response to the question asking students if they have a trusted adult at the school that they can talk to about bullying and other problems they might be experiencing, 57% said "yes," 28% said "no," and 14% indicated "unsure"; this large majority view reveals a powerful indicator of the strength of the ideal middle school model's presence at the school. Finally, only 33% of respondents agreed with the statement that "when my teachers respond to bullying, it helps make the situation better."

Students from the task-force met three times with Kayce and the two counselors in a focus group format to review the results. The students provided valuable feedback in understanding some of the responses, and they also brainstormed various short- and long-term goals for our school and group. One of these goals was similar to a strategy that other researchers have described in the creation of a student-run watch group (Crothers, Kolbert & Walker, 2006). This group, which would later be named "Cougar Watch," would be responsible for monitoring bullying and reporting incidences to teachers. Around the same time this student-led brainstorming was happening, the school faculty learned about the most significant results from the student survey, especially those that differed from their own perceptions. This knowledge of students' experience and perspective undoubtedly fostered greater interest and concern on the part of teachers to learn more about what was



happening and the different ways they could respond. This is significantly relevant for this middle school as it shows a genuine desire on the part of adults to be a part of a school community where student differences are celebrated and respected (NMSA, 2010).

### **Creating the cougar watch student group**

Equally important to having mechanisms in place in the school community for students' healthy emotional growth is the need for similar strategies that foster their ability to contribute as democratic citizens both in their school and in their future (NMSA, 2010). The formation of the student-run Cougar Watch group coincides with the AMLE proclamation that developmentally responsive middle schools "will promote the growth of young adolescents as scholars, democratic citizens, and increasingly competent, self-sufficient young people" (NMSA, 1995, p. 10). Students in grades 6–8 who submitted applications to participate in Cougar Watch had to receive parent permission as well as teacher recommendations.

This application process served several goals: (1) it informed parents that we were taking steps to do something about bullying at our school, (2) it ensured that teachers were able to provide confidential input as to the character of these applicants, and (3) it let students know that the role was a serious responsibility and an opportunity for leadership. With backing from our principal and assistant principal, we planned training sessions for our 32 new Cougar Watch members. The training focused on being able to clearly define the three different types of bullying and being able to identify whether or not situations are bullying. These students practiced identifying bullying throughout the school for about two weeks by simply observing and recording their observations in a journal. During this time the two counselors, two teacher members of the task force, the school resource officer, and Kayce met with the 32 Cougar Watch members a total of five times.

In small groups, the adults facilitated the discussions in which students shared what they observed and tried to identify as a group whether or not these should be considered bullying. Out of this training experience we drafted and finalized a bullying reporting form that would be available for use during the following school year. The form incorporates student-friendly language and has a checklist format that helps students determine if what they are reporting is indeed bullying.

### **Planning our approach to bullying prevention**

After this training experience and before departing for the summer, the core group of adults from the task force met for a long brainstorming session with the principal. We determined that the best use of the Cougar Watch reporting forms might be to make them available to all students in the school. This decision resulted from the need to protect Cougar Watch members from becoming targets themselves, but it also is consistent with other bullying prevention programs that stress the importance of a whole-school response particularly involving all students (San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007; Brewster & Railsback, 2001)<sup>1</sup>. We also intend to incorporate the Cougar Watch members' responsibilities as well as the data from the reporting forms to help inform the implementation of Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) at our school over the next few years. Next, we decided that since our budget ruled out the opportunity to invite an outside expert to train our teachers, this same core group who trained the students would use similar content with modified methods to train the adults in our building. While possibly missing some of the expertise of an outside trainer, benefits accrue from having the adults and students within our school community find answers to our school's challenges.

One of the reasons bullying is such a complex issue is because people have different ideas as to what constitutes bullying. Hence, we knew we needed a clear definition of bullying that could be communicated to all stakeholders in our school community. We established our school's definition—Bullying: (1) is harming another person intentionally, (2) is repeated, (3) involves a power imbalance—based on the multiple but similar definitions provided by different experts, and made it student-friendly with cartoon-like depictions to help clarify. This clear and shared definition has been communicated to staff during their training. It was also professionally printed on posters that are in all teachers' classrooms and throughout the building, and it was shared with parents at the first Open House night of the school year. During this four-hour Open House, teacher and student volunteers offered descriptions of the main types of bullying, shared with parents the school's official definition, and provided them with a pamphlet that included resources on bullying available on the Internet.

## Broader connections of bullying

In less than one school year, the topic of bullying at our school has gone from the status of a “non-issue” to being a real priority with strategies included in next year’s school improvement plan. Further, one of the district-determined goals for all School Improvement Plans, which coincides with the AMLE stance on positive school culture, is to have a “safe and nurturing school for all students.” Our Senseless Bullying Must Stop Task-Force is a perfect strategy to accomplish this goal. Ideally, after some time is spent raising awareness about bullying and learning how to respond to it better, the approach to dealing with bullying at the school will shift to more of a preventative nature. This should be made easier with the implementation of a school-wide PBIS program. PBIS focuses on bringing a culture shift into a school by modeling positive behavior in school-wide routines and explanations and then rewarding subsequent positive behavior. The district has chosen PBIS as a tool to be utilized by all schools in our county, so the work of the Senseless Bullying Must Stop Task-Force should provide a helpful segue from simply reporting and disciplining bullying to changing the school’s culture in general on various behaviors including bullying. For more information on PBIS, see <http://www.pbis.org/>.

Remarkable changes have occurred at Southeastern Middle School in one year. We now have a much better understanding of the groups of students at the school who have been targets of bullying. We have developed widespread interest and support with the teachers and administration, an action plan for creating awareness about bullying among the students and parents, and a visual representation of the different strategies that are available at the school to respond to bullying and bullying-victim behavior.

As we pursued this study, our understanding of bullying also evolved from seeing bullying as a separate problem, to recognizing that it is deeply connected to the whole school culture and draws upon nearly all 16 characteristics identified as keys to educating young adolescents (NMSA, 2010). In seeking to create a school culture that supports the diversity of our students and in which all students feel valued for who they are, we have had to engage our teachers and administration. We have also realized the importance of listening to our students and involving them in helping create a supportive school culture (Lipka & Roney, 2013). Additionally, we have

had to involve our students’ parents and families so that they too are included in supporting the changes in school culture. There likely will still be difficult issues to respond to, but we are starting the school year informed of the problem and no longer assuming that “bullying is not a problem at our school.”

## Key points for teacher led change to address bullying

Based on our experience as well as the literature we read about bullying, we offer the following six key points when considering a grassroots approach to raising awareness about bullying at any school:

- Be aware that some bullying incidences are microcosms of greater societal issues that some parents and citizens may view as “controversial.” However, do not be deterred by initial responses that may not be supportive, e.g., “we have a safe school,” or “bullying is not a problem at our school.” Use data to prove objectively why those controversial issues need to be addressed at the middle school age level.
- Find other colleagues within the school, at other schools, and/or in organizations concerned with bullying who are either interested in helping form a group at the school or who can help serve as a resource for you or the group. A group provides a stronger voice than one individual teacher. Also, invite a broad base of representation on the group, e.g., teacher, student, counselor, parent, and administrator.
- Collect student data on their experience and perceptions of bullying at your school. Students know firsthand what is happening with bullying. Include students in any group created to make recommendations on bullying. School-wide action plans should include all students and teachers.
- Be patient. Just when you think you have made changes and done extensive work, you will realize the road is a long one. Eliminating or reducing bullying is not something that happens in one year. No matter what community you are in, it is an ongoing effort and programs or strategies should be continually assessed for their effectiveness.
- Remind your principals that increased reporting will occur when you start to tackle the issue of bullying. This is positive and means people are paying attention.

It will be extra work upfront for the principals, but if the school's action plan is successful and effective, these reports should decrease over time.

- Once you determine through your needs assessment that some type of program or plan is necessary at your school, you will likely find that a clear definition of what your school considers as bullying is a great place to start. It gets everyone (students, teachers, parents, and administrators) on the same page when discussing the issue and formulating plans.
- Remind yourself that efforts to eliminate bullying get to the heart of creating a successful middle school. Don't give up!

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<sup>1</sup> Author's update on the Cougar Watch and reporting forms: In the following school year, the adult task force determined that allowing students to serve as "bullying police" via the Cougar Watch may not be the most effective use of the student run group. Additionally, there was a concern that there would not be sufficient adult human power to monitor, investigate, and respond to the reporting forms if they were completed by all students in the school. Since then, the group's focus has turned more toward awareness for the school and community at large. They meet as an academic club 1-2 times a month, are well-versed in the school's definition of bullying and process for reporting bullying, and are making plans to lead assemblies for each grade level in which they engage students around the definition of bullying, how to respond to it, and how to report it at our school.

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**Robert William Smith** is a professor in the Watson College of Education at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. E-mail: [smithrw@uncw.edu](mailto:smithrw@uncw.edu)  
**Kayce Smith** teaches middle school in rural North Carolina. E-mail: [Kayce23smith@yahoo.com](mailto:Kayce23smith@yahoo.com)