

# Taking aim at school bullies

A scourge of schoolchildren is now treated as a public health concern

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The names hurt Justin Saffer the most: He said other children call him one-lip, one-tooth or worse. Sometimes they push or smack him.

A sixth-grader at Pulaski Elementary School in Wilmington, Justin, 11, said he is taunted because he was born with a cleft lip and palate.

"Sometimes I ignore them or say shut up," Justin said.

When he is teased or bullied by other kids, he wants to stay home from school, he said. His mother, Shirley Saffer, said bullying has taken a toll on her son, making it hard for him to concentrate and make friends.

To combat bullying and other violent behavior in the nation's schools, the federal departments of Education and Health and Human Services plan to launch a \$3.4 million campaign next year. The program will use Web sites and commercials to make the case that bullying is a public health concern.

This year, Delaware's Department of Education added bullying to its list of offenses committed on school grounds that must be reported to the state within five days.

Though bullying long has been shrugged off or dismissed as "kids being kids," in recent years, it has gained national attention. It was cited as a factor at Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colo., in 1999, when two students shot and killed 12 students and a teacher. The boys committed suicide afterward.

Twenty percent of public schools reported bullying happened at least once a week in 1999-2000, the federal Education Department said. That is more than all other discipline problems reported. Department statistics show kids who are bullied are five times more likely to be depressed and suicidal than other kids.

Bullying can contribute to a climate of fear and intimidation, state officials said. The National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2002 that 160,000 students nationwide miss school each day because of bullying.

## The problem grades

School statistics show the greatest number of bullying incidents typically happen in middle school, where social experimentation really blossoms, said Robin Case, state education associate for school climate and discipline. Students are faced with physical and emotional changes, peer pressure and a wide range of choices.

"I think middle-school students struggle the most with bullying because of vulnerability and differences with adolescence," said Wendy Bailey, a counselor at Everett Meredith Middle School in Middletown.

"When you come into my building, you've got kids ranging in height from 3 to 6 feet, 50 to 200 pounds, and they're all scared," Bailey said. She said she tells students everyone is vulnerable and can become a target of a bully.

Case said because of the problems in those grades, the state is directing more attention to anti-bullying efforts in elementary schools to change students' behavior before they get to middle school.

This is the first school year the state Department of Education is collecting reports of bullying incidents at all schools, Case said. So far, six of the state's 19 school districts have reported 87 incidents of bullying. The total will be available June 30. Students who bully can be punished with detention or suspension, state officials said.

## Getting police involved

In Delaware, the School Crime Reporting Law requires all violent felonies that occur on school property to be reported immediately to police, then to the victim's parents and the Education Department.

Other offenses, including bullying, pornography, exhibitionism, criminal mischief, disorderly conduct and fighting must be reported to the Education Department within five days.

Delaware State Police handled 665 incidents in Sussex County during the 2002-2003 school year, including assaults, offensive touching, terroristic threats and bullying. Police made 513 arrests. In three Kent County school districts in 2002, state police handled 560 complaints and made 310 arrests. Statistics for New Castle County were not available because the state statistician is out of town, state police spokesman Lt. Joseph Aviola said.

Since 1998, the state has had a program targeting bullying that included assemblies, special training for teachers, counselors and school resource officers, a school crime hot line and alternative schools for students with disciplinary problems. State officials said the program is working and students are beginning to realize bullying is a serious problem.

Detective Preston Lewis, a school resource officer for the southern part of the Indian River School District, said he thinks the presence of school resource officers deters bullying.

This year, Gov. Ruth Ann Minner launched an initiative on character education that also targets bullying.

Shirley Saffer said she has reported the teasing her son endures for his cleft lip to Christina School District officials and police, but the bullying continues. School district spokeswoman Lisa McVey said school officials have responded in a "timely and appropriate manner."

Bailey, the school counselor, said students who are bullied suffer psychological pain that can continue to grow and never disappears. When it is turned inward, students become depressed and self-destructive.

Some victims may explode instead. That's when deadly school violence, such as what happened at Columbine, can occur, Bailey said.

"Parents may think it's not a big deal," Bailey said. "A lot of them say, 'Just stand up for yourself or hit back.' But it's far too dangerous in this time with the prevalence of weapons."

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