

## PREVENTING BULLYING: PROGRAM AIMS TO MAKE BC SCHOOLS SAFER FOR ALL STUDENTS



*Theresa Campbell*

"A teacher in one of my ERASE Bullying training sessions sent me a photo of his classroom door, where he'd posted a sign saying 'You are valued, respected and appreciated.' I love to see that sort of positive classroom culture."

Theresa Campbell tells this story in a quick break between training sessions in Prince Rupert. As the President of Safer Schools Together and developer and lead trainer for the ERASE Bullying Strategy, she's overseeing a provincial initiative to make our school communities welcoming and safe places for all students.

Ms. Campbell has developed a four-level series of workshops on creating safe and caring schools, preventing bullying, and identifying risks and responding to threats. Over a five-year period, she and her team are delivering these workshops to educators and community partners throughout BC; in 2012-2013, more than 4000 people attended an ERASE Bullying training session.

Level one training focuses on strategies for creating safer schools and identifying and preventing bullying. "In this first level of training, we're exploring the three Cs," says Ms. Campbell. "We're looking at culture, climate and connectedness and asking school teams to provide evidence of this through the eyes of students. Before we can talk about bullying, we really need to step back and look at behaviour and environment."

### **CULTURE, CLIMATE AND CONNECTEDNESS**

Dawne Tomlinson, the principal of Langley Secondary School, attended a training session in September 2013 and found that the discussion of the three Cs validated the work she and her team at Langley Secondary have been doing over the past five years. "You need to create a culture where kids feel safe," she says. "If you don't have that, no anti-bullying program will help."



Educators who've attended the first level of training say there are many strategies that can be used to foster a more positive school climate and culture. For Ms. Tomlinson, changing traditional school terminology - by renaming the "warning bell" the "welcome bell" or calling "late slips" "glad you got here" slips - subtly shifts the tenor of the school to make it more welcoming and friendly.

She also stresses the value of being intentionally present with students, greeting them by name and connecting with them between classes, at lunch and after school.

Ashley Ambrosio, a counsellor for three elementary schools in the Surrey School District, recently attended a training session and affirms the importance of educators extending a personal greeting to students.

"Making students feel as though they're part of an inclusive and nurturing school community can be achieved by something as small and simple as greeting them at the door of the classroom, saying hello and welcoming them in for the day," she says. "Minimal effort, important message, major impact."

Research shows that strong and healthy relationships between students and adults are the single most important factor in promoting safe, healthy and caring schools. That's why Marcello Moino, principal of Brookwood Secondary in Langley, will be asking his staff members to identify the least-connected students in their classes and "quietly adopt them, making a concerted effort to engage those kids and create stronger connections." →→

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This sense of connectedness is at the foundation of what the program calls an open school system – one where students are more likely to come forward and share stories of bullying, harassment and other unwelcome behaviours.

“If students and members of the school community feel connected, you have an open system where information flows,” says Mr. Moino, “In a closed system, on the other hand, information is shared only in sub-cultures within the school and may not come out. That can be dangerous.”

#### **IDENTIFYING THE BULLYING BEHAVIOUR IS THE FIRST STEP IN INTERVENTION**

When bullying occurs, intervention is necessary. But given the multifaceted nature of bullying, there is no simple “one size fits all” solution.

In fact, Ms. Campbell cautions educators to make sure that the behaviour is actually bullying. “It can be challenging to identify if a behaviour is a conflict, mean behaviour or bullying. But we need to be clear about what the behaviour is so we can apply the right intervention. The way we respond to a threat of assault is very different from how we respond to bullying.”

Bullying, she says, is a repeated pattern of behaviour that often involves an imbalance of power and has the intent to harm or humiliate someone. There are four main types of bullying: verbal; social, emotional and relational; physical; and cyber.

Ms. Ambrosio found the training session's careful distinction between bullying and other behaviours helpful. “Bullying is a big umbrella term, so we need to break it down so that we can debunk the myths and shift our focus to include bullying prevention and intervention.”

She also says that the session's emphasis on providing educators with information to better understand the realities of cyberbullying was very valuable and relevant. “It's incredibly useful to know what kids are being exposed to and for us to be aware of the trends.”

“The online aspect of bullying has dramatically changed the landscape,” adds Ms. Tomlinson. “There's greater intensity and volume now – and students have nowhere to go to find a reprieve from what can be essentially a ‘social assassination.’”

#### **IT TAKES A COMMUNITY**

The training sessions are attended by educators, as well as a mix of people from the community, including support agencies and community partners. Ms. Ambrosio says the opportunity to engage in small-group discussions with those from outside the school allowed her to see bullying “through the lens of other professionals' perspectives.”

The workshops describe interventions to address bullying, with school teams encouraged to follow a bullying flowchart that specifies the steps to follow, community resources to call upon and appropriate interventions after receiving a report of bullying.

The level two training session explores interventions to threats and worrisome behaviour in greater detail. This session outlines a four-step Violence Threat/Risk Assessment



protocol that asks school teams to identify threatening behaviour, call on a multidisciplinary team to assess the risk, determine if the threat maker actually poses a risk and intervene appropriately.

Educators who have attended the ERASE Bullying training session say they are committed to taking action to ensure our schools are safe, welcoming places.

“Changing a school culture is hard work and requires that every staff member make intentional choices in their connections with students each and every day,” says Ms. Tomlinson. “As we discussed in the training session, students need to feel they belong somewhere, that they’re valued. If we can help them feel they are safe in our schools, we will have fewer problems overall.” ←



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## TAKE ACTION CHECKLIST



- Attend an ERASE Bullying training session
- Review your school's Code of Conduct
- Do a school culture check
- Identify small changes to make your classroom and school a more welcoming environment
- Share the resources on the ERASE Bullying website with other educators, parents and students

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