

Introduction

BULLYING IS MORE THAN the actions that exist between a few individuals. It is the accumulated consequences of all of these actions—the mental health and physical outcomes, the violence created, the devastated families and communities, the economic impact, the trust lost, and the failed relationships that result.

There are many reasons for schools to take bullying seriously. Bullying has an impact on students, staff, and community. It has short-term and long-term effects, economic and relational consequences, and it directly interferes with the academic outcomes of any school community. It must be addressed for a school community to be successful.

Yet, addressing bullying is not an easy challenge. Bullying is about relationships, or more importantly, the absence of relationships, and the quality of relationships in a school is a consequence of the school's culture. Bullying rarely happens without the necessary ingredients to support it, and it rarely stops without the necessary ingredients to prevent it. This book focuses on those preventive ingredients, sharing the practices that we have found to be key to creating a culture that welcomes everyone and prevents bullying.¹

WHAT IS BULLYING?

It is important to start this book by addressing the question of what bullying is. As someone who started a school with a mission to address bullying and to teach others to do the same, it seems counterintuitive for me to say this, but I don't like the word *bullying*. On the website stopbullying.gov,² bullying is defined as “unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time.” This definition suggests a pattern that could have been prevented or interrupted, yet the definition implies that children alone are the victims and perpetrators of bullying.

This definition, as well as others, stands in contrast to what I believe about bullying. It suggests a binary of victims and perpetrators, and it ignores the systems that create and reinforce these behaviors. As a result of this tendency to look at the binary alone, young people are often punished in ways that force them to pay a high price for participating in the very culture that created the behaviors it rewarded. And the school goes on, without consequence, despite the fact that it has allowed a culture that celebrates bullying to develop, when it could have been prevented.

Bullying is the result of a culture that supports and allows bullying. Some bullying experts, such as Dorothy Espelage, have pushed beyond the binary, applying Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory to describe the nested systems in which students reside and to identify how these systems influence bullying behaviors. In an article for *Theory Into Practice*, Espelage describes the microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems that make up a child's experience of the world and impact his or her likelihood of participating in or experiencing bullying.³ This socioecological model is a more effective lens for looking at the problem of bullying in schools and creating a systems approach to preventing and addressing it. When school communities look at the problem of bullying as a systems problem, it is possible to uncover, predict, prevent, and address bullying, and in doing so, to build healthier communities where students can learn and grow.

DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN CONFLICT AND BULLYING

To address the system, one must first be able to differentiate between bullying and conflict. Many people confuse the two, and this can cause a lot of harm. Conflict is something that happens between two people or groups of people. There is no imbalance of power, and both are active participants in the conflict. Most issues in schools are actually issues of conflict, not bullying. In these situations it is possible to bring people together to mediate such conflict, whether through restorative justice practices or other mediation strategies.

However, when the issue is one of bullying—where individuals repeatedly exercise their power, derived from the sociocultural system, to cause harm to others—it is never appropriate to bring a bullied student to a circle or mediation with the student or students who have done the bullying. The imbalance of power can potentially allow the bully to use the structure to continue the bullying pattern. In cases where there has been a pattern of documented incidents of harm, to one individual or to many individuals, the person causing such harm must be addressed away from those who have been harmed, and the focus must be on making the harm visible and repairing the harm that was caused. This is one of the first steps in preventing the devastating effects of bullying.

MAKING THE ISSUE VISIBLE

A few years ago, I was invited to do a presentation about bullying at a local middle school in Milwaukee. It was Family Night, and they wanted to have someone come in and speak to the families and students about bullying—what it is, why it happens, and what to do about it. As a school that has invested itself deeply in this work, we know that presentations about numbers, definitions, and threats don't work. Bullying is a problem of relationship, and when dealing with problems of relationship, you have to make people *feel* what you're talking about if you want them to make any kind of change.

I worked with a group of students to plan for this presentation. We asked ourselves, “What would be the best way to get people to understand the *impact* of bullying?” We decided to open with two students sharing their own experiences of being bullied and why they chose to come to Alliance. Then we did an activity that would bring it home for the students and for the adults.

For this activity, we divided the room in half and asked the parents and adults to go to one side of the room. Then we had the students go to the other side of the room. We gave each group large sheets of paper and some directions. We told the students to work in groups of three or four students to draw pictures of what bullying was and to include a definition. The students were enthusiastic about the task. They knew what bullying was. They knew what it looked like, and they knew how to define it. They laughed and joked as they drew pictures of people being hit, beat up, and called names.

While they were working on their drawings, we asked the parents and adult family members to do a different task. We asked each of them to draw a picture of the person from elementary, middle, or high school who had made their lives so miserable that they didn’t want to go to school. The adults were stunned for a minute, but it only took a couple of seconds for them to think about it, and then they started to draw. Each of them had a story to tell, and they were ready to share them. After about fifteen minutes, we asked the young people to come to the front of the room and teach the group what bullying was and what it looked like. The smaller groups took turns presenting their pictures, and they still couldn’t help but laugh and joke a little bit as they presented. I imagine it was because the topic was sensitive to them, and they didn’t want to acknowledge it, so they hid behind humor and ribbing. It was a little painful to watch, especially for my students who had been targets of bullying, but we knew it was going to happen before we started the activity, so we let it run its course, and then we moved on.

Once the four groups of students had presented, it was the adults’ turn. We invited each of the adult family members to come up and share their pictures and stories of the people who had made school miserable for them. Every single one of them was willing to share his or her story—moms, dads,

grandpas, uncles. The students sat, stunned by the stories they were hearing. I don't think they had ever imagined that these people, who were the strongest people they knew, could have possibly been so vulnerable, so hurt by anyone. You could see that their own actions and the actions they had witnessed over the years were starting to register. The most powerful point came last, though. An older, African American grandmother, who had become blind with age, was led to the front of the room by her grandson, a young man in his twenties. He held up the picture that he had helped her to draw. The sketch was a simple drawing. It was a large circle of a face with a stick body; eyes, nose, and mouth; and a ponytail. The woman said, "Penny Carson. That was her name. Penny Carson used to chase me home from school every day. If she caught me, she would grab me by my hair, pull me down to the ground, and beat me up. I might of stayed in school, if it wasn't for Penny Carson. I just couldn't go, not as long as Penny was going to be there."

She looked out to nowhere, unable to see the people in the room where she was standing, and it was almost as if she could see Penny Carson standing there in front of her. Her eyes were brimming with tears of anger, hurt, resentment, and regret, as she looked back into her memories of school.

This woman was somebody's grandmother, a woman of great respect in the community, and as she spoke, you could see every face in the room filling with sadness and a recognition of the real meaning of bullying. It was no longer just a definition. It was the pain on the face of a blind, elderly grandmother, decades later. I think that moment and that story had more impact on the actions of the young people in that room than any character lesson ever could.

The issue of bullying is a devastating one. It hides behind fears, power struggles, trauma, systemic racism, oppression, status, and culture. You can't teach people about it with textbook definitions and statistics. You can buy all of the trust balls, and kindness posters, and character curricula you want, but they won't make people less likely to harm each other. To address bullying, you have to focus on relationships.

Many attempts to address bullying start with the idea of giving young people information we think they don't know, but the truth is that most

people who bully, both as adults and as young people, know that what they are doing is wrong, and they choose the behavior anyway. They choose it for a variety of reasons—it gives them status, protects them from harm, increases their wealth or opportunity, provides a release for anger, makes them visible, or makes them invisible. They choose bullying because the culture allows and rewards it, or because the community does not hold them accountable for the harm that they cause. And they choose bullying because they do not know their own power in the world. At the Alliance School, we decided to take a chance at building something better, a place where young people know their power in the world and where bullying is not the norm. We were successful, and the school remains a place where it doesn't matter who you are or what you believe in, you are welcome. The Alliance School is the nation's first school started with a mission to address bullying and teach others to do the same.

MAKING ROOM FOR THE GOOD

Putting an end to bullying is more complex than just identifying it and handing out consequences. You can do this all day long, and you will never put an end to a bullying culture, because as long as young people want to bully others, they will find ways to do so. Our strongest tool in addressing bullying is to make it so that young people don't want to bully others. People often ask, "But how do you change the hearts and minds of young people so they don't want to harm others?" I would argue that it's not a change at all—that young people come to us with this genuine sense of justice and concern for each other. The circumstances that surround them either support this genuine concern or depress it.

At Alliance, we look at bullying through the lens of preventing and addressing harm. Most people, and especially young people, do not want to harm others. It is actually very rare for someone to have tendencies toward deliberately causing pain and suffering to others. Despite this, many young people do participate in harmful activities, insults, or aggressive behaviors. When pressed about their own harmful actions, they will often minimize the harm caused, making comments such as: "Words don't hurt," "I didn't

mean to hurt anybody,” and “People say things like that to me, and I don’t get hurt.” They don’t want to believe that they have caused anyone harm. Knowing this, it is easier to believe that when people do cause harm, they naturally want to reverse it. The Alliance principle of “do no harm” hangs in this balance.

At Alliance, it is an expressed belief that it is not okay to cause harm to another person, and when we do cause harm, whether intentional or not, we are responsible for repairing the harm we caused. Sometimes this comes in the form of simple awareness and an apology, other times it means sitting in a “repair-harm” circle with a peer, and at still other times it takes consequences from the community to hold someone accountable for the harm they have caused.

By addressing harm when it happens, we rarely have incidents rise to the level of bullying, because we address incidents before they become repeated or severe. With this belief, it is impossible for anyone to excuse their own harmful behavior; the question is not whether or not one intended harm, but whether or not harm happened.

DO NO HARM

Harm can happen, whether intentional or not, and teaching young people to avoid doing harm and to address harm when it happens is at the heart of our practice. This means that, as a community, we hold ourselves and each other to the promise of not doing harm, so that when harm happens, we feel an obligation to address it.

Even our rules were built around this idea. Rather than having a rule about not wearing hats or hoodies, we have a rule that says that you cannot wear something that is hurtful to another person. This can, at times, be challenging, especially when young people push the boundaries on revealing or “shocking” clothing, but we always come back to the question of harm when thinking about and deciding how to address concerns.

For example, a young woman was coming to school wearing extremely short skirts and tops that revealed her bra underneath. A group of students were upset by how revealing her clothes were. They wanted me to make her

stop. When I pushed them on why, they told me they were concerned that she may get attacked or raped for dressing the way she dressed. Once again, I pushed, questioning whether anyone should be able to say they couldn't control themselves because of the way another person dressed. They started to see the problem with policing her appearance rather than policing those who would cause her harm because of her appearance.

The conversation did not stop there, though. The group did feel there was an element of harm to the community caused by her dressing in ways that went against societal norms for modesty. She was making our school "look bad." Rather than deciding to police her dress, though, this small group of two or three concerned young women decided to have a conversation with her. They wanted to try to understand why she was choosing to dress in ways that pushed against these expectations and see if they could reach out to her in another way. They asked me to help facilitate the conversation—so it would not be perceived as an attack—and I agreed to do so.

When the students sat down to meet, a powerful conversation took place. The concerned students started by acknowledging that their original concerns were part of a larger societal problem of putting the blame for sexual assault on women, and they explained that they were sorry for having participated in that kind of thinking. They then went on to explain how they were personally affected by the young woman's choice of dress. One girl shared, "If my grandma comes into this school and sees you dressed like this, there's no way she's letting me stay in this school, and I love this school." This comment really hit home for the young woman. She agreed that her own grandmother would feel the same way if she came into the school and found her dressed that way. She shared that perhaps she had been so busy testing the adults on the school motto of "Be yourself. Get a great education," that she had forgotten to look around at her peers. She also acknowledged that while she should have a right to dress how she wanted without worrying about being attacked, the world was not that evolved yet, and she honestly didn't feel safe out in the world the way she felt in our school. She had pushed boundaries within the school because she knew it was a safe place.

There are a million reasons why young people do the things that they do, but it is truly rare that their actions come from an intention to harm a community that cares about them. They are testing adults, expressing individuality, challenging societal norms, standing up for justice, and pushing boundaries—all normal behaviors for adolescents. By holding to the principle of “do no harm,” we were better able to change behavior and build a community that cares. And once we had this principle, we began to frame our antibullying strategy around this idea. We didn’t want to just have a culture where bullying was not the norm, we wanted to have a culture where *harm* was not the norm, and when harm happened, it was addressed. So, we built our strategy around preventing and addressing harm.

PREVENTING HARM

The Alliance philosophy uses a two-pronged approach to bullying—first preventing harm, and then addressing harm when it happens. We spend most of our energy and planning on preventing harm, and this book reflects that. We do this through our culture, curriculum, practices, celebrations, community building, decision-making, and more. Everything we do is purposefully designed with the intention of preventing harm through powerful relationships among members of the community and a culture that supports the community’s values.

The Alliance philosophy rests on the idea that relationships matter—people are less likely to do harm when they know each other well. The Buddhist quote that keeps us centered on this idea is, “If you can see yourself in others, whom can you harm?” When people know each other well, they are more likely to see themselves in others, so much of what we do focuses on building those relationships. We do this in many ways, which will be highlighted in great detail throughout this book. The idea is that everything a school community does should be looked at through the lens of building relationships—“If we do it this way, will it strengthen bonds between people or build walls between people? Is there a way we can do it so people are getting to know each other better? Did we build in enough time for breaking bread?”

For us, this is especially important when it comes to building relationships across difference. Because of this, we have intentionally built a community that uses a full-inclusion model and does not have any form of tracking. There are no honors classes and regular classes. Every class is taught the way that honors classes are taught. If we offer an Advanced Placement (AP) class, the class is open to all students of all abilities. Students with disabilities are just as likely to be in AP classes as their nondisabled peers, and there is no segregation by race, class, or gender. The more diverse a classroom is, the better it is for academic growth and for building relationships. This is part of what it means to get to know each other well.

We also build in opportunities for students to share stories and experiences across difference. Students of different backgrounds, cultures, and abilities often find themselves drawn to friendships with people who look like them or believe what they believe. They can also develop assumptions about others when they don't understand their motivations, beliefs, or cultural norms. It is important to create opportunities for people to get to hear each other's stories, so they begin to understand how they are more similar to each other than they are different. We work to develop these connections across difference through our programming and our schoolwide circles. You will learn more about this in the chapter on restorative practices.

And our teachers know that they have the power to build connections between young people through their instructional practices. Teachers use stories, group activities, service learning, and more to build those connections. In our classrooms, you will rarely see students in rows, because they can learn so much more from each other in groups, and, as a staff, we are intentional about building relationships among students. The teachers build opportunities for choice and movement in the classroom, so that students are connected through the teaching and learning activities. All of these things help to build a culture where harm is not the norm, because people begin to know and care for each other as individuals and as members of a community when they are given the chance to work together.

Throughout the chapters in this book, you will see how the practices we use prevent harm by building connections, community, and a culture that celebrates the relationships between us.

ADDRESSING HARM

We also know that even in a school with a strong culture, harm will happen, intentionally and unintentionally. The second piece of our practice is to have systems in place to address harm when it happens. We spend a lot of time and energy teaching young people how to report and respond to harm when they experience it or witness it. We hold a conference at the beginning of the year where we teach our students how to respond to and report harm, how to participate in and request a repair-harm circle, how to use reporting forms, and whom to report to. We make sure students know what to do when they see harmful words or actions online, and we treat online actions just as seriously as we would treat them if they happened in the school.

And we don't just focus on teaching our students. We also spend time as a staff learning about best practices and developing our own strategies for addressing, documenting, and responding to harm. We regularly participate in trainings, discuss research, and share practices that we have found to be useful in our own classrooms. If the community of adults does not work together, there is no way to identify and respond to patterns that are developing, and this is part of the problem that allows incidents of harm to escalate in many schools, eventually becoming a problem with persistent bullying. We are also careful to create systems that protect the anonymity of reporters, making the environment safe for those who are willing to take a stand against bullying.

Finally, we engage students in the work to address harm. When the school was first started, we created a student-led discipline council that would respond when students repeatedly engaged in acts that harmed individuals or the community. This was highly successful on its own, and then we learned about restorative practices, which enabled us to take this to another level of success. We created two classes where students learn to facilitate repair-harm and community-building circles. Through these classes, they gain critical skills for life and become leaders in their school and home communities. They learn the difference between conflict and bullying and what strategies to use to address each.

By choosing to work hard at preventing harm and having strategies to address harm when it happens, we rarely have cases that rise to the level of bullying. Of course, when we do, we must address that. All of these scenarios are highlighted in this book, told through the stories of the community and the choices we make to deliberately stop bullying in its tracks. Our efforts make a real difference for a lot of young people, and the principles we have learned to live by are principles that can live anywhere.

This book is meant to help those in schools and communities to create the kind of culture we have created at Alliance—where young people feel safe and accepted for who they are and where bullying is not the norm.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is written in chapters designed to highlight the philosophies and practices that make the Alliance School the safe and accepting community that it is. Each chapter focuses on one principle or ideology that is a key to the school's success and illustrates how it worked through the stories of our community. Rather than providing a series of steps to follow, it is written in a way that allows school leaders, individuals, or communities to read about the principles and think about how to put those principles in place in their communities. It is a book written from the perspective of a school community, yet the principles illustrated would be key to creating an effective culture in any workplace or community.

While we recognize that some people may focus on the fact that we were small and had the opportunity to build our school from scratch, we learned about these practices and philosophies from large schools, small schools, new and existing schools, organizations, businesses, and groups. We know they can be applied anywhere because we have seen their effectiveness in other places, and we know that research supports these practices. By highlighting the philosophies we used to build a welcoming school culture, those who want to create such cultures can think about how to bring them to life in their own schools and communities.

For example, the chapter on teaming illustrates how we built connections as a staff, so that staff members knew each other well and were more

likely to be able to work together. We worked consciously to build a culture where staff members know each other and can assume best intentions in working together. The practices illustrated in the teaming chapter are practices that could be used anywhere to build a stronger culture, but they are not the only practices. It is highly likely that by reading the chapter, you will begin to imagine similar practices that would work in your community, workplace, or school. What will you do to make sure the people in your organization know each other well?

The chapter on acceptance, “A Place for *All* Students,” illustrates what it means to build a community that accepts everyone. Through the stories of young people who had been shut out of other places, it is possible to see how a community can act differently to ensure that all individuals feel safe and accepted. Acceptance of difference and diversity is a value that is worth building in any community. For some organizations this can be a challenge, especially in communities that have been traditionally homogenous. What does it mean to demonstrate an extraordinary welcome to those who are different from us, to understand that even if we believe different things, we can still treat each other with dignity and respect? What does it look like to hold the principle of “do no harm” even when we don’t understand another’s beliefs, actions, or history? The acceptance chapter provides an example of what it looks like to demonstrate the kind of extraordinary welcome that pushes us past our fears and misunderstandings.

The stories in these chapters and the philosophies they represent are at the heart of creating safe and accepting communities where everyone can thrive. It is my hope that if you are reading this book, it is because you hope to build a community that celebrates these values. I hope this book will serve as a conversation starter and a guidebook. I envision communities reading the chapters together and developing strategies for implementing the practices highlighted in the chapters of the book. I imagine young people and adults thinking together about *how* to build communities where everyone can thrive. And I hope that as more people develop new and unique strategies for building stronger and more accepting communities, we can continue to share those practices, so that seeing ourselves in others becomes part of the way we all live in the world.

This book is written for anyone who cares about transforming the school experience, so that all students are given the chance to thrive, rather than just survive, at school. It is for the adult who experienced bullying in school and wishes their experience could have been different. It is for the teacher who wants to make the classroom safe and accepting for all students, and it is for the parent who wants to change the culture of a child's school. It is for the reformer who is looking for the levers of change that put dignity and equity at the forefront of policy and practice. And it is for anyone who wants to spend a day in a place where a hug welcomes you at the door, where who you are matters, and where love and learning live side by side. I hear from people every day who want to know how to create a school or develop a school culture like the one we built at Alliance. This book is for all of you and for all who want to know the secrets of what makes Alliance tick. The chapters ahead will capture the histories, the practices, the policies, the people, and the beliefs that make Alliance the hope-filled place that it is. I invite you to be part of it. Welcome to—*The Alliance Way*.