The Canadian Safe School Network: Fostering Partnerships to Reduce Bullying

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This publication of *Teaching and Learning* provides a number of valuable perspectives on the characteristics and extent of bullying behaviour, and offers strategies to reduce or prevent it. It also serves to raise the consciousness about the importance of this issue to everyone who is associated with the care and education of children and youth. In so doing, it encourages ongoing dialogue and cooperation among many partners who share a common commitment to maintaining safe and caring learning environments for children. The Brock-Golden Horseshoe Educational Consortium is to be commended on this effort to inform its constituency about this very critical educational issue.

The Canadian Safe School Network is a charitable organization which was also created to achieve the same end across Canada. We are committed to reducing youth violence by fostering caring learning environments in Canada's schools and communities. In the early nineteen nineties, when members of the Ontario Principals' Council identified school violence as a critical issue, the Ontario Safe School Task Force was established to respond to the issue. The Canadian Safe School Network was founded in 1997 and has carried on the work that was begun by the Task Force. The Canadian Safe School Network believes that reducing youth violence is everyone's responsibility and our work includes raising public awareness, developing

anti-violence training and resources for educators, youth workers, and providing guidance and support to children, youth and their families. Through the development of resources and support, stakeholder partnerships, research and increased awareness, we promote empowerment, self-advocacy, caring and respect amongst our children and youth.

CSSN envisions a society in which all children and youth can:

1. Learn and grow in a caring, tolerant and violence-free environment;
2. Self-advocate and apply strategies to deal with personal safety issues;
3. Trust adults to believe, respect and protect them from harm;
4. Respond in socially acceptable ways to situations that are potentially violent;
5. Behave in responsible ways and accept the natural consequences of their own behaviour.

Educators have always fulfilled a critical role in shaping the development of their students' characters. Increasingly, that responsibility must return to emphasizing interpersonal development skills, self-advocacy and personal safety and injury prevention skills.

Educational leaders and teachers have become keenly aware of the need to maintain safe and caring

learning environments in which students can fully participate without fear. They know that violence in Canadian schools has sharply increased in the last ten years and incidents of bullying are frequent and often carry devastating consequences. Parents are very concerned about this danger and rate their child's safety to be a higher priority than academic success (Globe and Mail Survey Fall 2002)

The results of a recent provincial survey of school safety conducted by The Education Quality Assurance Office of Ontario and designed by The Canadian Safe School Network illustrate this trend and show that a significant proportion of both elementary and secondary students feel unsafe or threatened at school in some way. One in five elementary students think there is a significant amount of harassment in their schools, and the number jumps to one in three among secondary students. Three out of ten elementary students (that's approximately 11 000 children) and four out of ten secondary students (close to 30 000 youth) report observing physical fighting in schools on a regular basis. When asked about their personal experience with physical violence, 13% of elementary school respondents and 10% of secondary school respondents said that they were sometimes hit with an object or a weapon by someone who was trying to hurt them. In a related question, 23% of elementary school students and 13% of secondary school students reported sometimes being slapped, punched or kicked by someone who was trying to hurt them. Approximately 40% of all students and adult stakeholders surveyed disagree or strongly disagree with a statement that said there is very little bullying of other students at school.

Beneath these cold figures is a wide variation in perceptions of safety across schools and districts, so any given school could be better or worse than the overall picture portrayed by these statistics. The surveys used state of the art methods and instruments validated in studies worldwide.)

However vigilant and committed adults are in maintaining a safe learning environment, we can neither walk in our students' shoes nor witness every threat they face. We know that while violence may not occur in our presence, other students witness the majority of bullying incidents. Yet, bystander intervention does not occur with regularity because students fear reprisal, and have learned the secret law that prohibits "ratting".

This unwritten rule is often reinforced by mistrust in the "in charge" adult's ability to deliver sound advice, wise counsel and protection from harm. And often they are right; we either cannot or choose not to deliver.

Educational administrators must provide an education for the bully as well as the victim. Providing a consequence for an isolated incident of violent behavior does not fully address the ongoing reality that the bully and the victim must share the same space whether it is a school bus, a classroom, the hallways and washrooms or the playing fields. Many communities have only one school.

A lot of finger pointing goes on following a violent incident, and is especially emotionally charged when it involves children because their care is shared between parents and school personnel. A complicated interaction that often questions the enforcement of policy, ownership of responsibility, appropriateness of consequences, and the long-term assurance of protection ensues. If there are fun-

damental differences in the beliefs that drive those delicate interactions or if the differences are not fully understood and resolved, parents and educators find themselves in silent conflict, neither having the skill or time to resolve it.

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We all agree that the reduction of violence is a societal issue. Who then speaks for society? The Canadian Safe School Network offers an umbrella approach and provides an objective and well-established voice. Because it is committed to the reduction of school violence, is a charitable organization, and is politically non-partisan, the organization can speak freely and act as a sounding board for all partners. Corporate partners are able to support anti-violence initiatives and fulfill their community based initiatives, parents who work for these corporations identify a role they can play in supporting the maintenance of safer and more caring environments, and become more aware of the key role teachers play in their own children's lives, and community partners can join with schools to initiate safe school programs.

It is important to

1. Regularly remind ourselves that children, who live in fear, cannot achieve academically, artistically, or athletically, and often suffer emotionally or psychologically well beyond childhood.
2. Encourage open communication and provide models for parent/ teacher planning to end or avoid bullying incidents and devise anti-bullying strategies that restore the balance of power and protect

children from ongoing victimization.

3. Continue to examine our school cultures and the belief system that shapes them. If that examination reveals that there are parents, teachers and support staff who view sarcasm, put-downs, and aggressive behavior as a sign of strength, a measure of prowess or a means of disciplinary control, we must encourage them to reshape those beliefs. If we allow ourselves to be bullied and turn a blind eye to violent and aggressive behavior wherever it occurs in our community we not only victimize ourselves but those we seek to protect. The creation of a caring learning environment involves sending confident and consistent messages that violence is not tolerated while also making a long-range commitment to involve students, staff and parents in the development of a set of common beliefs based on mutual respect. We need to model those beliefs and create forums in which our students and teachers can hear their own voices express them.
4. Solicit the support of all our stakeholders to implement anti-violence programs in our schools and find ways to integrate them with our already crowded curriculum.

When schools are devising a whole school plan, setting up a safe school committee, conducting a safety audit, or providing information, workshops or conferences for its school community, The Canadian Safe School Network has resources to assist. Here is a brief description of some of them.

Cool Heads in the Zone is an interactive CD-ROM featuring live action video depicting six bully-

ing scenarios every child understands, a variety of positive interventions, a teacher's manual containing lesson plans and activities assessment tools and curriculum links. Using these interactive CD-ROM children can imagine themselves in the role of the bully, the victim, or the bystander as they view six live action scenarios. They will explore the outcomes of their reactions to bullying situations and test a variety of problem-solving strategies. It provides a starting point for classroom discussion, but can also encourage dialogue between the parents and teachers about possible contributing factors within their school community.

"Somebody's Bullying Me and I Can't Take it Anymore" and "Is your Child Being Bullied?" are two brochures offered both in

French and in English that provide steps to take when a child is being bullied. Like all CSSN resources, they are available for the cost of their production.

Empowered Student Partnerships (ESP) was established in the spring of 2002 to engage students in Toronto schools to take responsibility for reducing violence in their schools and communities. ESP is spearheaded by the Toronto Police Service in partnership with the Canadian Safe School Network, the four Toronto school boards and ProAction, Cops & Kids. Simply put, the partnership provides students with the organizational support to deal directly in their own way with the safe school issues of the day. It is a testament to the students' interest and concern that, at the time of writing this article, over half the

schools in the city of Toronto have voluntarily joined the program.

The Canadian Safe School Network is visiting school boards across Ontario this winter to strengthen its partnerships and extend an invitation to join a provincial "Think Tank" in the spring of 2004. The purpose of the "Think Tank" is to bring together safe school practitioners to exchange information and ideas and to make recommendations to the Minister of Education.

Editor's Note: To learn how you can become involved or for more information about The Canadian Safe School Network's research, programs and resources go to www.canadiansafeschools.com or call 416-977-1050.

"Cool Heads in the Zone"

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New Anti-Bullying CD-ROM

- ★Live Action Video depicting six bullying scenarios every child understands
- ★A variety of positive interventions
- ★Leader friendly resources and assessment tools
- ★Appropriate for children ages 7-12

Using this interactive CD-ROM, students will explore several scenarios imagining themselves in the role of the victim, bystander and bully. They will explore the outcomes of their reactions to bullying situations and test a variety of problem solving strategies.

The CD-ROM is priced at \$309.00 for a site licence.

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