Widefield targets bullying with ambitious program

CAROL MCGRAW
2012-09-03 15:13:28

Widefield School District 3 is creating one of the most ambitious anti-bullying programs in the region, involving every one of its students in third through 12th grades.

While the program has generated much excitement among students and staff, there is one little kid who is particularly ecstatic about it.

During a recent rally at Widefield Elementary School, Rachel’s Challenge facilitator Neil McIntyre asked if there were new kids.

Eight-year-old Sean Lockhart raised his hand.

McIntyre told the several hundred kids in attendance to say hello to him and invite him to lunch.

“Hello,” they yelled so loudly that some students put their hands over their ears.

Sean beamed.

After the program, the third-grader was bursting with enthusiasm. “I thought it was great. I’m new; I started this school because some kids were mean at my other school. It just feels great here.”

And Sean wasn’t going to wait for an invitation to sit with other kids in the lunchroom. “I’m going to find some kid who is all alone and say, ‘You want to sit with me?’ ”

He had certainly taken in the message of being kind to others.

In fact, Widefield officials aren’t so much calling this effort an anti-bullying campaign as emphasizing compassion and acceptance, said Scott Sage, assistant principal at Mesa Ridge High School. Sage, along with Shane Skalla, assistant principal at Widefield High School, are spearheading the program.
In some districts, efforts to address bullying are often a patchwork of individual schools confronting the issue with a one-time event, typically in middle school.

D-3 is spending about $42,000 on the program, including $17,000 in grant money. “It’s money well-spent,” Sage said.

“Bullying is a hot topic, and we have procedures and policies to give consequences to those who bully,” Skalla said. “But to really attack the problem, we wanted to be proactive and change the whole culture of the district and community with teachers, students and parents on the same page.”

Through the University of Colorado’s Center for the Study of Prevention of Violence, they conducted a school climate survey in fall 2011. Students, staff, parents and other community members answered questions regarding bullying, weapon carrying, smoking and drugs, truancy, gangs, victimization, effectiveness of parental values, trust and physical safety. Their answers were compared with those of other schools with similar demographics.

The district officials were particularly struck by the fact that bullying seems to be more pervasive in grade school.

• High school: 22 percent said they had been victims of bullying the past two months compared with 19 percent statewide. About 12 percent admitted to bullying other students. (State, 11 percent).

• Junior high: 24 percent said they were victims of bullying in the past two months compared with 26 percent statewide. Eight percent admitted to bullying others. (State, 14 percent).

• Elementary school third through fifth grade: 39 percent had been a victim of bullying the past two months compared with the state’s 34 percent. Twelve percent of students admitted bullying others. (State 9 percent).

The survey underlined that efforts had to be districtwide and that kindness training had to start early.

“You think at elementary age, they are sweet and wonderful, but they need to know the importance of kindness. When you wait until middle or high school, habits are already formed,” said Tracy Vsetecka, Widefield Elementary School principal.

“Every day, you hear bad things on the news that happens because students didn’t feel included or were bullied,” she said. “The message is if we can change the way we treat each other, we can reduce violence in our world and change the future.”