

Inside People: Schools take on bullying

by Michele Clock

They shoved Bailey Thompson against a wall.

They called the thin, brown-haired boy a nerd and a freak.

FIGHTING THE BAD FIGHT - Bailey Thompson, 11, reflects on the daily suffering he endured from bullies at Rio Seco School in Santee, Calif., which prompted his mother to pull him out of the school and teach him at home. CNS Photo by Nancee E. Lewis. After bullies threw sticks and pebbles at him, the 11-year-old told his mother he didn't want to go on.

"My son is telling me he wants to die, he can't take it anymore, nobody loves him," said Tonya Thompson, 34, a stay-at-home mother in Santee, Calif. "And that kills a parent to hear that."

Thompson pulled her son out of Rio Seco School in Santee and now home-schools him. Rio Seco Principal Cheryl Bowen said her staff worked hard to help Bailey, and that it is unacceptable for any child to "be hurt or perceive that they're being hurt."

The Santee School District has taken steps since then to prevent and combat bullying, but the problem persists at nearly every school across the nation.

Bullying can come in obvious forms like punching and kicking, and in more subtle forms such as making faces behind someone's back.

"There's almost this mentality that aggression is cool," said Wayne Sakamoto, Safe Schools lead coordinator for the San Diego County Office of Education. "There's this top-dog mentality that the tougher I become, the more popular I am."

It is spreading to younger and younger children in a trend Sakamoto said he has noticed over the past seven years.

"Anecdotally, it seems to be starting earlier, and then the scary part is it seems to be lasting longer," he said.

Sakamoto attributes this in part to images in entertainment, the media and even comic books in which the "tough guy wins." He said some adults also are "modeling" aggressive behaviors and not teaching enough basic etiquette and manners.

Bullying was cited as a cause of the 2001 Santana High School shootings that left two dead and 13 others wounded in Santee. Court documents said Charles "Andy" Williams lashed out because he had been bullied by neighborhood youths, though Williams later accepted sole responsibility.

Consequently, school districts are taking wide-ranging steps to counteract the trend.

The Carlsbad Unified School District in Carlsbad, Calif., adopted its first anti-bullying policy in July 2006, 1 1/2 years after 12-year-old Matthew Gilman committed suicide after being taunted by peers, his parents said. The boy attended the district's Calavera Hills Middle School.

In the San Marcos Unified School District in San Marcos, Calif., fourth- and fifth-graders in special jackets patrol elementary school campuses during breaks and lunch, clipboard and pen in hand. The program, known as the Peace Patrol, was started in the 1990s.

Chula Vista Elementary School District in Chula Vista, Calif., uses the Olweus anti-bullying program, named after a Norwegian researcher, at 11 of its 43 campuses. Students fill out questionnaires about bullying. Teachers and parents learn clear rules and expectations so students know where to draw the line. Students, parents and staff members are encouraged to report everything.

"The kids know. They just don't tell," said Dennis Doyle, former assistant superintendent for the Chula Vista district. "That code of silence starts really early."

The San Diego Unified School District offers a range of programs, including one created in part by Peter Yarrow of the folk group Peter, Paul and Mary called "Don't Laugh at Me."

The program encourages students to express their feelings, appreciate differences, treat others with respect and resolve conflicts in creative ways.

Officials also have begun to warn about cyber-bullying, a growing trend in which children ridicule and insult one another through Web sites such as MySpace.

This spring, the Santee School District adopted a student conduct policy with language banning bullying.

Sakamoto conducted a training in Santee for parents, teachers and others, as well as focus groups with Rio Seco students, and he is planning a program this fall in which students will learn how to help each other to not

bully, call names or act aggressively.

Seated under a cabana in the family's backyard late last month, Tonya Thompson said Bailey is starting to trust adults more. He has been nicer to his younger sister. And he is sleeping in his bedroom again.

But when asked if he felt safe, Bailey said he's still "paranoid." He said he hides under his blanket.

Thompson said she is disappointed in the way the Santee School District handled her case, but said district officials have been more receptive lately. Principal Bowen said she feels bad if the school let Bailey down.

Bowen said she wants teachers, parents and other staff members to report problems that they are not able to handle to the main office.

Sometimes, social workers are called in. Outside counselors can help, too. The students who acted out against Bailey were punished, Bowen said, but she cannot say how because of privacy laws.

"The fact that this family has brought this forward as an issue is something I've taken very seriously," she said.

Santee Superintendent Lis Johnson said she is focused on making sure children are safe.

"I don't want kids to suffer," Johnson said. "I don't want our kids to be hurt. I want kids to feel comfortable coming to an adult."

Correspondent Chris Moran contributed to this report.

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