

Schools can - and are - changing their culture

Each school has its own way to reduce bullying

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More than 100 students are milling about the school gym; most of them stare blankly at each other, a few giggle nervously, others look confused and a little bit scared.

The 10 and 11-year-olds have just been told to seek out two other people in the room they don't know. Walk up to these strangers, they are told; get to know them, and tell them what you'd do to combat bullying.

The students hesitate. This is way outside their comfort zone. They wander and whisper, until somehow, eventually, they manage to link up.

This, says teacher Scott Jones, is exactly what he was hoping for. That nervous uncertainty. Feeling vulnerable and isolated. That, he tells the students, is exactly how a person feels who has been bullied.

Mr. Jones hopes his message hits home. The students, from public and Catholic schools across the region, have been picked to spread the word on bully prevention as part of a highly praised initiative in York Region called "Put the Brakes on Bullying".

They've spent the day learning about bullying and, with luck, they will be pumped with enthusiasm to take it back to their home school.

Experiencing shyness and discomfort is one of the more powerful parts of the event Mr. Jones hopes will leave a lasting impression.

"The idea is to get them to understand what it's like ... to put themselves in someone else's shoes," the event's project manager said.

Last week's event at St. Brigid Catholic Elementary School in Stouffville was one of 12 held each year at public and separate schools across the region by the Community Alliance for York

Region Education - part of a myriad of approaches to combat bullying.

This newspaper's series on bullying has highlighted where the school system fails, where the bully, and the victim, slip through the cracks. It happens more often than most adults realize - but that doesn't mean educators aren't trying.

In Ontario, every school every school is required to have a safe school team. In addition, most schools in the region have a slew of other programs besides Put the Brakes on Bullying (see sidebar story page 17).

But on their own, most experts agree, those disparate programs are not enough. Throw them all into a pot and you don't simply get 'safe soup'. There's an elusive ingredient called "embedding" and schools that figure out how to stir that into the mix have found they've got a recipe that works.

One such school may be Holland Landing Public School.

Heidi Armstrong, literacy and reading recovery teacher, discovered Challenge Day was the missing element at her small school in East Gwillimbury.

The powerful program has been featured on Oprah. Led by two leaders from the non-profit group in California, participants are guided through a series of interactive activities to help them challenge stereotypes.

"By the end of the day there's not a kid who isn't moved," says Ms Armstrong. "We go through a lot of Kleenex - 30 boxes - it just shows you the power of the programming."

Students fundraise all year to pay for the program. Two facilitators, along with 30 Denison High students who have been trained for the event and 30 adult volunteers, organize a day to break down barriers.

"If you really knew me," the kids say, in one exercise, and then finish the sentence. "If you really, really knew me" and finish that sentence too. They're encouraged to share their true selves instead of hiding who they are in order to fit in.

The daysparks a movement of compassion known as "Be the Change." Ms Armstrong, and others who have seen it in action, say the effects are emotional - and lasting. She says there was some nervousness among staff at first, "afraid of what this would unearth."

"But the stuff is there, buried in our kids, and keeping a lid or Band-Aid on it doesn't make it better" and leads to difficult behaviour in schools.

The new attitude infuses daily activities and spin-offs: five weeks before Christmas it's "rewarding generosity" - with student presentations,

cheerleading at lunch and certificates. Another program is "pay it forward": kids make videotapes showing students' good deeds.

Because of Challenge Day, the school's restorative approaches are far more effective, she says.

"When the students gather to discuss what they need to do to make it right, the emotional connection is more possible because a lot of work has happened beforehand."

Last year, she says, the Grade 8s vowed they'd never let bullying happen again in their grade - and when a single incident did turn up, they were genuinely upset that their perfect record was tarnished.

"We're not saying bullying doesn't happen," she says, but because the attitude is embedded throughout the school, it has had a huge impact on the number of incidents, and how those incidents are handled.

It's that "embedding" aspect that Randy Ketterling, a Newmarket child and adolescent therapist, says is key.

"In some schools, you get a flurry of stuff, guest speakers, and then it fades away," he says. "And then there are others where it becomes a part of the fiber of the whole school."

Much depends on school leadership - the principal's approach and the morale of teachers, he says.

Mr. Ketterling works with St. Andrew's College, a private boys' school in Aurora which he says has also managed to embed the message.

At the beginning of each school year, staff and students learn behaviour expectations and what to do if they feel harassed, bullied or uncomfortable. With the help of faculty facilitators, the targeted student can choose to work on strategies to deal with it himself, hold a 'mediated discussion', or request a formal investigation.

Special efforts are made in middle school - especially Grades 7 and 8 - where bullying happens more often.

- Mr. Ketterling meets regularly with students informally, without the teacher, to talk about peer relationships. Students are encouraged to let others know what's bothering them. Because the teacher is not present and Mr. Ketterling is considered "cool", they open up to him. The therapist then follows up with the teacher.

- A variety of programs all year keep the topic active, including visits from Toronto Argonauts, soccer celebrities, Beat Bullying Week, outreach and community-building activities, and surveys about school safety, bullying and social dynamics.

- Eight students are chosen



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

With an older student taking notes, Liam Timewell, 11, Grade 6, makes a point during an anti-bullying session held at St. Brigid Catholic School in Stouffville - one of many approaches schools use to fight the problem.

from each level to act as anti-bully leaders - peers the other students know they can confide in. The leaders attend a summit at the start of the year, then meet biweekly for informal discussions about what they see happening in the hallways or recess, and anyone they've heard about who is feeling victimized.

Gaeme Allison, a Grade 8 student at St. Andrew's, thinks it's effective. He remembers when he attended his neighbourhood school it was rife with rumours, "someone getting creamed at recess" and the Grade 8s dominating the playground equipment. "Here, basically everyone's friends with everyone. There are groups, but there's no exclusion or bullying."

The approach is possible in large publicly funded schools too.

St. Emily Catholic Elementary School may be a case in point. Last year, principal Donna Hackett undertook a joint effort with staff and the community to change the culture of the Woodbridge school. With about 1,000 students, it's the largest elementary school in the separate system, and "there were a lot of issues to deal with," she says.

Bullying is a "huge challenge for schools, but if you start at the grass-roots level ... reinforcing good values, high expectations, the whole attitude in the school can change."

Along with popular programs like Second Step and Tribes, St. Emily began a Games Club for special needs students who had trouble with social skills and often ended up in tears or trouble at recess. Identified students spend recess in more structured activities with older students coaching and adults ready to intervene.

Girls on the Run and Girls on Track,

which culminate in a 5-K run, teach assertiveness to girls vulnerable to subtle female "relationship bullying".

St. Emily holds Character Assemblies, but rather than parade award winners across the stage for a handshake and certificate, guest speakers highlight values and programs, like literacy in Africa. Winning students have their photo displayed.

"Faith in Action" and Oprah's Ambassador Club help foster the students' view of themselves as generous team workers.

Bullying hasn't been eliminated, Ms Hackett says. "But I can honestly say that in every case I've dealt with, the bullying has not been repeated, no matter how ugly it was."

"It takes time, but you can change the culture of a school. It's all a matter of attitude and action."

And patience, adds Fred Faber.

"I think we're making good headway," says Mr. Faber, who is coordinating the public board's system initiatives on bully prevention. "Lots is going on behind the scenes ... none of which will satisfy the parent who feels his child is being targeted. We need to recognize that we're not going to eradicate it in a year or two or three."

Nor will it be eradicated with simple classroom lessons, adds Julie Anderson, curriculum consultant for health and physical education with the public board.

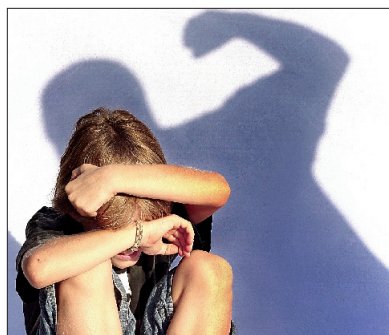
"We need to engage the whole community. We can't just ask teachers and principals to make a difference. ... It takes a village to raise a child."

SCHOOL BOARDS TRY MANY APPROACHES

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SCHOOL BOARDS TRY MANY AND VARIED APPROACHES TO PREVENT BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

From page 3.

York Region's public and Catholic schools make use of a variety of programs designed to prevent bullying and enhance the school climate. Here's a brief description of some currently being used.

- **VIP** – The Values, Influences and Peers program brings youth education officers from York Regional Police into elementary schools to make presentations on topics including values, peer pressure, vandalism and drugs.
- **ESP** – Students involved with Empowered Student Partnerships team up with York police to develop year-long initiatives to combat safety concerns in their school.
- **Tribes** – A step-by-step process in which students learn a set of skills that will help them work together in long-term groups (tribes), using four key "agreements": attentive listening; appreciation/no put downs; mutual respect and the right to pass (or say 'no').
- **Second Step** – An award-winning evidence-based pro-

gram in which students learn and practise social skills such as empathy, emotion management, problem solving and cooperation.

- **Roots of Empathy** – In some public schools, interactive classroom visits by a parent with a baby teach students about emotions and empathy. An instructor works with students to make the link between responding to the baby's needs, and being aware of the feelings of others.
- **SEAL** – Also a public school program, Social, Emotional Academic Learning is a "skill-based learning continuum" aimed at all grades, beginning with students focusing on self management and self awareness, then learning interpersonal skills and decision-making skills.
- **Peer Mediation** – A select group of students are taught intervention and problem-solving strategies to allow them to help other students resolve conflicts.
- **Restorative practices**: A range of approaches to student behaviour where the focus is on correcting the harm

and restoring the relationship rather than punishing the deed. It can be formal – with a round-table restorative justice discussion involving everyone effected – or informal – encouraging students to examine how their behaviour affects others and work through solutions.

- **Character Matters** – Incorporates the teaching of values like respect, responsibility and empathy throughout the curriculum and all aspects of school life, reinforced with posters, assemblies and awards.
- **Religious Education and Family Life Programs** – York's Catholic system takes a holistic faith-based approach to

help students build positive relationships with their family, friends, peers and community, learning social justice issues, and "learning to care for all God's creation."

- **Healthy School Healthy Workplace** – Newly endorsed by the public board, this is a comprehensive model towards health, of which bullying is one aspect, and also includes mental health, nutrition and physical activity. The policy is incorporated into curriculum, social environment (with peer mediators, playground leaders etc.) physical environment (posters, newsletters) and community partnerships.



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Play a role in the future of the Don River Watershed

York Region Open House Wednesday, April 22, 2009

Open House: 6 p.m.

Meeting: 6:30 – 9:30 p.m.

Location: Pallsade A, Elgin West Community Centre 11099 Bathurst St., Richmond Hill

RSVP Required: Call 416-661-6600, extension 5280.

Toronto and Region Conservation and its partners are seeking public input on the draft Don River Watershed Plan and concept site plans. Together, we face many challenges in revitalizing the Don into a healthy urban river. Please join us for the second in a series of open houses to:

- Learn about the issues and opportunities
- Discuss concept plans for the Maple Nature Reserve (Vaughan)
- Share your comments and concerns
- Find out how you can become involved

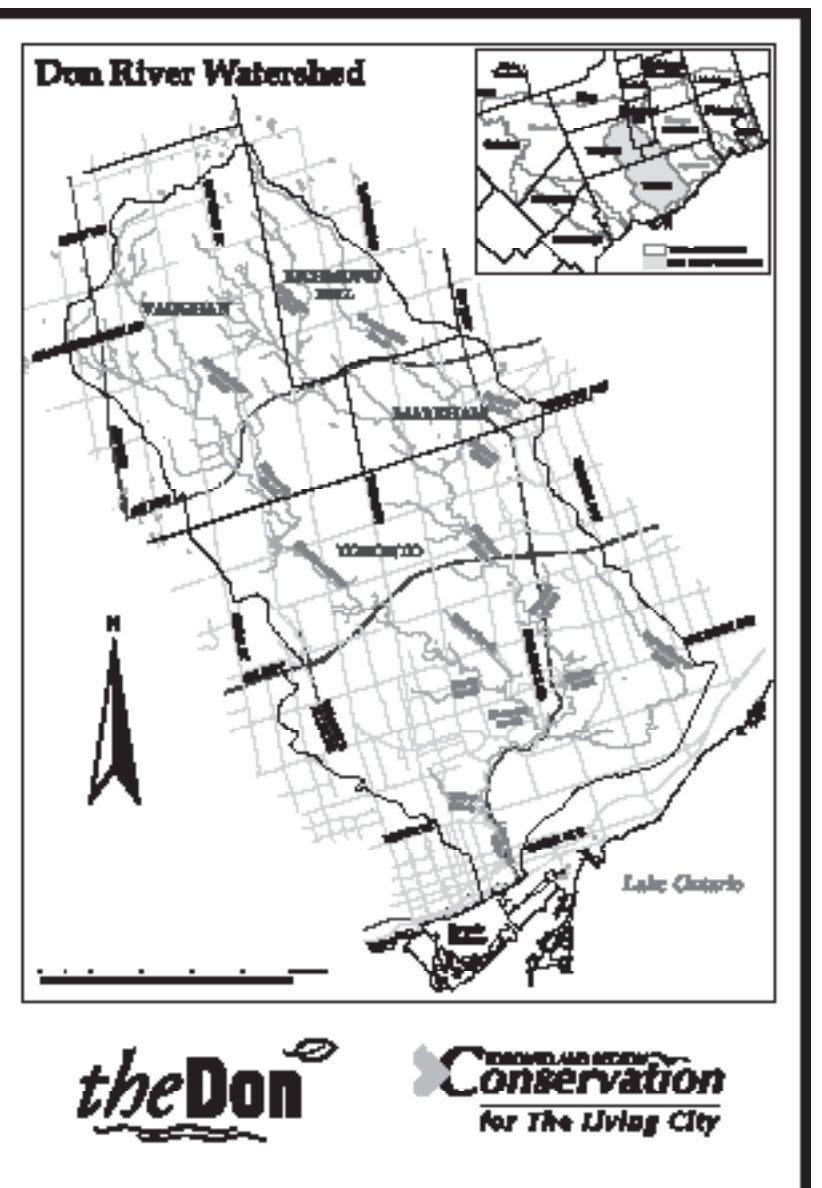
An Open House will also be held in Toronto to discuss concept sites in that area. Check the website for date and location.

For more information and to obtain a copy of the draft Don River Watershed Plan and the technical background reports, please visit our website at www.trca.on.ca/donwatershedplan

The following organizations have participated in development of the watershed plan:



Don River Watershed



Map showing the Don River Watershed area, including municipalities like Vaughan, Richmond Hill, Markham, and York Region, leading to Lake Ontario.

