

# Education Officials Seek New Ways to Beat Bullying

KINGSTON, N.H. —

Bullying has been called a growing epidemic in the country's schools, but some experts are finding new ways to fight back.

Carol Croteau, a mother of four, said her family experienced the pain of bullying firsthand. She said her teenage daughter was the victim of schoolyard bullying not long ago.

"At first, it was disbelief that my daughter could be bullied," she said.

Her daughter was a sophomore in high school at the time, and Croteau said the bullying got out of hand.

"It created a situation where she just could not go back to that school anymore and feel safe," she said.

Croteau's daughter eventually transferred schools after experiencing what thousands of students statewide face each year, and experts warned that the bullying epidemic has reached record highs.

Recent data from the New Hampshire Department of Education shows that more than 5,500 bullying incidents were reported in a 12-month span, and half were substantiated. Elementary school students had the highest percentage of bullying reports.

Officials said depression, poor grades and sometimes injuries, such as scrapes and bruises, can be symptoms of being bullied.

"People have to communicate better," said Stephen Berwick of the state Department of Education. "If something comes up, an issue comes up, it's important to try and nip it in the bud as early as it occurs."

Berwick helps mediate a growing list of possible bullying cases. He said it's an issue he doesn't take lightly, and he hopes it will someday go away.

"I think this could be the meanest generation," said Malcolm Smith of the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. "We've got to act quickly."

Smith said he and has studied youth violence for the past 30 years.

"Fifty percent of our students, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, are at a risk this very year in middle school for experiencing a severe bout of bullying," he said.

Smith and others are trying to shed light on both sides of bullying and how to stop it.

"We assumed that bullies were kids that had low self-esteem and needed more self-esteem, but that was a false assumption," he said.

Smith said research shows the children most likely to become bullies are those who have confidence. He said they start bullying to show power over those who lack what they have.

"It turns out now, after 30 years of research, that bullies are kids who consider themselves better than other kids," Smith said.

He said the research points to a potential solution. Smith is the lead researcher on a pilot program for middle school children aimed at teaching social skills -- specifically, learning to better care about one another.

The program just completed a nine-week test in three schools statewide. The goal is for students to learn empathy and intervention instead of being bystanders to bullying.

"So far, the initial results are just exactly what we were hoping for, that children are showing a change in their behavior," Smith said. "Most other approaches have tried to change the teachers and then try to change the students, but we're hoping the student's momentum will change the whole school environment."

Smith said that this summer, his team will teach the program to more teachers and more districts with the hope of spreading it beyond New Hampshire. He said he believes the only way to stem bullying is to impart a fundamental way of learning that he hopes children will pick up at a young age.

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WMUR Story on Bullying