

Issue Brief

Bullying: A Schoolhouse Reality for Kentucky Students

Introduction

Bullying is prevalent and pervasive throughout Kentucky's schools. While often being dismissed as "part of growing up" or as an experience that "toughens you up," bullying can, in fact, result in substantial long-term negative impacts for the victim, the bully, the school's learning environment, and society as a whole. Rather than being an uncommon occurrence, however, bullying is, sadly, as much a part of schools as are tests, homework and basketball.

Though definitions of bullying vary somewhat, common components include an imbalance of power between the victim and bully (or bullies), aggressive behaviors, and behaviors that are repeated over time.¹ Bullying behaviors take on two different forms: direct and indirect. Direct bullying involves overt physical actions such as pushing or hitting. Indirect bullying includes social isolation or manipulation and gossip.² Bullying is also intentional. It is neither accidental nor incidental; it is purposeful in focus and tactics. Either form of bullying can be harmful to a student's overall well-being, development and educational attainment.

To understand the significance and impact of this problem in Kentucky's schools, Kentucky Youth Advocates instituted a "Bullying Hotline" for the entire month of October 2006 where students, parents, teachers and administrators were encouraged to report their experiences with bullying. Both a telephone hotline and an online survey were available. Extensive outreach efforts were made: every teacher in every county, the Kentucky PTA, the Kentucky Department of Education, school boards, schools and administrative officials, and every organization affiliated with the Anti-Bullying Alliance were provided with hotline contact information to distribute. All submissions were voluntary and anonymous submissions were allowed.

The response was strong. The stories were compelling and in many instances, frightening. However, the survey results were not surprising. The numbers and stories echo prior national and state studies on the pervasiveness and impact of bullying.

The numbers on bullying

Nationally, an estimated 3.2 million students are victims of bullying annually while 3.7 million students play the role of bully.³ Kentucky is no exception to the national landscape, as the Kentucky Center on School Safety reports that the 2005–06 school year saw:

- 25% of middle school students reported being afraid that someone at their school would bully them;
- 17% of high school students reported being afraid that someone at their school would bully them.
- 27% of middle school students reported that they had been teased, called names and been subject to emotional bullying.
- 18% of high school students reported that they had been teased, called names and been subject to emotional bullying.

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Authors

Tara Grieshop-Goodwin
tgrieshop@kyyouth.org

Terry Brooks
tbrooks@kyyouth.org

Shawwna Gary
sgary@kyyouth.org

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KENTUCKY YOUTH ADVOCATES

11001 Bluegrass Pkwy., Suite 100
Jeffersontown, KY 40299

(502) 895-8167

www.kyyouth.org

During 2006, school shooting events in Bailey, Colorado; Cazenovia, Wisconsin; and Pleasureville, Pennsylvania were all linked to bullying. According to the U.S. Secret Service, more than two-thirds of the attackers in school shooting cases reported that, “they had felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked or injured” before the attack.⁴ Bullies are on a trajectory for problems with the law as adults. According to one source, 60% of youth identified as bullies while in grades 6–9 had a criminal conviction by age 24 as compared to a 10% conviction rate with their peer group.⁵

Kentucky experienced its own incident in Paducah at Heath High School, where bullying was considered a factor in the shooting spree in 1997. While the results of bullying are often as ghastly as the school shooting events listed here, bullying takes a toll on individual students, on families, on the school, and on the community. For victims, the effects of bullying can often develop into low self esteem, poor self worth, higher rates of depression and anxiety, impaired concentration, and socially avoidant and introverted behaviors among victims.⁶ The erosion of one’s self confidence can and does create serious health problems for the future. Victims are at higher risk for later maladjustment and may even suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.^{7,8}

Bullying also impacts the learning environment. Fear is the number one byproduct of bullying; an estimated 160,000 students stay home from school every day in the United States for fear of being bullied.⁹ Not only are bullied students more likely to skip class or school, they are also at higher risk for subsequently dropping out of school entirely.¹⁰

Kentucky stories and voices about bullying

Bullying has posed a serious problem for the Commonwealth’s children and youth for many years. While some efforts have been made, results from the Bullying Hotline indicate that responses are most often individualized (a teacher intervening) rather than systemic (policies and administrative support). The numbers at hand, as indicated in the preceding section, detail bullying as a widespread reality for Kentucky’s youth. However, there is another dimension that is perhaps even more informative – the stories of victims, the stories of bullies, and the stories of adults who see and are impacted by the phenomenon.

To connect the numbers on bullying with the narratives of bullying, KYA drew from two sources. The first emanated from KYA’s ongoing case advocacy work. In 2006, the majority of all case calls were education-related; the majority of education calls were about discipline issues; and, the majority of discipline case calls were related to bullying. Additionally, KYA initiated a statewide Bullying Hotline during October 2006. Following academic qualitative research protocols that KYA has used in parallel data gathering on such issues as

Child Protective Services and Medicaid, a toll-free number was established and the lines were staffed with volunteers over a three-week period. In addition to taking calls, an online form was available via the KYA website throughout the month of October. Partners, including the Kentucky Parent Teacher Association, the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents, the Kentucky Education Association, the Jefferson County Teachers Association and the Kentucky Department of Education, provided invaluable communication links to encourage Kentuckians of all ages to share their experiences, perspectives and accounts of bullying in the Commonwealth’s schools.

While respondents came from throughout the Commonwealth, the northern and central parts of Kentucky accounted for almost 75 percent of all responses. Parents, students, educators, and other professionals responded to the hotline, with parents and students accounting for more than 80 percent of the calls.

Bullying took on myriad forms in the responses, though verbal and physical bullying accounted for the vast majority of reported types. The research suggested verbal bullying was associated with females more than male students. One teacher responded “girls bully through dirty looks, ignoring, and ‘sweet’ put-downs.” Another student respondent recalled being called names such as ‘loser’ and ‘dirty.’ The name calling sometimes included racial slurs and sexual harassment. The negative effects experienced by victims of verbal bullying are no less than those of other forms.

On the other hand, research suggests that physical bullying is often more associated with male students.¹¹ Parents shared experiences of physical bullying between boys that included behaviors ranging from shooting rubber bands at the victim’s face to more serious physical assaults. Illustrative of the real violence at hand was the recollection of one parent who shared, “The bully got my child in a head lock, punched him, hit him in the back with his knuckles and kicked him...”

Many respondents shared observations they had witnessed even though they personally had been neither a victim nor a bully. The consistent observation was that bullying is a widespread condition. One student succinctly summarized his school’s environment, stating, “I’ve noticed a lot of kids get bullied in school every day.” Witnessing acts of bullying can be just as disruptive to the learning process. Bullying puts witnesses at risk for performing poorly in the classroom “because their attention is focused on how they can avoid becoming the targets of bullying rather than on academic tasks.”¹² A 4th grade teacher echoed that notion of witness impact as she observed that, “many students in my school are in fear of becoming the next target.”

Three overarching themes can be extrapolated from KYA’s qualitative data. These include:

FINDING 1

Bullying is taking a toll on Kentucky's children and families

Research in the past decade has begun to document the toll bullying takes on children. Bullying impacts the mental health of victims, who are more likely to report feeling depressed or having thoughts about committing suicide.¹³ Bullying can also result in behavior problems and difficulty for students in relating to their peers.¹⁴ Even in children ages 5 to 7, victims of bullying exhibited behavior problems and problems adjusting to school.¹⁵

Because of bullying, students are afraid to attend school

A common theme that emerged from students and parents responding to the bullying hotline was that students were afraid to attend school as a result of bullying. The fear students experienced impaired concentration during the school day and began filtering into their home environment. Often children attempt to cope with bullying on their own and don't seek help for fear of retaliation. Fear of school is one of several indicators that a child is the victim of bullying.

"I had a terrible experience with a group of girls, one in particular, that made me afraid to come to school each day in eighth grade year."—*Student*

"I was very proud of the way she continued to go to school, even when she was scared and afraid of what people would say to her."—*Parent*

With some respondents, parents reported that the child would feel physically sick thinking about having to attend school.

"She was physically sick at times because of it and would beg her daddy and me not to make her go back."—*Parent*

"...she started getting sick each night around 7 pm... in the morning she would still not feel well, and ask to stay home from school."—*Parent*

"[My] daughter would cry and even throw up after or during school because of being so upset by the bullying."—*Parent*

Bullying impacts students' mental health

Many students and parents reported depression and self-esteem problems among bullying victims, mirroring what national research shows.

"I truly believe that her experience in school was more harmful to her in life than what it helped her. Getting an education at the expense of your emotional well-being is not a good trade off."—*Parent*

"His attitude is low and so is his self esteem. His grades have dropped and he picks on his sister at home."—*Parent*

Other respondents reported that bullying had significantly impacted their lives, in some cases even after many years had passed.

"The bullying I received was so severe that had I had a weapon, I really think I would have used it."—*Former student*

"I was bullied all through school. I am now 33 years old and can tell you my experiences at school have affected the rest of my life."—*Former student*

"My daughter is grown now and still is suffering the effects that bullying had on her as a child in the _____ County School System..."—*Parent*

Bullying impacts families in ways large and small

Bullying does not stop at the schoolhouse door but marches into the student's home as well.

In the stories KYA heard, bullying often had a profound impact on families themselves as they made various decisions so a child could escape from being bullied. Many parents reported making decisions to move their children from their current educational setting to another school, and in some instances from a public to a private school. Additionally, some parents ended up deciding to home school their children.

"It has been so bad with my child that I had to remove her from her current school and relocate her."—*Parent*

"Our response to the problem was to enroll her and her younger sister in a local parochial school here... We sacrifice in order to afford their tuition and are taxpayers in _____ County but do not trust the safety of the public schools that are within our district."—*Parent*

Another common thread to the stories centers on the amount of involvement families took in dealing with their child's bullying experience. Often as a result of being unsatisfied with the way schools were addressing bullying, parents would come up with plans or find other means to help their child deal with bullying.

"She has to let us know by cell phone when she leaves any activity or if there is even going to be a 5 minute delay in her arriving home because we are afraid that these girls could decide to follow her or become physical. We want to do all we can to keep her safe."—*Parent*

"I had to change how my daughter played on the playground. I taught [her] to stay near teachers and always be with a few friends that she trusts."—*Parent*

“I did what I thought was right by giving her coping ideas.”—*Parent*

“We try to teach our child to avoid [the bully] because this will make our child a better person.”—*Parent*

FINDING 2

Responses to bullying across Kentucky vary widely

In Kentucky, the protection a child receives from being bullied appears to depend heavily on the school they attend or even the teachers they have. Hotline participants shared stories of the responses they received to bullying, and their stories ranged from feeling positive about the way the school handled the situation to feeling like their concerns went unaddressed.

Respondents want decisive action from school officials

Both in terms of case analyses and the responses of parents and students to the bullying hotline, the key element in resolving a bullying situation was the quick action by school officials.

“I feel that the principal is very concerned with the children at the school and holds a no tolerance policy for bullying.”—*Parent*

“I have talked to the school and the guidance counselor is now teaching a segment to each class regarding bullying.”—*Parent*

Bullying prevention efforts were often individual rather than systemic

Systems to prevent bullying were lacking but that heroic individuals – typically classroom teachers – made the difference for students. These teachers should be commended for their actions. However, such individual responses leave children not lucky enough to be in the teacher’s school or class unprotected.

“I felt that one senior teacher and their son kept my daughter out of harm’s way more than the whole administration did.”—*Parent*

“Right now my science teacher is really into helping the kids and keeping us safe, but most teachers don’t care.”—*Eighth grade student*

“One of the teachers was helpful and empathetic. She would let me know about bullying incidents she witnessed and kept lines of communication open.”—*Parent*

The typical response to bullying is either inadequate or nonexistent

The vast majority of cases reviewed expressed severe disappointment in the response from the school system when they reported bullying. In some instances, parents and students felt that nothing was done to address the problem.

“Last year in 7th grade I told the office, and nothing was done! It just kept happening! They just ignored it.”—*Eighth grade student*

“Given that the counselor doesn’t know my name, I kinda doubt if she is going to step up on this.”—*High School Sophomore*

“I feel bad because the law here in _____ County won’t help me to keep my child safe. This town is small and they all stick together.”—*Parent*

“...you tell the principals and they just say don’t worry about it.”—*High School Sophomore*

“You get a lot about the kids just needing to toughen up. It is the victim’s fault. You almost think the school believes the bully is doing the victim a favor. You know, tough love.”—*Parent of a middle school student*

Some respondents report no action, other cases are marked by inappropriate interventions.

“The teacher replied to me that if my daughter happened to strike the girl bullying her she [the teacher] would conveniently be looking out the window.”—*Parent*

“...my daughter was being touched inappropriately on the bus. I called transportation and supposedly they make a seating chart... This year the touching has stopped but the bullying has picked up. ...The only option we have been given again is the seating chart.”—*Parent*

Bullying is the venue of the privileged

A consistent, though unanticipated finding was a sense that bullying was, as one parent suggested, “the hobby of kids from powerful families.” Several case respondents asserted that the lack of action taken to address bullying resulted directly from the connections a child had. Having parents who worked in the school system or being well-liked by the school administration provided protective shields from punishment to some students accused of bullying.

“We tend to let students with certain parents or special stars in the sports area get away with doing much of the bullying.”—*Parent*

“Bullying has always been ignored IF the bully is a student whose parents work in the school system.”—*Parent*

“[The teacher said] every parent that had a girl in her class had complained about this child already in their confer-

ences and there was nothing she could do about it. She told us the child’s mother works at the school and refuses to speak to or even punish her child for her actions against others.” —*Parent*

Lack of supervision leaves students vulnerable

Structural decisions that allow students to go unsupervised leave many students feeling vulnerable. Adult supervision is a critical component in preventing bullying, and research shows that efforts such as hall monitoring by school staff were associated with fewer bullied students.¹⁶ Yet, Kentucky students do not always have that protection.

“The most help came from a teacher...who literally put themselves in the places between classes and sometimes even during class while on their own free period as a watch dog to make sure my daughter was safe.” —*Parent*

“The teacher who was to be in this class was gone to sell ads for a ballgame program, and no one covered this history class.” —*Parent relating story of physical abuse incident*

Adults minimize or ignore bullying

Adults contribute to the problem of bullying when measures to counteract such behaviors are not implemented. The perceived lack of concern by adults may translate into acceptance of such behaviors by students.¹⁷ Lack of concern from adults at the school left some respondents feeling like they had nowhere to turn. One parent told of her son calling her from a payphone at school, rather than going to the principal, when a fellow student had stabbed a nail into his leg. The school administration’s lack of responsiveness in the past led to his distrust.

“The bullying that teachers don’t see is the worst, but I have seen bullying going on right by or in front of teachers and they haven’t done anything and that’s just wrong!” —*Eighth grade student*

“One day I told a teacher and she said that I was overreacting that maybe it was just me trying to get attention.” —*Student*

“I asked the ... teacher if my son had really been bullied in her class daily per his friend, and she said ‘why, yes and I can’t figure it out; he is not the victim-type.’ She had NOT ONCE reported this or done one thing about the bullying.” —*Parent*

“I have been inside a high school during class change... Staff in the hallways did not intervene when they had the opportunity.” —*Anonymous*

“The administration would say it was an accident or down-play incidences by saying ‘this happens at every school.’” —*Parent*

One educator, in fact, reported that too many of her colleagues actually were modeling bullying behavior themselves as she reported staff “neglecting to read a child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) and calling them ‘lazy,’ [and] making derogatory comments in class.” She further asserted, “This behavior can unwittingly give peers permission to harass as well.”

FINDING 3

Respondents felt that more action is needed to address bullying

An analysis of case calls and hotline responses showed respondents were very vocal in what they believed would be appropriate measures to address bullying. School districts across Kentucky vary in their policies governing students, just as much as the response to bullying varies. There appeared to be little satisfaction with current policies and disciplinary methods used. Suggestions included creating stricter policies and providing services to both victims and bullies and education for school staff, students and parents.

Policies may be in place but they are not effective

A review of school district policies found that the policies currently in place in the majority of districts specifically address some bullying behaviors, such as harassment. However, very few school districts specifically define bullying or have policies in place to address it in all its forms. Parents and students echoed concerns about the lack of effectiveness of current policies, often reporting that the existing school policies did not prevent students from engaging in such behaviors or correct the behavior when it did occur.

“In my opinion the bullying or other wrong behavioral activity should be addressed by more strict policies and should always have parents notified of anything no matter how small.” —*Parent*

“Stricter school policies for discipline, stricter laws instead of a smack on the hand and not wait to see if this BULLY shows up with a gun or comes after another child.” —*Parent*

“Stop it completely, set up a law that you enforce, make the teachers watch for it, make sure the students should not do it.” —*Eighth grade student*

Parents and students felt that the lenient policies and lack of school effort to address bullying perpetuated further bullying. Without deterrence, bullying lasts longer and occurs more frequently. The message sent by poor response is one of

tolerance for such behaviors. Respondents gave suggestions on how to send a message of no tolerance.

“I think that teachers need to have more harsh punishments for bullying and harassment.”—*Parent*

“We need to let students know from the day they enter school that this is the RULE...period.”—*Parent*

Education is a key component needed to prevent and deal with bullying

For students who indicated they had experienced bullying, the most difficult aspect came when help was sought but not given. Teachers, parents, and students alike felt as though the community and schools did not know how to identify bullying or understand the lasting effects. Many were hopeful that if school staff knew how to identify and address bullying, there would be fewer occurrences. Also, some parents felt that increasing both parent awareness and involvement would decrease the number of incidents.

“I think it must begin with education about the effects of emotional/social bullying and it should start in first grade and be mandatory education on the subject every year until the child graduates.”—*Parent*

“I think that the schools should have seminars about bullying, not just for the students, but for the parents, who really care.”—*Parent*

“I think that teachers and other school officials should have to attend conferences to teach them how to deal with bullying...”—*Anonymous*

“Teachers are unsure of how to address it or stop it.”
—*Guidance counselor*

“Teach kids how to build relationships by modeling things in the classroom.”—*Middle school counselor*

Schools should take the extra step – work with bullies, engage students, and let students know they care

Strict policies and education alone are not enough to address bullying in Kentucky’s schools. According to respondents, services need to be provided to both victims and bullies.

“I think when dealing with bullies that you can’t just think of how the bullying is making the victim feel but also the feelings that are going through the bully.”—*Eighth grade student*

“I may be naïve but I think bullies may need the support groups as much as the victims. If that is how they mark their territory, they need skills to re-mark their identity.”
— *Assistant Principal*

A common suggestion among respondents was that schools engage students in the work of reducing bullying.

“Last year in seventh grade someone was getting bullied and everyone told the bully to stop...then that person stopped.”—*Eighth grade student*

“We have a group going called ‘Lunch with the Ladies’ for girls to talk about what bothers them and how to react to this type of bullying.”—*Teacher*

“Every student needs to be overtly taught how to react to this type of bullying. Parents can’t be expected to equip their sons and daughters to combat bullying alone.”
—*Teacher*

“Have a classroom survey asking students to write down who they think is a bully in their school...have it be anonymous. Then at least the principal has it in his radar. Right now it is nowhere.”—*Eighth grade student*

Sometimes all a child needs is to know that there are adults who care. When an adult shows concern and addresses the issue of bullying, a trust is built. Knowing that it will be taken seriously can help those too scared to come forward to report their own victimization.

“Protect the victims in school from more than an incident here and there – we tend to make them more of a victim by not listening to their problems.”—*Professional*

“...how long does my daughter have to suffer before someone will have the courage to do something about it every single time it happens?”—*Parent*

“If we as parents don’t stand up for our kids, who will? I don’t think that my kids’ school would. That’s a scary truth.”—*Parent*

CONCLUSION

National research, Kentucky data, and powerfully, the voices of Kentuckians point to the undeniable truth that students, families and schools are paying the price of bullying. While the majority of school districts in the Commonwealth have policies addressing inappropriate behavior, including intimidation, bullying itself is rarely defined, and unfortunately, poorly handled or ignored. These stories from Kentuckians confirm that what is being done is neither preventive nor effective in dealing with incidents that do occur. Bullying is a complex social dysfunction and there is no single solution. However, the findings from our analysis of the Hotline responses and email transmittals indicate that effective policy changes must account for the following factors:

- Laws, policies, and practices must protect every student. While this study was replete with examples of dedicated

educators making a difference, there was little evidence that schools were implementing systemic and institutional approaches to combat bullying.

- Both educators and parents need more information on how to prevent and intervene in this phenomenon.
- Students, including the general student body, victims, and the bullies themselves, need articulated support services.

As one parent shared, “I am glad to see that you[KYA] continue[s] to work on bullying. I believe with all my heart that when my son committed suicide, the bullies finally won.” We as a state cannot let the bullies continue to win.

Endnotes

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