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Florida schools collecting data on bullying

BY NIRVI SHAH

On the TV show *The Simpsons*, schoolyard bully Nelson is known as the biggest, burliest kid in the fourth grade, with a trademark laugh of triumph over his prey.

But in real life, students are getting harassed in much subtler ways: through text messages, e-mail and MySpace pages and vicious social circles.

In response to growing alarm about new types of bullying and how easily it can be hidden, Florida school districts for the first time are collecting data on bullying.

In Broward, 871 incidents were recorded of students victimized by classmates last school year. And though that may sound like a large number, the figure probably doesn't tell a complete story.

"First of all, we know that the numbers probably don't reflect the real problem," said Amalio Nieves, who works in Broward's office of prevention programs. "That's part of our whole program: recognizing when our kids are being bullied."

Last school year, Shelly Heller of Parkland said her youngest daughter -- then a first-grader -- was the victim of exclusion.

"She just came home everyday crying that all the little girls were being mean to her," Heller said. "That there were cliques as early as first grade -- that was alarming to me."

And among older students, some say bullying is on the rise in part because of kids' access to technology.

"It's texting. It's online. It's recording pictures and making fun of people with them. It's like an electronic slambook," said Meline Kevorkian, associate dean at Nova Southeastern University, and a former principal and teacher. "Physical bullying is usually easier to see. Their shirt's torn. They have a black eye. You're going to ask questions."

In Heller's case, she intervened on her daughter's behalf and realized that teachers don't always know what to do when kids are being bullied or may not even know it's happening. That, combined with her own experiences being bullied as a child, have helped her gather support for adding strong, clear definitions of bullying and cyberbullying to Broward Schools' student code of conduct.

BANS ON BULLYING

While bullying and cyberbullying are banned, Heller said, principals are left to interpret what that means.

"We have really good prevention programs, but they can only be successful if we identify the problem," said Heller, who has four children attending public schools in Parkland. After gathering support at schools in the north area of the county, she has taken the idea to a group that advises the School Board.

According to the state, bullying is unwanted and repeated written, verbal or physical behavior, including any threatening, insulting or dehumanizing act by an adult or student that creates an intimidating or hostile school environment.

But in Broward and across the country, some school employees dismiss bullying as little more than adolescent antics or tattling. Schools are trying to change that culture by making sure every student knows they have someone to talk

to and that they will be taken seriously if they are being taunted, Nieves said. Aside from constant mental anguish for victims, the consequences of bullying can be deadly.

"Most of the kids that are involved with school violence were bullied to the point that they just can't take it anymore and they snapped," Kevorkian said. "We don't know what a person's snapping point is."

In February, a Lauderhill Middle sixth-grader brought a knife to school to defend himself against two eighth-grade boys who attacked him in the past. He cut one of the bullies three times.

And in late 2005, high school student Camille Burke boarded her school bus in Miramar and shot a classmate who she said had been teasing her about her hair. Burke agreed to serve 10 years in prison and 10 years probation in exchange for pleading guilty to attempted murder and possession of a firearm on school property.

WIDESPREAD PROBLEM

Parents say bullying is widespread, and they are pushing for the school district to clearly define what bullying is. School Board member Stephanie Kraft wants to create a task force on the issue.

In one recent national survey, students ages 8 to 15 ranked bullying as the biggest problem in their lives, Kevorkian said. And according to the American Medical Association, half of all American children say they have been bullied at school.

With cyberbullying, Kevorkian said parents should watch for their children becoming isolated or depressed. They may not be sleeping well or wish they didn't have to go to school.

Locally, Broward received an \$8 million federal grant to teach students, parents and the community about preventing violence and promoting awareness about bullying, Nieves said.

The effort is in partnership with the Broward Sheriff's Office, the Department of Children & Families and the Department of Juvenile Justice.

"We know the majority of kids disapprove of bullying," Nieves said. "They don't know how to act in those situations. We call them the bystanders but we don't want them to stand by."

And three schools are experimenting with "positive school culture," in which all employees are empowered to be a mentor or listener if students have a problem.

"We know when students have at least one adult that trusts and cares about them, he said, "they're going to be better off."