

Why all must help stop school bullying

By Sue Klang & Fred Evert

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It was three years ago that 15-year-old Eric Hainstock entered Weston High School with a 22-caliber pistol and a 20-gauge shotgun. Principal John Klang confronted Hainstock, trying to protect his school's students and staff. After a brief struggle, Klang was shot three times. He died later that day.

Debate continues as to exactly what Hainstock intended to do—get the school's attention for the help he needed, or execute a fatalistic death wish for himself and his school.

What is clear is that Hainstock had been bullied.

He was bullied by his father who, he says, treated him like a slave and refused to let him wash. At school and after school, he claimed he was bullied by as many as 30 of his fellow classmates. He says he snapped.

We can't know how much of this is true or how directly it contributed to the tragedy in Weston. What we do know is that nearly a third of America's schoolchildren say they've been the victims of bullying—or been bullies themselves—or both.

We know that bullying can destroy a student's self-esteem and ability to learn. We know it can ruin students for the rest of their lives; it can ruin families and ruin schools. It's a problem among girls and boys. It can be mental bullying as well as physical. We know it can border on torture for the young minds who are the victims of it.

Bullying is a problem that affects us all. It's a problem we must all help solve.

That's why we're partners with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, which just launched its curriculum to help teachers cope with bullying in their classrooms, halls and playgrounds.

The DPI curriculum, called "Time to Act—Time to React," is a set of lesson plans to help teachers identify bullies and bullying and to teach their students how to handle it.

The WEA Trust, a not-for-profit group health insurance company that insures many of Wisconsin's public school employees, paid for the printing of the curricula (one for grades 3-5, another for grades 6-8) along with an interactive DVD, making it available free to teachers in any public grade school and public middle school in the state.

This isn't a state mandate. It's not a requirement. It's a helping hand for teachers who feel they need help in keeping their students safe.

The problem is clear. So are the goals.

We, along with a large coalition, are supporting this effort to provide safe, healthy learning environments for our students and school staff.

The goal is important for insurance companies who believe that strong mental health is crucial to healthy bodies—and that healthy students make for healthy, safe schools.

The goal is important for the wife of a murdered husband whose life was abruptly ended by a bully out of control.

This curriculum is a step in making teachers' and children's lives safer today and tomorrow.

Sue Klang is the wife of John Klang, the Weston High School principal killed trying to wrestle a pistol away from a troubled 15-year-old student on Sept. 29, 2006.

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