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 Opinion
Sue Klang

Bullying can lead to tragedy

By Sue Klang And Fred Evert

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Three years ago, 15-year-old Eric Hainstock entered Weston High School with a .22-caliber pistol and a 20-gauge shotgun. Within a few short minutes, 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 on 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 Hainstock says he was 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 classmates. He says he snapped.

We can't know how much of this is true or how much 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. We know it's a problem among girls and boys. We know bullying can be mental as well as physical. We know it can border on torture for the young minds of its victims.

It's a problem that affects us all. As such, it's a problem we all must 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 deal with it.

The WEA Trust, a not-for-profit group health insurance company that insures many of Wisconsin public school employees, paid for the printing of 1,200 sets of the curricula (one for grades three through five, another for grades six through eight) and an interactive DVD that will be available free to teachers in any public grade school and public middle school.

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

The problem is clear. So are the goals.

We, along with a large coalition of groups - including those with a focus on schools, mental health, law enforcement and child advocacy - are supporting an effort to help keep our schools safe and healthy. We do this to provide a safe, healthy learning environment for our students.

That's important for insurance companies that feel good mental health is important to a healthy body - and that healthy students make for healthy, safe schools.

That's important for the wife of a murdered husband whose life was abruptly ended by a young boy out of control.

We're encouraging teachers to use the new curriculum. We're encouraging parents to be aware of what is happening with their children at school. 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. Fred Evert is executive director of the WEA Trust.



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