

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## COMMENTARY

# 10 Ways to Move Beyond Bully Prevention (And Why We Should)

By Lyn Mikel Brown

Seven years ago, I helped found a nonprofit organization [← Back to Story](#)

committed to changing the culture for girls. Our work was based on the health-psychology notion of “hardiness”—a way of talking about resilience that not only identifies what girls need to thrive in an increasingly complex and stressful world, but also makes clear that adults are responsible for creating safe spaces for girls to grow, think critically, and work together to make their lives better.

As a result of this work, I’ve grown concerned lately that “bully prevention” has all but taken over the way we think about, talk about, and respond to the relational lives of children and youths in schools. So, from our group’s strength-based approach, I offer 10 ways to move beyond what is too often being sold as a panacea for schools’ social ills, and is becoming, I fear, a problem in and of itself:



**Stop labeling kids.** Bully-prevention programs typically put kids into three categories: bullies, victims, and bystanders. Labeling children in these ways denies what we know to be true: We are all complex beings with the capacity to do harm and to do good, sometimes within the same hour. It also makes the child the problem, which downplays the important role of parents, teachers, the school system, a provocative and powerful media culture, and societal injustices children experience every day. Labeling kids bullies, for that matter, contributes to the negative climate and name-calling we’re trying to address.

**Talk accurately about behavior.** If it’s sexual harassment, call it sexual harassment; if it’s homophobia, call it homophobia; and so forth. To lump disparate behaviors under the generic “bullying” is to efface real differences that affect young people’s lives. Bullying is a broad term that de-genders, de-races, de-everythings school safety. Because of this, as the sexual-harassment expert Nan Stein has noted, embracing anti-bullying legislation can actually undermine the legal rights and protections offered by anti-harassment laws. Calling behaviors what they are helps us educate children about their rights, affirms their realities, encourages more-complex and meaningful solutions, opens up a dialogue, invites children to participate in social change, and ultimately protects them.

**Move beyond the individual.** Children’s behaviors are greatly affected by their life histories and social contexts. To understand why a child uses aggression toward others, it’s important to understand what impact race, ethnicity, social class, gender, religion, and ability has on his or her daily

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experiences in school—that is, how do these realities affect the kinds of attention and resources the child receives, where he fits in, whether she feels marginal or privileged in the school. Such differences in social capital, cultural capital, and power relations deeply affect a child’s psychological and relational experiences in school.

**We provide the groundwork for civic engagement.**

**Reflect reality.** Many schools across the country have adopted an approach developed by the Norwegian educator Dan Olweus, the “Olweus Bullying Prevention Program,” even though it has not been effectively evaluated with U.S. samples. Described as a “universal intervention for the reduction and prevention of bully/victim problems,” the Olweus program downplays those differences that make a difference. But even when bully-prevention programs have been adequately evaluated, the University of Illinois’ Dorothy Espelage argues, they often show less-than-positive results in urban schools or with minority populations. “We do not have a one-size-fits-all school system,” she reminds us. Because the United States has a diversity of race, ethnicity, and language, and inequalities between schools, bully-prevention efforts here need to reflect that reality.

**Adjust expectations.** We hold kids to ideals and expectations that we as adults could never meet. We expect girls to ingest a steady diet of media “mean girls” and always be nice and kind, and for boys to engage a culture of violence and never lash out. We expect kids never to express anger to adults, never to act in mean or hurtful ways to one another, even though they may spend much of the day in schools they don’t feel safe in, and with teachers and other students who treat them with disrespect. Moreover, we expect kids to behave in ways most of us don’t even value very much: to obey all the rules (regardless of their perceived or real unfairness), to never resist or refuse or fight back.

It’s important to promote consistent consequences—the hallmarks of most bully-prevention programs—but it’s also critically important to create space for honest conversations about who benefits from certain norms and rules and who doesn’t. If we allow kids to speak out, to think critically and question unfairness, we provide the groundwork for civic engagement.

**Listen to kids.** In her book *Other People’s Children*, Lisa Delpit talks about the importance of “listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but also hearts and minds.” Again, consistent consequences are important; used well, they undermine privilege and protect those who are less powerful. But to make such a system work, schools have to listen to all students. It’s the only way to ensure that staff members are not using discipline and consistent consequences simply to promote the status quo.

**Embrace grassroots movements.** There’s nothing better than student-initiated change. Too many bully-prevention programs are top-heavy with adult-generated rules, meetings, and trainings. We need to empower young people. This includes being on the lookout for positive grassroots resistance, ready to listen to and support and sometimes channel youth movements when they arise. We need to listen to students, take up their just causes, understand the world they experience, include them in the dialogue about school norms and rules, and use their creative energy to illuminate and challenge unfairness.

**Instead of labeling kids, let’s talk about them as potential leaders, affirm their strengths, and believe that they can do good, brave, remarkable things.**

**Be proactive, not reactive.** In Maine, we have a nationally recognized Civil Rights Team Project. Youth-led, school-based preventive teams work to increase safety, educate their peers, and combat hate violence, prejudice, and harassment in more than 250 schools across the state. This kind of

proactive youth-empowerment work is sorely needed, but is too often lost in the midst of zero-tolerance policies and top-down bully-prevention efforts. And yet such efforts work. According to a study conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, or GLSEN, youth-led gay-straight alliances make schools safer for all students.

**Build coalitions.** Rather than bully prevention, let's emphasize ally- and coalition-building. We need to affirm and support the definition of coalition that activist Bernice Johnson Reagon suggests: work that's difficult, exhausting, but necessary "for all of us to feel that this is our world."

**Accentuate the positive.** Instead of labeling kids, let's talk about them as potential leaders, affirm their strengths, and believe that they can do good, brave, remarkable things. The path to safer, less violent schools lies less in our control over children than in appreciating their need to have more control in their lives, to feel important, to be visible, to have an effect on people and situations.

Bully prevention has become a huge for-profit industry. Let's not let the steady stream of training sessions, rules, policies, consequence charts, and no-bullying posters keep us from listening well, thinking critically, and creating approaches that meet the singular needs of our schools and communities.

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Vol. 27, Issue 26, Page 29

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