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Anti-bullying message

Several schools in Chicago, suburbs use 'Hundred Dresses' themes to teach kids

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For all the passage of time, very little appears to have changed since Eleanor Estes wrote her 1944 book about schoolyard bullying, *The Hundred Dresses*.

"There are a host of reasons why kids are victimized and it changes over time," says anti-bullying expert Dorothy Espelage. "At the moment, 50 percent of the bullying is homophobic in nature. These bullies are demeaning people and using sexuality slurs to do it."

Chicago Children's Theatre is remounting its 2009 production of the hit musical adaptation by Ralph Covert and G. Riley Mills. The show is being used by several Chicago and suburban elementary schools as part of their bullying prevention programs.

At the Saturday performance, Judy Freedman, author of *Easing the Teasing*, will conduct a post-show talk.

In the play as in the book, Maddie (Leslie Ann Sheppard) watches her classmates occasionally torment the new girl in school, Wanda Petronski (Briana De Guilio).

Sheppard says she can identify with both students who are bullied and those who silently watch and do nothing.

"When I was in fifth grade, we moved to a different school district in the middle of the year and it was hard to fit in and I was ridiculed because of it," she recalls. "Unfortunately, I also stood around as some of my classmates made fun of a Croatian girl because she was different."

Sheppard says she eventually apologized to the girl.

"It wasn't until junior high that I realized she must feel the way I did when I was being bullied," Sheppard says. "I went up to her and apologized, but only after parents, teachers and adult mentors had encouraged me to do so."

"Growing up, I was very much a 'Wanda,'" De Guilio adds. "One girl was the ringleader and I was an easy target because I did theater and didn't play sports. It was pretty much non-stop until after junior high."

De Guilio says children have been coming up to her during pre-show discussions to empathize with her character.

"Just the other day a second- or third-grade girl came up to me and asked me if I was Wanda and then told me she wanted me to know that she knew what it was liked to be picked on. It was absolutely heartbreaking," De Guilio says.

As a professor of educational psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Espelage has spent the last 17 years studying the problem and has surveyed hundreds of thousands of kids and parents in her research. She says she isn't surprised by such stories.

According to her research and other studies, 17 percent of students say they have bullied another student. Fifty-eight percent of students say they have witnessed bullying as a bystander, but only 13 percent of those kids said they intervened to stop the bullying.

And Espelage says don't expect parents to exactly intercede.

"In the 17 years of surveying parents, I have had only two parents who admitted their kids were a bully," she says.

Illinois is one of 45 states that has some sort of anti-bullying legislation on the books. Though bullying prevention programs have been shown to reduce bullying by as much as 50 percent, in a cash-strapped state like Illinois, the mandate often comes without the funds necessary to carry that mandate out.

"When teachers ask me for materials to work into the classroom, *The Hundred Dresses* is one of the books I recommend to them," Espelage says.

"I've seen the show a couple of times and this production can be an important tool to start the discussion."

'THE HUNDRED DRESSES' **When:** Through Dec. 2

Where: North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, 9501 Skokie Blvd., Skokie

Tickets: \$26-\$36; (847) 673-6300; [northshore center.org](http://northshorecenter.org)

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