



# Creating a Safe Place: One School's Experience

## Queen Elizabeth School Staff, Saskatoon

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This McDowell project emerged from a year-end process of reflection in which the staff members of Queen Elizabeth School identified both proud moments and problem areas in the preceding school year. Among the problem areas identified were issues relating to discipline/student conduct and school climate/structure. Committees were struck to develop belief statements and action plans in each of these problem areas. The decision to develop a school-wide, anti-bullying campaign evolved from this committee work and the staff's commitment to making their school a safe, caring and positive learning environment. Their research question was:

Can a concerted effort by a committed school staff to develop and implement a bullying-prevention policy and educational program have a significant, positive impact on the school culture?

The project began with an in-service on bullying in the fall of 1999 to establish a common base of understanding among the staff. A subgroup of staff members volunteered to act as a policy committee overseeing and coordinating the process of developing a school-wide policy on bullying. In addition, questionnaires designed to gather baseline data about bullying at Queen Elizabeth School were administered to all staff members, students in grades 3-8, and the

parents in each family served by the school. The draft anti-bullying policy and the results of the baseline survey were shared at a two-day staff retreat. Strategies for making the school a safe place were developed for staff members, students, and parents.

It was determined that a common language and understanding of bullying were necessary if the school's anti-bullying campaign was to succeed. Six lessons were developed to be taught by classroom teachers to all grade levels. Although the lessons were modified to suit levels of student maturity and experience, each one was built around a common concept:

- Lesson 1: Develop a class mission statement that relates to "Creating a Safe Place".
- Lesson 2: Define the characteristics of the bully, bullied and observer.
- Lesson 3: Identify and classify bullying behaviours.
- Lesson 4: Create an action plan for students to create a safe place.
- Lesson 5: Create an action plan for teachers to create a safe place.

Lesson 6: Read and discuss a story that involves a bully, bystander and victim.

Throughout the project, teachers met in grade-alike clusters to review resources and plan lessons. An effort was made to integrate bullying concepts and lessons into various curriculum areas.

At the end of the school year, another survey was conducted of students, staff and parents to determine whether or not progress had been made. Staff opinions varied as to whether or not the number of bullying incidents had decreased over the year, but most staff had noticed changes in the way students responded to bullying incidents. The data gathered from students indicated that students, particularly younger students, saw some reduction in bullying at the school.

The quantitative data gathered in the project was encouraging but was regarded by the school staff as only part of the story. They saw themselves as on a journey toward “a safe place – a place where children feel physically and emotionally safe” – and they understood that the journey would be long-term and on-going. Committed to continuing their work, the staff have identified three areas to pursue in the future: student education, parent education, and staff support and suggestions.

*Bullying is as old as childhood. Being bullied can be one of the most painful experiences a child can have. Unfortunately, as adults we often either dismiss bullying as a normal part of childhood, or perhaps more likely, we don't even realize it is happening. Most bullying takes place “below adult radar” – it's part of the hidden curriculum of childhood.*

- Excerpt from Staff In-Service

*In my ideal world there would be no child reading a book in the corner of the boot room, hiding in the bathroom, or taking a long walk around the schoolyard alone. There would be no student whispered about, pointed fingers at, or excluded from the creative playground or game he/she would like to play. All children would feel safe at school. We as educators must strive to reach the goal of a “bullyless” environment.*

- Entry in Staff Journal