

# Students: Don't take any bull from bullies

By Karen McGee / For the Sun-News (New Mexico)

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LAS CRUCES - Teachers and parents are often the last to know when a student has become the target of a bully. Yet other students often know who has become a target for mistreatment long before teachers or parents get wind of it. The victim who suffers the abuse is often helpless to control his or her school environment. Although parents, teachers, and students know there is a problem with bullying in the schools, we frequently respond to the mistreatment in a reactive way - after the bullying has occurred.

Our student volunteer ambassadors are our first line of defense in creating a peaceful environment at Picacho Middle School. The Safe School Student Ambassador Program gives our student volunteer ambassadors tools to diffuse and short-circuit the bullying behavior in a more proactive manner, before it escalates. The SSSAP provides our student volunteers with methods designed to curb mistreatment within their own friendship groups before the bullying becomes a problem. The success of the SSSAP depends on proactive, non-confrontational student-to-student interactions. At the beginning of this school year, we chose our student ambassadors from students who were considered "leaders" from different student cliques, socio-economic groups and ethnic groups. To do this, we obtained teacher and student nominations. We trained approximately 20 students from each grade - 10 boys and 10 girls. Our volunteers represented the student council, student athletes and students more focused on academics. When our volunteers met for the first time, some of them were heard to say, "What are we doing here? I don't hang out with any of these people! They don't even hang out with each other!" One student proudly exclaimed, "I can't believe I was chosen to be a safe school ambassador!"

At the start, our two-day training was very intense, as we worked to create "victim awareness" by giving our volunteer student ambassadors information about what it is like to be bullied (how it affects lives) and non-confrontational steps that they can take when they help a student who is being mistreated.

For example, we told our ambassadors that many students miss school because they are afraid of being bullied. We discussed the different types of mistreatment, such as exclusion (being left out), put-downs (hurt feelings), bullying (threats/fear), physical (push, hit, etc.), and acts against campus (tagging, littering and vandalism). The action steps that a volunteer ambassador might choose to take include balancing, supporting, reasoning, distracting, listening and getting help from an adult staff member.

After participating in the training, our volunteer ambassadors and teachers not only had an increased understanding of the student who is being mistreated, they had increased self-awareness. The information provided during the training better prepared our ambassadors to show compassion to others. In order to participate, student volunteers examined their own lives and ventured outside their comfort zones, as they answered questions such as, "What are you most proud of?" "What do you regret?" and "What do you want to do in life?"

Then we created "family groups." Each "family" has two adults (volunteer staff members) and six to nine ambassadors who meet every two weeks to provide support for each other, learn new skills, and keep each other motivated. We held another "whole-group" training in February, during which more information was provided for all SSSAP students and teachers.

Almost every school day, our safe school ambassadors are at "work" helping other students who have become targets for bullies. One student ambassador quickly diffused physical mistreatment by supporting the victim, reasoning with the bully and getting help. "When I saw that student get pushed down, I walked over, helped him get up, told the bully that pushing wasn't nice, and got help from a teacher." When our ambassadors identify mistreatment at school, they choose the type of action to take and report back to their "family group" about the results. Both the victims of mistreatment and the ambassador are supported each step of the way. With this kind of enthusiasm, our chances of success are excellent, thus creating an environment of peace and unity for all students at Picacho Middle School.

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