PART ONE

Working with Students

chapter
ONE

Responding to Student Conflicts

You had heard some rumblings a couple of weeks ago about two best friends who'd had a falling out. Once sworn friends, the two girls could no longer pass each other in the hall without their iciness having a polarizing effect across the school. The tension between the two was evident in classes, among cliques, and online. Even extracurricular activities weren't immune to the fallout; sides were taken and lines were drawn around the school, unbeknownst to you. You hadn't paid much attention to the initial conflict because you naïvely mistook the quiet for calm; how were you to know that the quiet was just the harbinger of the coming storm?

And so when two shrill voices rose above the din of the class change one Monday morning while you were on hall duty, you really didn't understand what was occurring. When you arrived at the scene of the disturbance, you discovered the two girls pointing angrily in each other's faces, obscenities flying, and a crowd of onlookers rapidly getting sucked into the black hole the opponents were creating. Thankfully, no punches were thrown—there wasn't even a shove—but there was no mistaking the potential for violence or the disruption to the learning environment. Nor was there any mistaking the serious consequences that would have been handed out if there had been a physical conflict, or how two young adults unable to control wild and deep emotions would have jeopardized their otherwise well-respected academic records.

Life is marked by conflict. Whether it is between spouses, siblings, friends, or coworkers, conflict is a staple of the human condition. Of course, life is no different for your students than it is for you or for us. And given students' youth

and inexperience, especially when coupled with the social environment of school and technology, student conflicts can easily, quickly, and frequently erupt. Their aftershocks can have a profound impact on social circles and the atmosphere in the school; and just when you think everything is quiet, tremors rippling beneath the surface initiate a whole new dramatic event. So it is only natural that many times over the course of a marking period, conflicts of all types and kinds eventually find their way to your office. And although these conflicts are a normal and necessary part of learning and growing up, their potential to cause such upheaval cannot be ignored.

RECOGNIZE STUDENT CONFLICTS

Student conflicts take a variety of shapes and forms. Some start innocently enough as simple disagreements and end there, never escalating into anything more significant. On the other end of the spectrum, though, are those that foment and culminate in verbal altercations (or worse), and they usually seem to occur anywhere and whenever there is an audience present—in the hallways, in the cafeteria, or while boarding buses, where the screaming, yelling, and cursing are heard by a significant portion of the school's population. Following are examples of the different types of conflicts you are bound to encounter in a secondary school setting.

Conflicts Caused by Rumor and Gossip

We find that most conflicts stem from something that someone has said behind the other person's back, either innocently or maliciously. Some students are very open and "share their business" with anyone who will listen, but then are surprised when everyone seems to be talking about their business or recent activities. In other instances, the instigating action might not even occur within the school building; perhaps something was posted online, texted, or e-mailed the previous night, but by the morning, the key player or players are suddenly aware of what has occurred, which often has an impact on the learning environment.

Relationship Conflicts

Regardless of their grade level, academic performance, or social clique, students experience school as their very own soap opera, and the relationships around which their lives revolve change on a nearly daily basis. Best friends become ex-

friends, friends date their friends' exes, good friends are "frenemies" who engage in subtle and not-so-subtle battles, and an endless cycle of hookups and breakups courses through our houses of learning. As a result, our needing to help friends repair their relationships is a constant. However, we recommend always avoiding mediating students involved in romantic relationships; entering this area would be opening the proverbial can of worms.

Personality Conflicts

As much as we would like all of our students to get along with one another, the reality of life is that people don't and won't like everyone they meet, nor are they liked by everyone. This might seem obvious enough to us, but to the outgoing, optimistic, and academically successful fifteen-year-old girl, it usually comes as a surprise when she discovers that someone dislikes her without any apparent reason. She can't comprehend why a classmate always seems to mutter things under her breath when she passes her in the hallway or why she "mean mugs" her (staring, glaring at her, shooting her dirty looks). And this exemplary young woman might suddenly find herself losing control of her emotions or doing things that she had never done before because this person seems to be "out to get her" for "no reason."

Conflicts Caused by Racial, Ethnic, or Gender Differences

As our society becomes more and more diverse, our students become more tolerant and understanding of diversity, but, paradoxically, we also encounter more conflict as a result of the increasing diversity. You can certainly expect the same to be true in your school, especially if it is experiencing a major change in its demographics. Similarly, students in recent years have begun to feel more comfortable about expressing their sexual and gender identity, and even though it appears that young adults are more tolerant and accepting of LGBT people, these individuals are still likely to face conflict as well.

Bullying

Although many of the aforementioned types of conflict can manifest as bullying, it is important to identify bullying (including cyberbullying) as a distinct type of conflict. Trying to resolve situations that involve bullying through mediation is not appropriate, for many reasons; we will address bullying later in a separate section.

MEDIATE STUDENT CONFLICTS

In many instances, students are able to work out their problems and conflicts on their own; however, there are just as many times when they are not, perhaps because they lack the necessary skills, maturity, or self-awareness. But because students will certainly continue to have these conflicts once they leave school, they need to learn how to communicate effectively, appropriately, and maturely with someone with whom they disagree.

We have found that by serving as mediators between students and trying to get to the root causes of the conflict, we can help students resolve differences before situations escalate, which in turn has a powerful and lasting impact on the students and the school as a whole. And although the results are difficult to measure quantitatively, engaging students in conflict mediation seems to reduce the possibility of violence; by extension, these proactive measures also reduce the number of suspensions and disciplinary consequences. But perhaps most important, through mediation students learn valuable life lessons and skills. And in our experience, many students we have mediated eventually ended up becoming friends, or they repaired their relationships, something that was unlikely to have happened for most of students had they been left to their own devices.

But just because you know that a conflict requires mediation does not mean that the students will be open to mediation. The specific situation and personalities involved often dictate how you will first present the idea of mediation. If you generally anticipate a favorable reply, you can give the students the illusion of choice by asking if they would like to try mediation—to take the opportunity to discuss their conflict in an objective setting, with you as a neutral facilitator to help them understand the issue at the core of the conflict and to resolve it. However, in other situations, you do not present mediation as an option; rather, you simply state that it will happen, with the implicit understanding that the alternative option is disciplinary consequences. In some cases, you will immediately recognize that the situation is so combustible that any attempt to mediate would end disastrously, so you don't even entertain the option. Regardless of how you introduce the idea, the following are some basic guidelines for the mediation process.

Set the Stage

Before you sit the students down together, talk with each of them separately about what they can expect from you when they enter the room and what you

expect from them. Acknowledge that there may be a point during the session when they may be upset or angry; convey that it is acceptable to feel that way, but also express your expectation and your confidence that they will be able to "keep it together."

Set the students at a clear table, free of staplers or other items that could be easy to use as projectiles. Also be aware of the arrangement of the furniture in the meeting area, as well as the location of the quickest exit. Although you naturally hope that physical conflict is unlikely, taking these steps can be very important for your safety and the safety of the students. Last, it helps to meet in a neutral area when possible. For example, if you are the administrator for one student and not the other, you might want to consider meeting in an office other than either yours or your colleague's. You need both students to understand that there are no sides in the relationship nor in the process, that the only objective is an agreed-on outcome.

Establish Ground Rules

Because you will be entering a charged situation, it is especially important that you create a structure that facilitates dialogue. Because conflicts often arise or continue because communication is impossible or unwanted, you want to create a climate that allows for communication. It is equally important to attempt to protect the emotional well-being of both parties involved, and establishing ground rules is the way to do so. But even if you address ground rules individually with the students, it is still a good idea to mention them again once they are seated in the room. As a way to break the ice and reinforce your expectations, you might even have the students restate the ground rules at the onset of mediation. The following are some ground rules that we have found particularly helpful. (Depending on the degree of the need for mediation, you might choose to explain them in more positive terms, as we have indicated.)

- *No standing up (Remain seated).* Students must remain seated, especially because suddenly standing up could be perceived as a sign of aggression.
- *No yelling (Stay calm).* Students will certainly raise their voices because you and they are dealing with an emotionally charged situation, but make it clear that they are not to yell at each other. If they do, you need to immediately call a "time-out," and as a referee send them back to their proverbial corners until they have cooled down and are able to continue with the mediation.

- *No personal attacks (Be objective).* Because students are vulnerable and upset in these situations, you can expect there to be cursing sometimes, although you needn't condone it. Policing swearing is not the sword that we choose to fall on, but we do make it clear that the students are present to have a productive conversation; name-calling and other personal attacks, such as derogatory or insulting comments, will not be tolerated, as they will not help produce a resolution.
- *No using pronouns (Use each other's names).* It might seem strange at first, but we ask students not to refer to each other as "him" or "her." Referring to someone in the third person when he or she is present often conveys a feeling of rudeness and a degree of disrespect; you want to reach a common ground, a process that starts first with demonstrating respect. By using each other's names, the students are forced not only to show a measure of respect but to acknowledge each other as an actual person. Personalizing the dialogue in this way can sometimes make it uncomfortable for students to continue to treat each other poorly.
- *No interrupting (Allow each other to speak).* Announce that each student will have the opportunity to tell his or her version of what happened. Acknowledge that they might not agree with the other's perception of what happened, but will be permitted to share their side of the situation without interruptions. Students will undoubtedly try to interrupt each other in order to defend themselves or to refute a claim, so in order to preserve the process and the other student's dignity, you will need to quickly and firmly signal that the interruption is out of line. You might even point out to the student that he was able to give his version without interruption, so now he needs to extend that same courtesy to the other party. If you see that the students really want to interrupt, you can suggest that they write their thoughts on a piece of note paper and use that as a guide to their part of the discussion. This suggestion indicates that you know that what they have to say is important to them, but that you still value adhering to the ground rules.
- *No blaming (Identify how you feel).* Have students avoid saying what the other person *did.* Instead, have them speak in terms of how they themselves *felt.* Although we understand that this is not always possible, realistic, or easy to monitor over the course of a charged conversation, encourage students to say

things like, "I feel hurt and angry when you say things to me when I pass you in the hall" instead of "You say things to me in the hall" and so on. These kinds of "I statements" are usually perceived as less accusatory and combative and are less likely to put the listener on the defensive. In addition, this kind of framework allows the speaker to identify the cause of the conflict as well as what she is feeling, both of which are helpful to her and the other party involved in the mediation.

- *No arm-crossing or other negative body language (Be seen as positive).* What you should be concerned with here is minimizing body language and nonverbal gestures that could be perceived as defensive or offensive and instead encouraging those that would seem to indicate that the participants are listening. Ask students to sit up in their chairs and keep their hands on the table in order for them to listen better to what the other has to say. Whenever possible, try to have the students look at one another, as staring away or looking down could be interpreted as a sign of disrespect or disinterest.

It might seem that we are creating too rigid an environment in which to facilitate dialogue, and on some level, that may be true, which is why we encourage you to determine what works best for you and for your students. In our experience, we have found that a clearly defined structure is the foundation that leads to a mediation's success. You want to create an environment where students can be honest and expressive yet also come to a resolution without having the situation escalate.

Facilitate the Mediation

We don't have a prescription for determining which student should tell her version first, but you do stand a good chance of creating an unproductive environment if you select the "wrong" person to start. You might ask who would like to volunteer to begin the conversation, or flip a coin or utilize some other impartial way to begin the dialogue. In some cases where you know the students extremely well, when you speak with them privately you might explain why you will be letting the other person speak first, that she will be allowed to have the last word, and so on. For example, you might tell one student that because you trust her restraint and maturity, you are going to let the other student go first. Regardless of who begins the process, the following are some points to consider to help you facilitate the mediation.

Ask, "Why Are We Here?" For the most part, you should already be familiar with the major plot points of the conflict, and you would have used this information to determine whether mediation would be an appropriate course of action. Regardless, you can open the mediation by simply asking the students, "Why don't you describe for me what happened?" or "Why are we are here?" It is crucial that each student be given an opportunity to share his or her perception of what the issue is.

Ask Open-Ended Questions As much as possible, ask questions that set the stage for elaboration and description. If the goal of mediation is to get your students talking to one another (and, by extension, listening to one another as well), then detailed, expressive responses are your objective during the initial stages of the mediation process. Closed questions, to which students simply respond with yes, no, or some other one-word response, will not help you get closer to the root of the problem or to resolving it. You might also ask students to explain *how* they feel rather than having them *confirm* how they feel. But even with open-ended questions, you may discover you still need to coax the parties along with words of encouragement or other affirmations that put them at ease as well as assure them that someone is at least listening.

Verify and Ask Questions Either along the way or when one student has finished sharing his version of the story, verify the main points. You should ask questions where something seems unclear (or even if it is clear, but for the benefit of the other student), summarize what has been said, and, where appropriate, inquire as to how the student felt as a result of whatever the action was.

Have Students Seek Clarification Each student should be given the chance to ask the other clarifying questions. After the student shares his version of what the problem is, ask the other student if he has any questions he wants to ask. Be forewarned: this is a potentially explosive moment in the process because one student has had to sit quietly while the other had the opportunity to share his thoughts, so he can potentially be defensive, angry, and upset. You could also wait to have students ask questions after they have each had the chance to say what happened, but regardless of the timing, students need to have the chance to clarify what has been said. You may want to encourage the student to start and end the question with, "What I heard you say was . . . Is that correct?"

Remain Neutral Because you are the authority figure in the room, many students will look to you as an arbiter, not as a mediator. They might not understand that your role is to facilitate a dialogue in a safe setting to come to a mutually satisfactory outcome, and not to dispense a decision or judgment. We are confident that you are professional enough to remain neutral and not take a side or agree with one student over another. However, there is still a chance that you could unknowingly and unintentionally convey partiality to one of the parties through simple word choices of which you might not even be aware. Johnson and Johnson (1995) offer the example that rather than saying, "She is angry because you stole her purse," you should instead say, "She is angry because you have her purse" (p. 81). In the latter statement, you are not accusing the student or judging her by saying, or agreeing with the other student, that she stole the purse. You are only stating a fact: she was in possession of the purse. Paying attention to small word choices like this can help you avoid seeming as though you are taking sides.

Take a Time-Out Feel free to take a time-out if things are getting heated or if no progress is being made. It's good to give your students a few minutes to collect their thoughts and process what has just transpired, so a time-out can be an effective strategy for moving mediation along. In some instances, you might even want to use the time-out as a pep talk of sorts: coaching, coaxing, and commending participants separately can help set the stage for when they return to the table.

Reverse Roles Negotiating an equitable outcome can depend on both students' understanding each other's perspective. Because students rarely do understand the other person's perspective, you might have them either actively role-play the conflict as the other person or have them present the other's position (Johnson and Johnson, 1995).

Identify the Problem We hope that through verifying, summarizing, and clarifying, you have been able to identify the problem and to enable the students to identify the problem. The tricky part is that you need to do so in a way that preserves your role as an impartial facilitator who is not seen as taking sides or playing favorites. Along the way, you might have the students identify some common ground, as that is usually helpful in coming to a resolution.

Identify the Solution By the end of the mediation, students should be able to articulate a couple of different solutions; it is not your responsibility to develop one. In fact, even if they cannot generate a solution, we encourage you to refrain from offering one. It would be better for you to ask questions that might lead them to coming up with their own solution—that way, there will be more ownership, buy-in, and sense of responsibility (not to mention that jointly developing a solution, if they can, will only further reduce the barrier between them). However, you might find that sometimes students "become fixated on one possible agreement and are unable to think of alternatives," so your role is to help them "break this fixation" (Johnson and Johnson, 1995, p. 87). After a solution has been agreed on, you should reiterate and emphasize it to ensure that everyone is clear on the expectations from that point forward and that it is something they will abide by or support, even if they don't agree with it.

Solicit Thoughts We recommend that before both students leave, you make one final call for them to share anything that is on their mind. Remind them that if there is anything else that they want to say or share, now is the time to do so, because from this point forward, you will consider the issue resolved, and therefore don't expect to hear anything more about it (and nor should either party).

Offer Advice We generally refrain from offering a lot of advice during the actual mediation because students are so caught up in what they are feeling or what is being said that they probably won't be able to hear what we are saying. However, near the end of these sessions, we do offer some important advice: ignore what others might say after the mediation has occurred. We find it is necessary to explain to the involved students that everyone likes free entertainment, so they are likely to hear one of their friends later say something to them like, "Do you know what I heard Ben say that Sue said about . . ." Advise your students to simply tell their friends or acquaintances that they and the other student have worked things out, and then walk away. You will find that because your students might not always hear it at home, they need to be told that their friends don't always have their best interest in mind—a difficult concept for adolescents to comprehend. Most cannot imagine that their friends will try to push their buttons in order to wind them up and watch the ensuing drama, which they find entertaining. So encourage them to respond with something along the lines of "We squashed that beef, so I don't need to hear anything more about it,"

or "I'm over that, so I'd appreciate not hearing any more about it" when they encounter peers trying to stir the pot.

State Future Consequences At the end of a mediation session, after students have shaken hands or at least come to some kind of truce or understanding, it is important also to inform them of what could happen if the conflict continues, reignites, or escalates in the future, especially after you have warned them to refrain from engaging in this behavior. Remind your students that if you have to see them again on this issue, they would now be in defiance of you and your expectations of them, and as a result there could very well be disciplinary consequences for (further) incidents related to this conflict. You may want to ask them to repeat what you just said about future occurrences to ensure that they heard you.

Praise Their Participation It is important to reinforce that your students made a good choice by agreeing to mediation. In addition to praising them during the process, you can do so at the close of the mediation. Specifically, you should highlight their maturity, restraint, and composure, and you might even engage in a little self-deprecation by saying something like, "I don't know if I could do [have done] this, so I really appreciate and admire what the two of you have accomplished here today."

Follow Up It is essential that at some point you follow up with the students you engaged in mediation. You don't need to bring the students together again, but you should talk with each of them to get his or her perspective on how things have been since you last worked with them and get a feel for any problems or potential issues.

It should go without saying, but it is worth emphasizing that you should contact the students' parents after the mediation (and in some prickly cases, you might even want to inform the parents in advance). Be up-front with the students about contacting their parents; assure them that you are looking forward to telling their parents how well they worked through their differences and that you're confident that their issue is moot now. You should explain to the parents what the infraction consisted of—what transpired and how it made it to your office, as well as how the mediation session went and your intention of following up with the students.

Most parents will be pleased not only that you contacted them but also that you refrained from giving out disciplinary consequences and tried to work with the students to help them learn how to resolve situations.

If there are future conflicts between the disputants or an escalation in the conflict, mediation is no longer a viable option. You might need to consider disciplinary consequences, and, in some cases, if the students have contact with one another during the day, you might have to consider changing their schedules. If the students have the same class together and you have other options with their schedules, you should consider changing both of their schedules so that they are not in the same class (or sharing the same lunch period or other school-created opportunities for interaction, with the exception of class changes). Again, in order to retain your neutrality, we encourage you to change both students' schedules if you need to change one.

ADDRESS BULLYING

When you were growing up, you might have experienced a bullying situation and were told that a bully was simply someone who was afraid or insecure. You might even have been told that it was just how kids act toward kids; if you just stood your ground or learned how to ignore it, everything would be fine because it was a rite of passage that everyone goes through. Even if you weren't a target of bullying yourself, we're confident that you can recall a victim of it and understand in hindsight the pain, hurt, frustration, and humiliation that bullying causes. And as it now turns out, experts, research, and even common sense indicate that these notions about bullying are inaccurate or are in some cases overly simplistic. Moreover, being a victim of bullying can have significant effects on the development of a child, including substance abuse issues, poor school attendance and grades, lowered self-confidence and self-esteem, and social withdrawal. In severe instances, victims "have increased thoughts about suicide [or what has come to be known as "bullycide," which is committing suicide as a result of being bullied] that may persist into adulthood" and are also "more likely to retaliate through extremely violent measures," according to www.stopbullying.gov. Because the hurt caused by bullying is so acute and the effects so profound for an adolescent, we categorize bullying as a different type of conflict found in schools.

According to a MetLife survey (2004–2005), 50 percent of the students surveyed in the 2004–2005 school year said they were bullied or teased as a new

student (p. 50), and according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in partnership with the Department of Education and the Department of Justice, "56% of students have personally witnessed some type of bullying at school" (www.stopbullying.gov). The Department of Education recognizes bullying as a critical issue because "bullying can be extremely damaging to students, can disrupt an environment conducive to learning, and should not be tolerated in our schools." Secretary of Education Arne Duncan further explains in "Secretary of Education Bullying Law and Policy Memo" (www.stopbullying.gov/references/white_house_conference/, p. 93) that "recent incidents of bullying have demonstrated its potentially devastating effects on students, schools, and communities and have spurred a sense of urgency among State and local educators and policymakers to take action to combat bullying." You should inquire what your school or district has done or is doing regarding bullying because "many states are now requiring schools to have anti-bullying policies in place" (Boynton and Boynton, 2005, p. 161).

Understanding Bullying

Simply put, bullying is abuse. It is a repeated pattern of behavior and actions intended to purposely hurt, scare, or intimidate someone. The bully-victim relationship is primarily characterized by an imbalance of power, whether that power is physical, social, or even simply perceived. A person or group then leverages this power by intentionally attempting to cause direct or indirect harm to someone who is perceived as physically, emotionally, or socially weaker. This behavior differs from general "meanness" because there is a pattern of "repetition: incidents of bullying happen to the same person over and over by the same person or group" (www.stopbullying.gov).

Bullies generally select targets because they appear to be weaker or don't fit in socially, or because of their physical appearance or differences in culture, ethnicity, or religion. Victims might also lack socially significant symbols (the current "in" clothing, or knowledge about current pop culture trends and so on). What is distressing is that many times students report that these attacks are invisible to adults. In some cases, teachers might excuse bullying as a case of "kids being kids"; parents might be blind to it because many students feel ashamed and embarrassed about being a victim and therefore are hesitant to talk about it. In other instances, the bullying can be so subtle or so quick that it goes unnoticed. To further complicate matters, it seems that educators can even be focused on the wrong bully.

The traditional view of a bully is that he is a loner, someone on the fringe. This kind of bully is often unpopular himself, or "socially marginalized," according to Rodkin (2011), quoting Farmer and others (2010): they "may be fighting against a social system that keeps them on the periphery" (p. 12). And although this view of the bully is valid, it is almost antiquated when one considers the other type that Rodkin identifies, drawing again on Farmer and others: the "socially connected bullies" (p. 12). This kind of bully contradicts the traditional notion of the loner or the outsider trying to gain entry into social circles. Rather, these bullies "have a variety of friends . . . and strengths such as social skills, athleticism, or physical attractiveness. Socially connected bullies tend to be proactive and goal-directed in their aggression" (p. 12). According to Goodwin (2011), these students are far from "the social outcasts" of our youth and are instead "often popular or semipopular social climbers. . . . Stated bluntly, many kids climb the social pyramid on the backs of other students, using ostracism, ridicule, and gossip to gain social status" (p. 82). In some cases, as fictionalized and depicted in movies such as *Mean Girls,* the bullying is a means toward simply maintaining social status. Rodkin concludes that "educators who exclusively target peripheral, anti-social cliques as the engine of school violence problems may leave intact other groups that are more responsible for mainstream peer support of bullying" (p. 15). To make matters even more difficult to grasp, there is almost no real profile of a bully, as "it transcends race, it transcends gender and it transcends family income. Bullying can occur in every community and in every school" (Susan Swearer, quoted in "Bullying, Cyberbullying and the Schools," 2010). In fact, in this interview in the *School Leadership Briefing,* Swearer goes on to identify a subgroup of bullies, those who are "also victimized . . . [and] often get in trouble for bullying others but educators don't necessarily recognize that they are also being victimized, whether by peers or at home or in their neighborhood."

As an administrator, you have an almost sacred obligation to ensure a physically and emotionally safe learning environment for your students and to help your teachers understand what bullying is and when it occurs. In the traditional sense, bullying manifests itself in the following two forms:

- *Verbal.* This form of bullying is more along the lines of what people would recognize as "picking on" someone, and includes overt coercion or putdowns and subtle manipulation through persistent rumors, gossip, and the threat of

exclusion, with the outcome being to hurt the target emotionally. This form of bullying can also involve social isolation.

- *Physical.* This kind of bullying conjures the image of the schoolyard bully telling classmates what to do, beating someone up for lunch money, or anything that involves violence or the threat of violence. Although this kind of overt abuse and more serious examples of it still occur, the threat of physical violence can be subtle, such as a shoulder nudge or tripping in the halls, "bucking" at someone, or even "accidentally" knocking the books or materials out of someone's hands. However the bullying might occur, the intention is to instill visceral fear in the target and to demonstrate dominance through physical contact.

Regardless of how the bullying is perpetrated, "Schools and individual staff members can and should deal with bullies and bullying behavior in order to contribute to a safe and orderly school environment, one free of threat and intimidation" (Boynton and Boynton, 2005, p. 162). However, with the advent of cyberbullying, maintaining a safe and orderly environment is now even more difficult for administrators.

Understanding Cyberbullying

With monumental advances in technology that can better connect people and enrich lives, so too comes an ease with which bullies can torment and isolate victims. Cyberbullying, whereby the abuse and attacks occur or continue in cyberspace, is no less real than bullying that occurs in a physical setting. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (www.stopbullying.gov) categorizes cyberbullying as "sending mean, vulgar, or threatening messages or images; posting sensitive, private information about another person; pretending to be someone else in order to make that person look bad; and intentionally excluding someone from an online group." Cyberbullying can also include the uploading of embarrassing videos, the creation of fake social media profiles, or the distribution of doctored (or real) photos.

The anonymity and ease with which it can occur, as well as its ability to go viral, have led to cyberbullying's seemingly becoming more common. It has also captured the mainstream media's attention with the suicides of middle schooler Megan Meier in 2006 and college student Tyler Clementi in 2010, both of whom were cyberbullied.

Responding to Bullying

Bullying cannot be ignored. If you or a staff member witnesses it or are told about it and think that it will just stop, you are doing the victim a grave injustice (not to mention the serious consequences you could face if it were discovered that you had ignored it). You have a moral imperative to convey to your staff the importance of responding to incidents of bullying, which encompasses addressing the bully (and his or her parents), meeting with the victim (and at least contacting his or her parents), establishing schoolwide expectations, and possibly implementing a prevention program.

Meeting with the Victim One of the first things you need to do is assure the victim that he is not at fault, that he did nothing wrong, that he did not deserve what happened to him, and that he was right to tell you (or another authority figure, if that is how you discovered the situation) about what has been happening; validate his feelings and reassure him that he is not alone in what he is experiencing. You might even pledge to him that you will be sure to address it with the bully; however, you should also be able to guarantee that you will not tell the bully that the victim had come to you and "snitched." You might also think about making him aware of resources available to him, such as his school counselor, support groups, or community resources. Last, you need to counsel the student on how to respond if there are future attacks from a bully. First and foremost, you should emphasize that he should not respond with violence, which will just escalate the situation and could result in bodily harm. You might also encourage him to use humor if possible or simply either to ignore the bully or agree with what the bully says and walk away, and then tell you or any other trusted adult in the building (Boynton and Boynton, 2005). You should also be sure to encourage the victim to tell a trusted adult or call the police if necessary if anything were to happen in the community.

Talking with the Victim's Parents When parents learn that their child has been bullied, the issue does not end for them when you hang up the phone or show them out of your office. We've had parents ask what they should do when their child comes home, so we offer them some gentle guidance on what they are in store for and how to handle the situation. Most important is to emphasize that their child did nothing wrong, that he did nothing to encourage this kind of behavior, and that no one deserves to be treated in such a fashion. You should

also encourage the parents to adopt the same approach with their child; it is critical for the child to hear from his parents that he is not at fault. The student's feelings may be complicated: in addition to the hurt caused by the bullying, he may feel a sense of relief now that an adult is aware of the situation, but he can simultaneously and paradoxically be frustrated and annoyed; he may also experience shame and embarrassment for having his administrator know what happened to him and having his parents learn about it, along with whatever awkward conversations or drama that might ensue as a result. In short, the student will need support and understanding. The parents' job is to be sensitive to his feelings and reassure him that whatever he feels is normal.

After being told about the bullying, many parents of victims are understandably quite upset. You need to keep them calm as best you can and advise them not to take matters into their own hands. Under no circumstances should you give out the contact information of the other student's parents, and you probably shouldn't even disclose the identity of the bully to the parents unless the victim was in serious danger. Discourage the parents from calling the bully's parents, as that can escalate the situation and increase the chance of the victim's parents losing control during such a conversation if the bully's parents are defensive or, worse yet, if the victim's parents discover that the bullying behavior had been learned at home. You might also explain that calling the bully's parents could have the unintended result of worsening the situation for their child. Instead, assure the parents that you will be meeting with the other parents and will follow up with them afterward.

In some instances, we've spoken with parents who have warned us that they will make sure that their child retaliates if the situation happens again. When this occurs, we assure them that we understand their frustration and why they are saying that, but we then caution them about encouraging their child to retaliate: even though their child is the victim, he can just as easily run afoul of school rules and regulations (as well as the law), so parents need to understand the possible ramifications. We also mention that if their child were to retaliate, there is the chance that he could suffer serious physical harm.

Meeting with the Bully When you meet with the bully, you'll see that before he admits to any wrongdoing (if he does at all), he will ask "Who told you that?" or "Where did you hear that from?" His purpose in asking is twofold: he's trying to determine exactly what it is that you know and how much, and at the

same time, he's probing to find out if the victim "snitched" on him. In our experience, if you are dismissive of his questions and respond with something like "Don't worry how I heard this" or "That's none of your business," he will assume—and there will be little you will be able to do to dissuade him—that the victim is the one who came to you. We've found it effective to respond by saying (when plausible and possible) that a staff member witnessed it or heard about it. (And if possible and your acting skills are up to the challenge, instead of giving an actual name, you might even feign trying to remember the staff member's name.)

Typically you'll find that if the bully does admit to the behavior, he will respond by saying something like, "It's not a big deal—we were just joking around" or "It's okay—we're friends." Although this is merely an excuse, he might actually believe it. In our experience, the best way to handle this is to ask the bully to explain where the joke is, to ask him to explain how it was humorous, and to try to invoke a sense of empathy. In the cases where the bully claims friendship with the victim, we've feigned surprise and asked when the last time was that they hung out together outside school and if the victim would be able to corroborate the bully's claim. In most instances, the bully will understand what you're implying and that what he claimed was innocent fun is anything but that. If he is still adamant that what he was doing was a joke and you're unable to convince him otherwise, then you need to state firmly the school's position and that he needs to cease immediately; a failure to do so would be defiance on his part for which there would certainly be (additional) consequences. It is especially important to mention consequences when you meet with bullies because they generally don't realize that what to them is harmless fun and entertainment could actually result in legal action and have far-reaching effects.

But perhaps the most effective strategy for working with bullies is to remember to see them as students in need of help. It's easy to view them simply as perpetrators of offensive and hurtful actions, but it is important for you to see your interactions with them as teaching opportunities, because there is an obvious deficit in learning some lessons. Boynton and Boynton (2005) aptly remind us that it is critical to "develop good relationships with them and be a good role model for them. Positive relationships with students and adults are often lacking in a bully's life. . . . The point is that they need your attention and relationship probably more than do other students" (p. 165).

Talking with the Bully's Parents As difficult as it is to tell parents that their child has been bullied, it is equally uncomfortable to tell parents that their child is a bully. Most parents are mortified when they hear of the kind of behavior their child has been engaging in, but as we briefly mentioned earlier, some parents can be very defensive and protective, which makes the conversation that much more difficult. In some instances, parents feel threatened because they perceive the accusation as an indictment of their parenting or child-rearing abilities. Boynton and Boynton (2005) draw on Olweus's identification of "four parenting practices that can lead to the creation of bullies: the emotional attitude of the parents, a permissive parenting attitude, physical discipline and emotional outbursts by the parents, and the temperament of the child" (p. 161), so although it is not your function to evaluate their parenting skills, through your interactions with the parents you might be able to determine whether they have created or reinforced the behavior in question. Regardless of the nature of the call or the severity of the bullying, the parents and student must know that the student is still valued by you and the school.

Implementing Schoolwide Approaches Experts cannot seem to agree on what programs to implement schoolwide or on the efficacy of programs. One-time events—antibullying inoculations, if you will—do not seem adequate. These moments in time are not sufficient to change a school's climate and culture or to have a significant impact on bullying. On the other end of the spectrum, Rodkin (2011) cites findings by Farrington and Ttofi (2009) that "interventions that involve peers, such as using students as peer mediators or engaging bystanders to disapprove of bullying and support victims of harassment, were associated with *increases* in victimization" (p. 14). As you can see then, creating a bully-free and safe environment is certainly complex and fraught with challenges.

What seems to be clear, though, is that the culture of the school needs to be one where bullying is not tolerated. Such a culture can be developed through classroom lessons, seminars, and creating an environment where students feel safe to confide in staff members. Providing professional development to your teachers about bullying and bullying prevention as well as on how to teach schoolwide expectations can also help you reduce bullying in your school. You should also encourage your teachers to be present in the halls during class changes, especially in areas that seem to make bullying easier (stairwells, blind corners,

and so on); their presence minimizes the opportunity for bullying to occur, shows students that staff are involved, and allows students to quickly find an adult if a situation occurs.

Responding to Cyberbullying

The high-profile cyberbullying cases we mentioned earlier, which were indeed horrific, caused a visceral public reaction, and such incidents lead to entreaties for immediate consequences and action whenever one occurs, including demands that the school become involved. This knee-jerk thinking is understandable, but consider for a moment the commonsense wisdom of some educators: would you (the school) get involved if you heard that over the weekend Mary said something mean about Sally while at the mall? Most likely, you would never investigate what had happened, and, even more likely, you probably wouldn't have been told about it. But because these conflicts are occurring in cyberspace and are available for parental consumption in many instances, you are more likely to receive a phone call about them. However, although there are times when you do need to become involved, which we will address shortly, your role is not to supervise the Internet and what occurs there, a truth that is sometimes difficult to tell parents and equally difficult for them to hear. In some instances, you would even be overstepping your bounds by taking any kind of action, in terms of students' right of freedom of speech and expression.

When You Can Respond to Cyberbullying Although we encourage you to check with your district leadership or legal counsel, you should really become involved in a cyberbullying incident only when there is a nexus, or a direct connection, between something occurring in the school community and an incident taking place off of school grounds. If you have evidence of any of the following, though, you should take action to varying degrees within your capacity as an administrator:

- A threat has been made. (The legal ramifications or the violation of FCC rules would probably allow you to act.)
- There is a substantial disruption to the learning environment (although this is not always easy to prove, and you probably would not be supported if you predicted that there would be one).

- Child pornography is involved. Students don't always recognize it as such. (Confiscate the evidence, make your supervisor aware of it immediately, and turn it over to the police; you should also contact Child Protective Services.)
- The offenses are occurring during the school day (in that you have evidence that the school's equipment or Internet access are being used to enact the cyberbullying).

If you are presented with evidence of harassing text messages, obscene e-mails, phony social networking profiles, blackmail, or anything else that is either illegal or does not sit well with parents yet does not have a direct connection to the school other than students' being implicated, your response is very simple: "Although I wish I could be of more assistance, this is outside my authority, so I encourage you to contact law enforcement or the moderators of that site (or both)."

Teaching About Cyberbullying When it comes to cyberbullying, an effective and proactive move on your part would be to provide training and classes about cyberbullying. These could take the form of professional development for your faculty during an in-service day or a faculty meeting where there is also a focus on monitoring computer usage in the classroom and the computer lab; an evening session for parents with guest speakers from local law enforcement who could also address Internet safety and online predators; and regular discussions and lessons with students during their classes.

RESOLVE STUDENT-TEACHER CONFLICTS

Conflicts are bound to occur in the classroom. No matter how skillful the teacher or how mature the student, as humans we are always susceptible to personality conflicts. In some cases, the conflict manifests itself through misbehavior (which we address in the next chapter); in other cases, the conflict is simply a matter of the teacher and student not getting along or of the student not responding to the teacher for any number of reasons. It is also natural for some students to feel that a teacher just rubs them the wrong way (and vice versa), so you can be sure that at some point you will have to address a conflict between one of your students and one of your teachers. You will need to strike a delicate balance, ensuring both that your teacher leaves feeling supported and that your student is assured that

you believe in him or her. The following are some questions to ask your teacher if he or she comes to you with such a conflict:

- Have you had a one-on-one discussion with the student?
- Have you solicited help from the parents?
- Have you had a meeting with the student's counselor? Have you met with the counselor with the student present?
- Have you talked with other teachers to see if they are experiencing the same conflict? Why or why haven't they had the same experience?
- Have you talked with your department chair to ask how he or she would work with this issue?
- Have you employed strategies to get know the student outside your curriculum or class?

If the teacher has explored these options without any noticeable improvement, then you will need to facilitate a conversation between the student and the teacher. Prior to having such a meeting, it would be helpful for you and the teacher to plan how you will conduct the meeting (which could function very similarly to the student mediation process we identified earlier in the chapter) and what you are hoping for in terms of an outcome. If after the conference there are still conflicts present, you might be tempted to remove the student from the class or make a schedule change. We are hesitant to recommend this course of action except in severe instances, because once you employ this strategy, you will be increasingly pressed by teachers, students, and parents to make other schedule changes, thus introducing instability to your master schedule and classes.

The importance of a positive learning environment and school climate cannot be overstated in terms of their power to influence student achievement and student and staff morale. But even in highly effective schools, "The frequency of conflicts among students and the increasing severity of violence that characterizes such conflicts make their management costly in terms of time, energy, and money. To make schools orderly and peaceful places where high-quality instruction can take place, conflicts must be managed constructively" (Johnson and Johnson,

1995, p. 111). You will need to address and resolve these conflicts—whether they entail bullying, cyberbullying, or conflicts between friends or between students and teachers—in order to prevent further disruption to the learning environment. Although the suggestions we have presented from our experiences are certainly helpful, they are by no means an exhaustive list of how you can address conflicts in your school. We are confident that the more involved you become in handling these conflicts, the more thoroughly you will develop your techniques and strategies to complement those contained in this chapter and better assist students in learning how to cope with and address difficult situations.