

Ruben Rosario: Minnesota group is taking on bullying

By Ruben Rosario

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Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Sorry. The old saying needs some revamping in this age. Verbal as well as online bullying not only hurts, it can linger far longer than fractures or black eyes.

Now, I'm not a helicopter parent, or I try not to be. There's some things I feel my child will need to find a way to handle if it ever gets problematic. It does build self-sufficiency and character and prepares them for a world that can be quite mean and not always nice. I emphasize here that it's not the bullying that builds the character. It's the proper and effective response to it.

Yet, there is no question that constant bullying through any means needs to be confronted early and stopped by parents, peers, the schools and the community at large.

Which brings me to a 5-year-old effort to help folks do just that. Who would think that in the land of "Minnesota nice" there's a national center to prevent bullying? Yep. It's here. In Bloomington.

Established by the PACER (Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights) organization, it has become a useful clearinghouse of information and resources about an issue that has become a national concern in recent years, particularly in the school setting.

Get this. According to an American Medical Association study, some 3.7 million youths engage in bullying, and more than 3.2 million are victims of bullying annually. That's a stunner.

High-profile national and local

incidents have fueled the concern. Police in Long Island, N.Y., last year investigated whether cyberbullies continued to post nasty messages about a 17-year-old high school soccer star who took her life amid "vicious" taunts on social-

networking sites.

After years of bullying, Ryan Halligan, a Vermont eighth-grader with a learning disorder, took his life in 2003 after a rumor about him being gay spread across the Internet.

The Halligan case is tragically interesting because the kid learned self-defense and got his father's permission to defend himself from an assault at school, which happened once. In fact, bully and victim became friends for a while. But the boy could not defend himself from the constant online smears and name calling, which his parents discovered after his death.

Locally, the Anoka-Hennepin School District recently has come under fire after several student suicides that some connect to an inadequate response to anti-gay harassment. Two pending lawsuits challenge the district's controversial Sexual Orientation Curriculum policy, saying it has contributed to anti-gay bullying by requiring school staff to be "neutral" on matters related to homosexuality.

Julie Hertzog, the bullying center's director, said the idea for it actually germinated in the early 2000s when the umbrella PACER group began receiving a significant increase in calls about the bullying of disabled students at school. PACER was created in 1977 as a resource and information-sharing site by parents of children and youths with disabilities.

"The parents who called us found that the schools were not being as responsive as they would like,"



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Hertzog said. The center began offering curriculum bully intervention strategies and took off from there. Expanding its offerings to all bullied students and parents, it now also runs links strictly addressed to students, peer groups and bullies themselves.

Meanwhile, the Bloomington center attracted national attention through People magazine, CNN and other media outlets as more and more states, including Minnesota, passed anti-bullying measures. But that's not saying much. A Minnesota Public Radio report this year of such laws found the Gopher State to have the shortest and weakest statute in the nation. Only Hawaii, Michigan, Montana and South Dakota have weaker anti-bullying protections, MPR reported, and that's because those states have passed no laws on the issue at all.

Hertzog said one major difference between one-on-one bullying and its online version is numbers.

"We call cyberbullying the modern bathroom wall," Hertzog said. "Through online, the audience is extended to hundreds of thousands. It can be more damaging to a child's psyche and harder to do something about it because often it's anonymous."

The old saying demands a makeover: Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words also hurt.

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FYI

To learn more about PACER's national bullying prevention center, go to pacer.org/bullying.

A "Walk, Run, Roll Against Bullying" event will be held at 9 a.m. Saturday at Mount Normandale Lake Park in Bloomington. For more information, go to the PACER website or call 952-838-9000.



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