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## Students Speak Out Addresses Bullying in the “School Safety” Discussion Group

June 6, 2008

A collection of student commentary from StudentsSpeakOut.org

The Students Speak Out – Minneapolis student leadership team hypothesized that increasing trust between students and teachers will reduce bullying and harassment in schools.

In early 2008, the leaders invited a number of students to react to their hypothesis by posting their stories on [www.StudentsSpeakOut.org](http://www.StudentsSpeakOut.org), and interviewed students attending middle school, high school, and college in Minneapolis.

The stories revealed some important observations:

- 1) **Bullying is a hard problem to solve because there are lots of different kinds of bullying, and lots of different reasons that bullying happens.**
- 2) **Teachers and students both have roles in stopping bullying – and helping students who are being bullied.**
- 3) **The more trust there is between students and teachers, the less bullying there is in the school.**

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### 1) **Bullying is a hard problem for schools to solve because there are lots of different kinds of bullying, and lots of different reasons that bullying happens.**

The students told stories of being bullied in many different ways – teasing, insults, physical bullying, cyber bullying, even being bullied by teachers. They said that the people who become bullies usually have a lot of other problems going on, things that are hard for schools to solve. And they said that the students who are bullied or picked on are usually “different” in some way or another – they look different, act different, or take leadership positions that set them apart from other students.

*Questions:*

- *Are all kinds of bullying “equal,” or are some worse than others? Should schools try to cut down on all kinds of bullying, or is it better to focus on just the most hurtful kinds? Who decides what the most hurtful kinds of bullying are?*
- *How much can schools do to reduce bullying, and how much needs to be solved by students and families?*

**There are lots of different kinds of bullying.**

*Teasing*

"I think another form that I don't hear about too much is teasing. People taking things from others our making a prank like... taking chair away when someone is sitting down etc." – **Gabe, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

### *Insults*

"I have been bullied in different non-violent ways such as name calling, teasing or even extreme insults. Most of what I get is just PLAYFUL but the question is what draws the line between just a little joke or something that really hurts." – **Gabe, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

### *Physical bullying*

"Once in elementary school, me and this other girl, I think we were both competing to be teacher's pet, but it didn't turn out so well because she was a lot more athletic and one day she pushed me down, literally. Coming in from recess. Typical bullying." – **Cristy, University of Minnesota**

There is a kid at my school who is very tall, but isn't really tough or mean. Some of the "tough kids" pick on him because of that. They sometimes just walk up to him at his locker and kick him in the back of the legs." – **Kevin, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

### *Cyber bullying*

"I was in class and people always text and stuff...which is normal. But in one of my classes, girls were taking pictures with their phones of this one girl in class who's considered "nerdy" and "annoying". They then proceeded to send the picture around class via text, giggling. She was completely oblivious...which almost makes it more disgusting....what do you call that? Cyber-bullying? Can you be bullied behind your back, or is that something different? – **Annie, Southwest High School**

"In our school cyber bullying is a big problem. It's tough cuz kids delete the history and say prove it. i didn't do any of that. they always get out of trouble." – **Jason, Buffalo Community Middle School**

### *Bullying by teachers*

"When it comes to teachers, it isn't as surprising as one might think that they bully students. The teachers are in charge, they have the power over the kids in the same way that bosses have power over their workers and, in both the office and the classroom, if the person in charge is feeling powerless, stressing the fact that they are in charge makes them feel more powerful, while, at the same time, making the students and workers feel less significant." – **Nora, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

## **People bully other people for lots of reasons – including a lot of things that are hard for schools to change or solve.**

"I think trust is always an issue for bullies in that they don't trust a lot of things in life. They operate out of fear. They are fearful that somebody else is going to be strong than them, meaner than them. They have to put themselves out there that way." – **Mr. White, teacher, Roosevelt High School**

"I think the reason that bullying exist in schools is due to the low attention that the bully itself gets from home and teachers. Bullying starts when the person has a low self-esteem. They feel that they need to be at the top of everyone else.

Maybe the bully comes from a family who does not make enough money and has little or no items to own. This might make the child to want things and own, so he or she might show that aggression towards others at school." – **Thomas Moua, Patrick Henry High School**

"I believe that the reasons why bully, bully other students are because there're prideful, hoping to gain respect and honor. Bully doesn't have self-confidence or doesn't know to respect themselves. Bully, bully students to destroy self-confidence and boost their ego. Bully doesn't feel good about themselves, so they put other people down to gain respect from the student." – **Por, Patrick Henry High School**

“I think the reason why students bully other students is because they want to feel superior and it’s a sign of wanting to be better than others. I think that when students bully the other, they might feel as if they are stronger or maybe gang related.” – **Bee, Patrick Henry High School**

“People often bully to make them feel powerful and to boost their self esteem, which would be one reason why bullying would occur a lot in the middle school years.” – **Nora, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

“By attacking one aspect of a problem we attack the symptoms of the disease, not the disease itself. What we need to do is be able to identify the root problem. Maybe it’s home matters, maybe it’s abusiveness. Whatever it is, they have become bullies due to a basic inability to handle it, they take it out on others.” – **Cori, Roosevelt High School**

## **Students are singled out for being bullied when they stand out in some way or another.**

“I think that a lot of times bullying occurs more in places or settings, like schools and things, where people are not exposed to very much diversity. For example, in a school where there is not that much cultural diversity, a person of a different race will stick out more than in a school where people are used to cultural diversity. When I talked to kids in the suburbs who did not have much diversity at their schools it sounded like the main thing that people were bullied about was race.

Like I mentioned before, bullying often happens because of differences. If people are used to those differences then they don’t feel uncomfortable and are less likely to bully. Sometimes people bully as a way of preventing themselves from having to stray out of their comfort zone.” – **Nora, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

“In the suburbs they would bully you because you were a different race, or a skin color, or they wouldn’t talk to you because they would infer that you were, like, a mean gangster from the ‘hood or something.” – **Madison, Susan N. Anthony Middle School**

“I have been bullied before. It’s fallen into all of those different categories, whether it was physical, mental or emotional. It happened mainly to me when I was in middle school, starting as early as when I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and lasted all the way through 8<sup>th</sup>. Some of the things that happened to me were, you know, being the bigger sized girl that I am I got picked on for my size and the hairstyles that I chose to wear and some of my clothes as well.” – **Shanaye, University of Minnesota**

“I was bullied all throughout high school. All four years. I would say it was sometimes physical, most of the time mental and emotional. A lot of teasing went on about me taking RINK in the school. Usually if you took RINK you were seen as a nerd, and people there didn’t want to be seen as a nerd. So I was considered a nerd because I took a leadership position.” – **Amelia, University of Minnesota**

“I got verbally bullied because I was friends with a kid who some people think is ‘gay.’ He actually isn’t and the only reason that they think he is is because he wears ‘girl pants.’” – **Kevin, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

## **2) Teachers and students both have roles in stopping bullying – and helping students who are being bullied.**

The students identified lots of ways that teachers can help solve bullying. They said that teachers often don’t even realize that bullying is going on (but that students always know) and that teachers sometimes let bullying happen or don’t enforce rules consistently. The students said that the most important thing that teachers can do is just “be there” for students who are being bullied, so that the students know that they have support and they don’t have to go through it alone.

Students have a responsibility to solve bullying problems, too. The students talked about ways that they can help individually, by standing up for their friends or getting involved when they see bullying happen. They also talked about how creating a supportive community can help prevent bullying from happening in the first place.

### Questions:

- *If students have the knowledge about what is going on with bullying, and teachers have the power to stop it, how can students and teachers work together to solve the problem?*
- *Teachers and other adults are sometimes required to do more than “just be there” for students. But students sometimes don’t want to tell teachers what is going on because they don’t want them to “do anything” about it – they just want someone to listen. What’s a good compromise?*
- *How can students and teachers work together to create an environment where bullying just isn’t accepted in the first place?*

### Teachers often don’t know about the bullying that is going on

“I think it’s because teachers are often unaware that bullying is going on and by getting them involved in the process of reducing bullying it is making them more aware of it.” – **Nora, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

“I do think that teachers have a pretty strong impact because they are supposed to be monitoring the environment so I think they are kinda at fault if the environment is full of bullying and stuff. I do think they could prevent it because a lot of times teachers are not really listening to conversations. I’m not saying that they should be eavesdropping but they could kinda pay attention to what’s going on. Instead of just, you know, sitting at their desk and doing whatever they should try to find out, you know, who’s friends with who. And if there are problems I do think that they should address it, or they should call the principle and have them address it. ‘Cause a lot of times, kids themselves don’t want to sign up for mediation unless they get caught, so I think teachers really need to be aware of these things.” – **Mariah, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

“Teachers at this school, I think they definitely try to do stuff to stop the bullying, but honestly, I think they are definitely ignorant to what’s going on. All the students at the school know who’s being bullied. But the teachers... they obviously see a few kids and try to be nicer to them, but they really don’t know how much is going on. Like I said, it’s not really out there, you can’t tell who’s a bully and who’s not, it’s really more secretive, I guess. You can’t see it happening throughout the school, with the kids who aren’t as popular as the others.” – **Ben, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

### Sometimes teachers let bullying happen, or don’t enforce the rules

“[[K]ids who bully show a lack of discipline. When teachers let bullying go they are not doing their job of disciplining those kids and it then interferes with their teaching of the rest of the kids.” – **Nora, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

“Adults definitely turn a blind eye [to hazing during Spirit Week]...I don’t think they see it as threatening. On the first day all of my teachers said something like “All the upperclassmen just love freshman!” or “They’ll embrace you!” ...“Don’t worry, no one REALLY throws batteries.” And for the most part, nobody’s seriously hurt. Freshmen kind of just tolerate because they know that they won’t be the picked-on freshman next year...they’ll be the picker-oner (for lack of a better term). Adults couldn’t seem to care less...they just sort of deny its existence and move on to teaching.” – **Annie, Southwest High School**

“I think that the trust bond between teachers and students is very important. It seems like if the teacher does not trust you, then you are more vulnerable to bullying in the classroom. If the teacher does not like you and then you start to get bullied in the classroom, the teacher will be more likely to let it go than if you are one of the kids who has the teachers trust. I’m not saying that you need to suck up to the teacher, but you should not lose the teachers trust.” – **Kevin, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

“I have a teacher who doesn’t respect us (or the rules) enough to turn off her own phone during school...then she laughs when her phone goes off during class. “Ooohh...I got a text message!” I definitely think teachers need to step it up and follow simple rules so that students will feel more inclined to.” – **Annie, Southwest High School**

“Our school doesn’t have the same problem as cell phones but we have a teacher who gets very mad at us for using very slight bad words but he uses them himself! I think there are a lot of “say one thing do another” kind of teachers.” – **Gabe, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

### The most helpful thing that teachers can do is to just “be there” for students

“After this situation I feel like it was a good thing that I actually went to talk to a teacher that I feel would understand. I learned from this experience that sometimes teachers could be your friend who will listen too. So, I think that with the school safety in school and the bullying, as long as there is a binding relationship between students and teachers than there would be less issues....” – **Mai-Eng, Patrick Henry High School**

“I do think that a relationship between a teacher and a student can lessen bullying, for the simple fact that as long the student feels like there is someone that they can talk to, they’re not exactly looking for you to stop what’s happening to them. They just want to know that somebody is there and that somebody cares. An particularly in my case, there were multiple teachers that I could go to and talk to when I was in the 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade that were there to just listen to me talk. And they never really tried to stop anything because we always knew that if they did try to do anything it would provoke the situation and make things a whole lot worse. But it was just the simple fact of knowing that there was somebody that I could talk to and that made my situation better.” - **Shanaye, University of Minnesota**

“My favorite teacher was Don Coe, Coolest teacher ever. He couldn't really help me, but it helped me cope with it. Don helped me by being my friend, just being there was enough. He also helped me keep occupied by hosting chess tournaments which I participated in. Nothing any adult could have done would have done anything immediately. I plain and simple didn't know who to trust, still don't truly trust anyone older than me. However I am now able to understand when others want to help me, and can accept that help.” – **Cori, Roosevelt High School**

“If you can trust your teacher to be there for you and do the right thing when you are having an issue with someone bullying, then that teacher becomes important to the mix. I don't think we can change all students' ethical behaviors at school all together. Especially right away, but with teachers being there for their students instead of turning the other cheek, showing that someone cares is definitely a strong step forward for those victimized.” – **Brett, Avalon Charter School**

“I have never been bullied before, but I feel that to better relations in the school, teachers have to keep an eye on bullies. Overall, the bully and the teacher will have to build a relationship for the teacher to understand how the student feels. This can lesson the bullies anger and actions if there is someone willing to help the student.” – **Thomas, Patrick Henry High School**

“My mother has always told me, if I don't feel comfortable going to her, go to somebody. So of course, most definitely, trust between anybody, especially between an adult and an adolescent, because adults have more experience and they can shine a little light. If you don't got nobody to talk to, you're just alone with yourself and your thoughts. You already know what you think. You're with yourself 365 days a year, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. You have no other choice but to know how you feel, and it can only better your interpretation in life to get to know someone else is going through the same things.” – **Tiffany, University of Minnesota**

### **Students can help stop bullying by standing up as individuals, and by creating a community that rejects bullying.**

“I think the best way to solve bullying is for those bullies who throw more insults to put themselves in the others shoes and see how it may be affecting the other person. Also having a civilized conversation about it or if the bully wont listen even to have a peer mediation or adult help.” – **Gabe, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

“I've made it part of my life to actually go out and help others. If I see someone getting picked on, I'll say 'Hey, leave him alone.' It feels good to be not on the bullying side but actually helping others who are getting bullied.” – **Kiana, Roosevelt High School**

“Be the change you want to see. By saying something to the bullies maybe your actions are living that statement . . . I just think that leaving it completely up to the kids at school, can cause more distraction from learning and have minimal effects if not pared up with administration interference.” – **Brett, Avalon Charter School**

“I have seen many of my friends who were bullied and i have stepped in and resolve the problem. I resolved the problem by telling the bully to stop it or i will have to beat him up, but i never did take such actions. I feel that students who are being bullied does not put themselves at a certain level above the bully, then the bully will take advantage of the situation. Bullies take advantage of our fears, but we can stand up and protect ourselves by being aware of our surrounding.” – **Thomas, Patrick Henry High School**

"The biggest thing we try and focus on is a positive community with supportive respectful peers. It is kinda based off peer pressure actually which can be used to your advantage. When we have a lot of kids who are saying "hey that's not how we work at Avalon, you need to change your behavior," you would be surprised with the results we get. Also the small school size is a big contributor, but its not impossible to do this at a regular high school. When you have the pride that comes along with going to your school and saying "hey I go to South, go Tigers!" Or whatever it may be, there is a lot to work with there. You can change those attitudes to include some respect that goes along with the name like what we do at Avalon." – **Brett, Avalon Charter School**

### **Schools need to find ways that students and teachers can work together to solve bullying.**

"Maybe that is one of largest differences of times, and how we can work to end bullying is to involve the teachers in a different way than previously initiated. I shouldn't have to face the crap that bullying brings my way myself, or expect only my peers to step up for me. There should be something coming from the authority figures as well. Students should be making efforts for each other and acting as the main contribution against bullying, and Avalon works really hard with that theory so we don't have to face things ourselves. Also our teachers take it in their hands if need be. Thus, we have minimal bullying issues." – **Brett, Avalon Charter School**

"I don't think that we will ever be able to 'cure' bullying. Criticism is part of human nature but the amount depends on the person. Some people see the faults in others more than the good things and they tend to be what we would consider a bully. So what we should focus on is not curing bullying but controlling it." – **Nora, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

### **3) Trust among students and teachers can help solve bullying problems.**

The students talked about a number of ways that trust among students and teachers can help solve bullying problems. Trust can help prevent bullying by building strong relationships between students and teachers – and without strong relationships with teachers students are more vulnerable to being bullied. Once trust is established, students will be less likely to violate that trust by bullying.

When bullying happens, students lose trust in their teachers and the school system in general – and that creates more problems.

*Questions:*

- *How can trust be created between students and teachers?*

### **Trusting relationships between students and teachers help prevent bullying in the first place.**

"I go to Susan B. Anthony middle school and from what I've noticed we don't have too much of a bullying problem. What is true though, is that the little bullying that goes on does not tend to happen in the classes where students and the teacher get along well and trust each other. The reason that this is the case is because the students know that the teacher appreciates them as a person and will not tolerate students bullying each other in that class. In classes where the teacher does not get along with students bullying is more likely to happen because the teacher just doesn't care so the bully can get away with it." – **Nora, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

"I think that the trust bond between teachers and students is very important. It seems like if the teacher does not trust you, then you are more vulnerable to bullying in the classroom. If the teacher does not like you and then you start to get bullied in the classroom, the teacher will be more likely to let it go then if you are one of the kids who has the teachers trust. I'm not saying that you need to suck up to the teacher, but you should not lose the teachers trust." – **Kevin, Susan B. Anthony Middle School**

"And once that trust is established for the student, they will probably work harder to not violate it." – **Holly, Avalon Charter School**

"I think that having a good bond between a teacher and a student is really good thing, because then a student is more likely to open up about stuff that's going on in their live. If they feel intimidated they are more likely to tell

the teacher that still feel involved in the class even if they are feeling threatened by sharing their ideas. So it would help them academically. And then also having a teacher there like a confidante will help you just tell someone, 'cause it really helps if you just talk to someone about it. And also the teacher can then help with strategies to lessen it. And also if the teacher just gives them, like, a stern look, a lot of times that's enough to keep it from seeming like the whole world is against that student." – **Cristy, University of Minnesota**

"I feel that to better relations in the school, teachers have to keep an eye on bullies. Overall, the bully and the teacher will have to build a relationship for the teacher to understand how the student feels. This can lessen the bullies anger and actions if there is someone willing to help the student." – **Thomas, Patrick Henry High School**

"If you can trust your teacher to be there for you and do the right thing when you are having an issue with someone bullying, then that teacher becomes important to the mix. I don't think we can change all students' ethical behaviors at school all together. Especially right away, but with teachers being there for their students instead of turning the other cheek, showing that someone cares is definitely a strong step forward for those victimized." – **Brett, Avalon Charter School**

### **Bullying destroys trust among teachers and students**

"I think another issue that I brought up again is the trust factor, it gets sabotaged when a student gets bullied. It can come to the point where they don't trust the system, they don't trust their teachers, they don't trust the support staff in the school, they don't trust the administration because so often it's happened to them. So many times it's happened to them and so many times they've said stuff, and so many times nothing's happened. It becomes really tough for them to trust the system and so they fall into the cracks and they keep on getting bullied... So I can see why someone who has trouble re-trusting the system and tell the authorities when they do get bullied." – **Mr. Flanders, teacher, Roosevelt High School**

### **How to build trust**

"If students are treated more like peers and less like little children, they'll be more likely to behave. I've had some really condescending teachers who pull the "I'm the teacher so you have to listen," card. It reminds me of the movie Matilda, when Matilda's dad and Ms. Trunchbull would say "I'm big and you're little, I'm smart and you're dumb, I'm right and you're wrong." That is not a good basis of relationship and does not create an environment of respect. Yet some teachers say this, trying to force students to have more respect and behave better." – **Annie, Southwest High School**

"At my previous district school I felt I was more of a criminal than a student. ... We need responsibilities and obligations at school for our behavior and the community. Kids have to learn to be good adults somewhere, and it needs to be done differently than the way my previous district school was doing it." – **Brett, Avalon Charter School**

## **ABOUT STUDENTS SPEAK OUT:**

StudentsSpeakOut.org is an initiative of the Citizens League Minnesota 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Project (MAP 150). MAP 150's purpose is to find ways of cultivating citizens' ability to participate in designing public solutions by developing new spaces and roles that respect citizens' experiences and ideas as relevant to the policy discussion. People affected by the problem should be included in defining it.

StudentsSpeakOut.org is a project whose face is a social networking Web site. We are testing a variety of strategies for involving young people as active citizens by meeting them where they are (on the Web, using technology, and in both school-based and outside-of-school learning environments). The Web site was at first Minneapolis-focused, and has now expanded to all of Minnesota and Milwaukee, with potential for further expansion nationally.

There are forum discussions where students and adults raise questions and discuss ideas for solutions. We've "turned the tables" and asked students to act as commentators on the education-related ideas of high-profile adults in Minnesota. The Web site was also the host of the "I Am Minnesota's Future" Video Contest, a pilot-level contest providing a forum for students to articulate what adults and youth must do to ensure a better future in Minnesota.

There is a lot of behind-the-scenes work, too, that occurs to cultivate active citizenship and bring the site to life. For example: Student leaders from Minneapolis and from Minnesota's alternative-education programs have project coordinators who assist them in investigating topics of their choice on video and in written story, and who connect the students to decision-makers working in their scope of interest.

In Milwaukee, students learn how to use the site to address education matters they care about via workshops, and adults participate in separate workshops to learn how to support the students on the site. The workshop designs and in-person recruiting strategies built on the successes of Minnesota's site, and the strategies are succeeding (as evidenced by rapid growth of site participation—almost 80 new participants since its launch in mid-April 2008.)

There are a number of strategies for facilitating more dialogue amongst students regarding NCLB, and other issues affecting students, including using site's discussion forums and cultivating student leaders to run the discussion. Most important to the students' willingness to participate is their trusting that there is an audience willing to consider their ideas. If that's you, and you would like to know more about working with Students Speak Out to involve students in your work, contact us: [studentspeakout@map150.org](mailto:studentspeakout@map150.org)