San Francisco Unified School District

School Times

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Schools Take on Bullying

Maybe you have heard the expression “kids will be kids” in response to children teasing each other, or you’ve seen quick fix responses to bullying, like “shake hands and say you’re sorry.”

When bullying isn’t taken seriously, it can have devastating effects. Bullied children might be too anxious to concentrate in class. They might skip school because of fear or, worst of all, bullied children can learn to hate themselves, which can lead to even more shattering consequences.

The superintendent and Board of Education have committed to taking a proactive approach to prevent bullying. School officials investigate every complaint and are ready to provide assistance to help the victim as well as the child who is doing the bullying, who needs to learn a different way to behave.

“Educators have a grave responsibility to prevent bullying and so do students, parents and community members,” says Superintendent Richard A. Carranza. “This is an important issue in the lives of our children and for all of us who care about children.”

Creating Safe Schools

Teachers at all grade levels lead community-building activities and teach lessons that promote acceptance and understanding of different abilities, cultures and family backgrounds. Every middle and high school has counseling services, including opportunities for students to participate in support groups and work through problems. There are student led efforts too - youth outreach workers and safe school ambassadors - that take on educating and standing up for their peers.

When students do experience or witness bullying, the district wants students to tell an adult. More and more schools are using restorative practices as an approach to discipline that asks the student who is bullied to actually learn from the consequences of his or her actions (see parent Amy Merickel’s perspective on the restorative practices on page 4).

Be an Upstander, Not a Bystander

Ignoring name calling and hurtful teasing allows it to continue and possibly get worse. If other students do not step up, then the perpetrator is given the false sense that no one is bothered by the behavior.

This past summer, 730 students participated in a one-week summer orientation program for rising 6th graders at nine middle schools. The program supports students as they make the transition from the elementary school routine and environment to the new and different reality of middle school.

Students got a taste of middle school before starting their summer break. They went to homeroom, an English class focused on writing, a math class, and a communications class that emphasized empathy building. Classes were interspersed with a school tour and team-building activities. The week ended with a ceremony for students and parents.

Grace participated in the Step Up program before beginning as a 6th grader at Roosevelt Middle School. *“Step Up really helped me because I wasn’t as nervous. Nervousness can make you jumpy. If you don’t feel that, there are only a few more issues you have to deal with and it gradually gets better. The program was a mix between fun and learning. It all went into one purpose which was to prepare you,”* says Grace.

At Roosevelt’s Step Up there was a locker opening contest and a scavenger hunt where students had to find things around the school like who the secretary was. Everyone read *Three Cups of Tea* as part of “One Book, One School.” Students also received workbooks to do over the summer to continue and possibly get worse. If other students do not step up, then the perpetrator is given the false sense that no one is bothered by the behavior.

PRINCIPALS FOR THE ARTS – School principals make collages as they reflect on the importance of art in their personal and professional lives. This activity, held at the de Young Museum, was part of a workshop series called Principals for the Arts. Professional artists worked closely with principals to create artistic work together. In addition to the studio work, principals also learned new ways to more effectively schedule the arts into the school day at every grade. Principals for the Arts workshops are funded by the Walter and Elise Haas Fund.

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Stepping Up to Middle School

with their partner.

Grace explained that she learned about how in every class there would be a “Do Now,” where students do what’s on the board as soon as they get into class. She said that this was a new concept that she didn’t learn in her elementary school.

Assistant Superintendent for Middle Schools Jeannie Pon has supported the expansion of Step Up programs throughout the district. She believes it is one of many ways that all middle school principals and teachers are practicing what Pon calls the five R’s.

“The five R’s are rigor, relevance, relationships, reflection and recommitment. We have to make sure that what we are teaching is relevant to our students; that we have high expectations for all students; that we truly know who our students are; that we continue to reflect on our practices; and that we make a point of recommitting to our profession and our students.”

Pon reports that the staff who participated in this summer’s Step Up program felt like they made great connections with their students.

Grace definitely felt the benefits of building relationships early.

“You get to know the teachers so they can be the kind of people who you go to for help – someone you’ve created a relationship with. Step Up was a big push for the start of middle school.”

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not see action, they get the message that there is nothing wrong with bullying.

For example, a phrase that is a prevalent remark among schoolchildren in the U.S. lately is, “That’s so gay.”

“I don’t think a lot of children realize how much their actions can hurt others,” says Kevin Truitt, Associate Superintendent for SFUSD’s Student, Family and Community Support Department. “If you hear the phrase ‘That’s so gay’ to mean that something is bad or stupid, take the time to make sure that children know what ‘gay’ means and know why it is hurtful to use it in a derogatory manner.”

Truitt adds that youth need to understand that in addition to being disrespectful to whomever they’re saying that to, the phrase is also hurtful to other students who may have parents, siblings, aunts, uncles or other family members who are gay.

Truitt says that, in San Francisco’s public schools, students should know to speak up for themselves and bullying victims sooner rather than later.

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It has been an honor serving as your President and Board of Education member for the past eight years. I feel both sadness as well as a great deal of pride in everything we have accomplished together as I bid you farewell to serve our City’s communities in other capacities.

We have come a long way over the past eight years. I first arrived to a fractious environment that was putting adult arguments before student learning. We ended that. Our community came together around a new leader, Superintendent Carlos Garcia, and a collective vision for success was achieved, our “Beyond the Talk” strategic plan. San Francisco, I am proud to say that SFUSD has moved beyond the talk, and we are walking the walk.

San Francisco is now the top urban school district in all of California. Every year for the past five years, we have seen student test scores rise, the achievement gap narrow, and fewer students disengaging and dropping out. Our public education system is keeping families in our city, as enrollment has increased and we have formal policies to welcome and engage parents in their children’s education. Our students are learning more foreign languages at earlier ages, and we are preparing them for careers in our 21st Century economy.

We have made some difficult fiscal decisions to protect our classrooms from state budget cuts. We have all made sacrifices, including cutting board expenses, to put learning first. And those decisions have paid off. Businessman Henry Ford had it right when he said, “If everyone is moving forward together, then success takes care of itself.” We would not be experiencing this success without everyone in our SFUSD community working hard and dedicating ourselves to moving forward in the right direction.

I want to thank my colleagues on the Board of Education, the district’s staff and educators, our families, and our students for the opportunity to serve alongside you and move SFUSD forward. I know that your hard work will continue our positive progress. Although I will be departing from the Board of Education at the end of this year, I will forever be working to serve our children and families.

Businessweek recently announced that San Francisco is America’s Best City 2012. SF was ranked the best place to live out of 100 American cities analyzed and, according to Businessweek, public school performance contributed to this honor.

Sometimes we get so focused on everything that needs improvement - and there is a lot that needs improvement - that we forget to celebrate that we’re a top performing urban school district. More importantly, the students in our district continue to make steady academic achievement gains year after year.

Once again this year San Francisco’s standards-based test scores have improved in both English Language Arts (ELA) and Math. This continues an upward trend for SFUSD, which in the past five years has seen proficiency rates in ELA improve by 10 percentage points and Math (grades 2-7) by 8.2 percentage points.

We are particularly proud that while we’ve accelerated the achievement of historically underserved students, we’ve continued to increase the achievement of all of our students. Almost all grades and major ethnic groups, as well as English Language learners and Special Education students, have shown the same positive trend in performance as the district, with increased or maintained rates of “proficient or above” in both content areas.

The fact that SF is the best city with the best public schools is not happenstance. Our district is being very thoughtful and very strategic about how we approach student learning. We monitor how students are learning and, if they’re learning, we help them learn even more. If they’re not learning, we go back and make sure that they master the skill set that’s necessary to get to the next level.

On a less celebratory note - while we strive to offer all that our children need to learn and grow, the State of California continues to spend less on public education than almost any other state in the U.S. If voters don’t support Proposition 30 and 38 in November, we’ll have to cut the school year shorter this spring and next school year. So please be sure to vote and keep SF the best city in America.
A Parent’s View: A Promising Approach to Discipline

by Amy Merickel

When my eldest daughter began kindergarten four years ago, I started volunteering as a recess monitor at her school. In between the predominant peals of laughter and spirited games of chase, I noticed something else that began to eat at me: Students who cut in line, grabbed a ball out of turn, or caused other trouble were getting an automatic time-out, and some of these kids seemed well on their way to being cast as “trouble-makers.”

As an education policy researcher I worried that this could pave the path to underachievement. As a mom I wondered if there might be a better way. I found it in something called Restorative Practices.

Restorative Practices is a framework for community building and conflict resolution, and sets high expectations with high support to meet them. In education, Restorative Practices emphasizes building trusting relationships and learning from conflict and helps put the kibosh on bullying.

In a nutshell, this method is a fundamental way to change the scenario when a student misbehaves. For example, say a kid grabs a ball from someone and a tussle ensues. A traditional approach would be to intervene, take the ball away and give the perpetrator a traditional time-out.

The new way I learned about turns that whole process on its ear.

What Just Happened?

First everyone is given a chance to calm down—and, yes, a time-out can help with this first step. But it does not end there or with other swift repercussions. Once everyone is cool and willing to talk, you ask the kids involved a very simple question: “What just happened, and what were you thinking as it happened?” The answer may be as simple as “I wanted to shoot baskets but no one would give me their ball.” There are a few more questions you then ask as a follow up, including, “Who has been affected by what happened, and how?” and finally “What do you think needs to be done to make things right?”

Now, you may be thinking that this is just too time-consuming to get into every time there’s a squabble over a ball. But think, by just asking how his or her behavior affects others – and giving that kid the chance to make it right – the seed is planted for students to think more clearly about why they are acting out and it gives them a chance to hear how their behavior impacted other people.

Most importantly, it teaches students the habit of making amends when they do make a mistake, and gives students who have been wronged the skills to speak up.

Is it Working?

But you don’t have to take my word for it. San Francisco’s public schools adopted the program in 2009 and since then schools throughout the district have begun embracing it. This has happened at many schools with extensive district support and organization, from the bottom up at others. As the practice spreads across the schoolyards, lunch tables and classrooms of the San Francisco Unified School District, suspensions and expulsions are decreasing. I do not see it as a coincidence.

But back to my daughter’s schoolyard: Just before school let out last year I saw a kid, one of those I noticed getting into trouble a lot, do something pretty mean to another kid. This time, like everyone in my kids’ school is getting trained to do now, I used the Restorative Practices approach. The exchange went well enough.

But then this same kid, the one who had just misbehaved done the mean action, walked back to me. What he said blew me away.

“You know, Ms. Amy, I was just thinking. What’s really bothering me is a problem I’m having with those other kids over there, and that’s why I was bugging somebody else. Can we have the same talk with them?”

We did. It got resolved. Amends were made. I will never forget that moment, the smiles on their faces as we simply got to the heart of the matter and worked it out.

This fall I’ve helped train a few other parents in Restorative Practices. I’m looking forward to getting back on the schoolyard with the kids at recess soon. As the year progresses, I’m excited to see how Restorative Practices makes a difference as they grow into young adults who can think clearly about how their actions affect others and make amends when they make a mistake.

Amy Merickel is a parent in SFUSD as well as an education consultant. She is an active member of the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) to the San Francisco Board of Education. For more information on Restorative Practices, go to www.sfusd.edu.

The Deadline to Enroll in SF Public Schools is January 22, 2013

Come to the annual SFUSD Enrollment Fair and learn about the public schools in San Francisco. Meet principals and parents, get information on tours, and learn more about the application process in this “one-stop shopping” event.

Saturday, Nov. 3 9:30 am – 2:30 pm at the Concourse Exhibition Center (620 7th St.)

Transportation: Muni lines 14-19, 10, 27, 47, Shuttle bus provided from Leola Havard EES (1520 Oakdale Ave.) Cesar Chavez ES (825 Shotwell St.) Gordon Lau ES (950 Clay St.)

More information at www.sfusd.edu/enroll