

# Stop School Bullying With Laws, Programs, People

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by [Ben Leichtling](#) in [All News](#), [Blogosphere News](#), [Education News](#), [Massachusetts News](#), [North American News](#), [Op-ed](#), [Society and Culture](#), [US News](#), [crime](#)

In their article in the New York Times, “There’s Only One Way to Stop a Bully,” Susan Engel and Marlene Sandstrom focus on the educational aspects of programs designed to stop school bullying. Let’s look at the whole picture and especially at the piece that’s usually missing from ineffective school programs:

- **Laws:** Over 40 states have passed laws to specify school bullying behaviors and to make them illegal. That’s a necessary step. Good laws give legal leverage to principals, school district administrators and teachers who try to stop school bullies. Good laws can also force reluctant school principals to implement and enforce effective programs to protect the targets of bullies.
- **Programs:** Laws, by themselves, will not stop bullying. Also, expensive, off-the-shell anti-bullying programs won’t stop bullies as long as the programs remain in their binders and are used merely as window dressing to show the appearance of compliance. Furthermore, programs that are focused on rehabilitating or therapeutizing bullies are ineffective. Since the only consequence for bullies in these programs is lengthy lectures, they have no reason to change their behavior and they victimize their targets more brutally. Real bullies are adept at manipulating the system and do-gooders who run it.
- **Effective Programs:** The motivating force behind these programs is proactive, responsible adults who don’t wait until a flagrant case is brought to them or they are surprised by a suicide. Effective programs educate teachers and all staff to observe, intervene and report bullying situations. These programs educate all staff, children and parents about behavior that’s acceptable, how that behavior will be rewarded and how to stop behavior that absolutely won’t be tolerated.

Effective programs have clear procedures and consequences at every step of the way. Ineffective programs move much too slowly; they protect the rights of bullies to have a lengthy process of rehabilitation while they give bullies continued access to their targets. Effective programs begin with protecting the victims; they move swiftly to remove bullies even if that interferes with the bully’s educational opportunities. These programs begin the first day of school and are reinforced weekly.

- **People:** Everyone must be involved in backing an effective program. Irresponsible adults pretend that they don’t know who the bullies are or where it occurs. Responsible adults will have a strong commitment to making their environment safe. The children must be taught what is expected of them and how to respond if they’re bullied or if they witness bullying. Kids must also have a way of finding help with temporary urges to act like a bully.

A critical group is parents. Principals need core groups of parents to support efforts to stop bullies, despite threats from bullying parents. Also, parents can lead the efforts to communicate and to set the tone of acceptable behavior with other parents. Vigilance and involvement are necessary to maintain the standards.

- **How to recognize real bullies.** If you think of all students as fitting on some version of a Bell curve, you’ll see that some kids won’t ever bully while most are in the middle group – they’ll accept the prevailing tone and behave in ways that are praised or tolerated. That’s where education and a tone of no-bullying can influence their behavior.

But no matter how much they are indoctrinated, they’ll try bullying when they’re having a bad day or a bad year in their personal lives. If they’re not stopped, they’ll be encouraged to continue and they’ll even act worse. If cliques get formed to pick on scapegoats, these middle-ground kids will be tempted to join or at least to look the other

way. If the individuals in the cliques are stopped and punished, kids in that middle group will tend to remove themselves from the cliques and to fit into the prevailing tone of civilized behavior.

None of the kids in those two groups are what I call real bullies. Real bullies are at the end of the curve. They come into school with bullying as their main tactic to get what they want and to assert themselves. They are predators who won't change because of lectures and indoctrination. They must be stopped or they'll set the tone of acceptable behavior and draw other kids into bullying and abuse.

- The missing and critical elements: Stop bullies; remove them; deal with their bullying parents. The "one way" Engel and Sandstrom focus on, like most experts in this field, is to educate bullies and encourage other students to befriend and involve the bullies in inclusive activities. They stress expressions like "be good to one another," "be kind," "cooperate," "relationship," "friendship" and "bullies require our help more than punishment. These are important for everyone to hear and they can set the tone for the kids in the first two groups but they're not enough to stop real-world bullies.

The missing elements that are critical to stop predators are swift and firm responses of adults to remove and isolate bullies, and to let parents of bullies know what is going on and what behavior will not be tolerated. Principals, teachers and staff set the tone by their actions, not their words. They show what behavior will be accepted and what won't. Too often, principals won't be straight forward, clear and firm with the parents of bullies. Too often, principals are afraid of bullying parents who threaten law suits and take the path of least resistance.

Good programs also teach children how to "defend" and "stand up" for each other. Good programs make children feel safe in becoming active witnesses instead of remaining passive bystanders or reluctant collaborators.

Stopping bullies is the first and necessary step to gain leverage to teach bullies that their old tactics won't get them what they want. It's more important than knowing if bullies are seeking love or power, or have low self-esteem, or simply don't know better. When bullies discover that their old tactics no longer work, they're more willing to learn new tactics to make their way in the world.

Real bullies are very strategic in their behavior; they harass, bully and abuse kids who the other kids won't protect. Or, like little scientists, they'll bully a kid once and keep score of that kid's response. If the targeted kid is ineffective in stopping a bully, bullies will take that as an invitation to do whatever they want with impunity. They'll continue to increase the frequency and severity of the abuse until they're stopped.

All kids know whether the adults will protect them or if they're on their own in a jungle in which power, not right, rules. Just as all students know who the bullies are and what areas of school are unsafe, examples of the consequences meted out to bullies will spread instantly.

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Resources Cited: [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/23/opinion/23engel.html?\\_r=1&emc=tnt&tntemail0=y](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/23/opinion/23engel.html?_r=1&emc=tnt&tntemail0=y),  
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Ben Leichtling, Ph.D. is author of the books and CDs "How to Stop Bullies in Their Tracks," "Parenting Bully-Proof Kids" and "Eliminate the High cost of Low Attitudes." He is available for coaching, consulting and speaking. To find practical, real-world tactics to stop bullies and bullying at home, school, work and in relationships, see his web site (<http://www.BulliesBeGone.com>) and blog (<http://www.BulliesBeGoneBlog.com>).