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## Kids learn to make bullies back off

Okolona Elementary program tackles issue

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Usually school district officials don't taunt students or tug on their hair, but Keith Schadt makes an exception when he's trying to prove a point.

Last week, he made fun of Tyron Brown's basketball skills and he messed up Stacy Wheeler's hair in front of the fifth-graders' classmates at Okolona Elementary School.

When the other students laughed at "Big Keith," he stopped them short.

"See, stop!" Schadt said to them all. "You've become part of the problem. It's your fault too that Big Keith will continue to pick on people. When you laugh, you're a third party to the bullying."

Schadt, who investigates student problems for Jefferson County Public Schools, spent two days last week at Okolona Elementary working with fourth- and fifth-grade classes on how to stop bullies and harassment.

The students watched a video, worked through role playing and discussed times they've been bullied. Schadt listened and gave advice based on district conduct codes and his experiences being bullied.

Inviting Schadt to work with her students is one of the ways principal Tracy Barber hopes to "knock out" bullying behavior before it starts this year, Barber said.

"We're in the honeymoon stage at the start of the year," Barber said. "They're all glad to be back now, but I want to give the students tools to use the rest of the year. I also don't think it makes sense to wait until middle school. This kind of behavior happens everywhere, so why not work on it from the beginning?"

Okolona Elementary students in other grades will go through workshops at different points in the year, Barber said.

"Being a bully is not right," said Stacy, 10. "You shouldn't laugh either because it could happen to you. That's not how you make any friends."

Tyron, 11, agreed.

"I don't think kids know what to do sometimes because we are scared," he said. "We should help each other and tell an adult."

Schadt said the investigators worked with 25 schools and about 5,000 students last year through different workshops.

"It used to be that bullying was thought of as a rite of passage," Schadt said. "We don't think like that anymore. We want to approach it aggressively so we can teach students how to resolve it, not put up with it."

The district has a multitude of programs about harassment and bullies for students, parents and staff members, said Pat Vissman, director of the family resource youth service programs. The school board approved a new option last week, she said.

The district plans to pay up to \$25,000 for Allan Beane, a speaker from Murray, Ky., who conducts bullying workshops nationwide, to work with middle and high school students this year, Vissman said.

"It is a lot of money, but any costs seem worth it for this," Vissman said. "We're much more aware of the effect this has on students and student performance."

Most schools have a plan or program, whether it's through the district or something the school has created, she said.

Vissman said the best way to find out what individual schools are doing about bullies and harassment is to call the school's principal.

Although there's no way to get rid of bullying, Schadt said, everyone should be working to lessen the presence of bullies.

"It's not about scaring students or parents," Schadt said. "It's about teaching kids what it means and what they can do to help themselves and each other."

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