

Northeastern teens say bullying exists

The district is giving students and parents tools to acknowledge and report incidents.

By MICHELLE STARR
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Most teens won't readily admit to something considered wrong, but 13-year-old Karli Landis and some of her friends were up front about bullying.

"I have," she said with a shrug and uneasy smile. Gasping, giggling or squirming from five other eighth-grade Northeastern Middle School students followed.

"I know I have," Karli said more confidently. "Everybody has."

After the shock settled, someone rhetorically asked the group if they hadn't said something about, for example, someone wearing an ugly shirt.

But bullying isn't about fashion, agreed the group that mostly wore an assortment of pinks, its wrists adorned with bracelets.

"If they're not in a certain group they might get made fun of," Stella Vitacco.

Karli added, "but not badly.

"Everyone knows that they make fun of some people," she said.

Laken Fritz said it happens when people aren't included.

Casey added casually, "We're friends with everybody."

She was referring to a group including the six and others from different homerooms for the assembly on bullying Thursday afternoon.

Kaitlin Soop and Erin Dubs quietly said they had never seen or been a part of bullying.

Northeastern Middle School used money from a safe and drug-free school grant to bring Virginia-based Merrill MerMan to teach about bullying.

The school also held an evening event for parents. He told the students that everyone in the room has been a victim,

bully or witness to bullying some time and ran through scenarios to recognize situations that aren't extreme, which he termed minor bullying.

Benjamin Ruby, assistant principal, said they haven't had a major incident and most eighth graders responded to a survey saying they had never been bullied or bullied only once. He said it was good news and the school wants to keep it that way.

Ruby said the assembly's goal is to make them feel more comfortable so they are able to come forward to tell parents, teachers and administrators for help.

Jensen Eberhart, 13, told her parents, teachers and administration last year when 10 to 15 eighth graders were teasing her.

"I had been wearing my glasses and they called me four eyes," Jensen said. "They called me a nerd, they made fun of my clothes."

They received detention and internal suspensions. The bullying stopped, she said.

Though she's a little worried about running into them next year, she said confidently that she will tell an adult and she believes it will help.

MerMan told the students bullies don't go away. They are in high school, college and the workforce.

Ruby said he agreed, and the school also is trying to teach students how to ignore a bully so they will move on.

The school invited state Rep. Keith Gillespie, R-Hellam Township to talk about a girl he went to school with who committed suicide because of the teasing. Ruby said Gillespie also was fitting because he helped introduce HB178 to establish policies on harassment, bullying and intimidation in schools.

Ruby said students are living in a different time from their parents. Children used to settle disputes out back, but today schools are trying to avoid suicides and other violence like shootings, he said.

Fifty-seven percent of the staff believed students and parents need to know more about bullying and how to report it, based on the survey Ruby took this year.

MerMan said parents could inadvertently teach bullying. For example, they could use names to describe weakness.

Bullying also doesn't exist solely on school grounds. It extends to the walk home or after school activities.

"It's not a school problem," MerMan said. "It's a community problem."

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