

Education

School Bullies: A Little Philosophy For Children Can Go A Long Way

Ethnic studies, p4c program foster safe learning environments in Hawaii schools.

By Nathan Eagle    / July 31, 2012

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Editor's Note: *This is the second story of an occasional [series on bullying in Hawaii schools](#). Bullying is more of a problem in Hawaii than in many other states yet Hawaii officials struggle to address it.*

Hawaii school officials may be reluctant to talk about the state's [stunning statistics](#) on bullying, but teachers say effective programs have been unearthed that could serve as models for the rest of the district.

[Philosophy for Children](#), which promotes peace in the classroom, is one example. Kailua High School and Waikiki Elementary have successfully deployed it and educators point at a profound shift in the learning environment over the past decade.

Chad Miller, Hawaii's 2012 [Teacher of the Year](#), said when he started working at Kailua, fights were a weekly occurrence. Eight years later, he said fighting on campus has become rare.

“Bullying is what we see, but the problem is below the surface,” Miller said. “It’s this lack of skills.”

[Mental Health America of Hawaii](#) Executive Director Marya Grambs shares those sentiments. The Honolulu-based nonprofit aims to find healthy ways for kids to handle bullying and for adults to prevent it.

“There’s a knee-jerk reaction to just punish the bully. That’s so scary,” she said. “Yeah, they’re doing really bad things but there’s usually a reason why.”

Ben Lukey serves as a Philosopher in Residence through a partnership with the University of Hawaii. While he primarily focuses on developing the Philosophy for Children program at Waikiki and Kailua, over the past couple years he has taken it to interested teachers at other schools around the island like Mililani High and Kuhio Elementary.

“It’s not about just creating an anti-bullying program,” he said. “In the social pipe of bullying, it’s difficult to follow a script. You’ve got to try to create opportunities where the students see each other as people and not as targets.”

Mental Health America’s Stop Youth Suicide and Bullying Project has trained adults and kids since 2007 to raise awareness and teach prevention and intervention skills. The nonprofit is motivated in part by statistics that show a teen in Hawaii is more than twice as likely to attempt suicide as a teen elsewhere in the United States; bullying is often cited as the reason.

Grambs said part of the solution could come from Hawaii incorporating anti-bullying concepts into the curriculum. This is what Kailua High School and Waikiki Elementary have done, though not to specifically address bullying.

“Education should be about creating good people, not good test-takers,” Miller said. “I think we’ve lost that focus. It’s a national issue.”

‘Everyone Coming Together’

The [Philosophy for Children program](#), or p4c as it's commonly called, is a worldwide movement. It strives to build an intellectually safe community based on four pillars: community, inquiry, philosophy and reflection.

Student engagement is key, Miller said; the kids need to feel comfortable in the classroom to share their thoughts on the subject at hand. The program helps students develop skills that foster mutual respect and inquisitive minds, he added.

"I don't think anyone wants to be a bully," Miller said. "So we need to create environments where kids learn to think responsibly and empathetically."

The ethnic studies program at Kailua High School works in conjunction with p4c to create intellectually safe environments. The school of roughly 900 students is over half Native Hawaiian, 11 percent White, 10 percent Filipino, 9 percent Japanese and 4 percent Samoan, according to [2011 enrollment data](#).

Oahu native Amber Makaiau helped develop and teach the course. Using some initial seed money, a pilot program was developed. What started as an elective became a required class to graduate, the only one of its kind in the country.

"It's a dramatically different place than it was 10 years ago, but it's taken the whole of everyone coming together and being on the same page," said Makaiau, who last year won the [Teaching Tolerance Award for Excellence in Culturally Responsive Teaching](#).

This comes at a time when other states hesitate to teach ethnic studies. Arizona, for instance, won't give schools millions of dollars in state money if they teach ethnic studies, [claiming it promotes resentment](#) toward a class of people.

Aside from incorporating p4c concepts in every class and requiring the ethnic studies course, Makaiau said Kailua High School has successfully transformed due to strong parent collaboration. She said it was the community that identified the issue — not bullying in so many words, but the

need to improve conflict resolution skills to reduce violence — that led to the change.

The school stepped up with a financial lift from a federal grant, state funding and nonprofits. Teacher training and community meetings ensued and a culturally appropriate ethnic studies course was born.

“We knew it had to be unique to the kids at our schools, not some cut-and-paste bullying program,” said Makaiau, who’s out on maternity leave. “These are the types of programs that become embedded, part of the school culture, not some passing fad.”

Like Miller, she said it’s all about how people relate to one another. The course teaches kids how to be aware and responsible for the language they use with one another, but also inquire within to examine personal biases.

Makaiau has had some students, for instance, who on the first day of class are yelling profanities across the room at other kids.

“That’s how they’re relating to one another, but they learn some rules on how we engage each other and I’ve seen tremendous growth,” she said. “We create a safe place where we can talk about issues, such as if it’s OK for men to hit women or what it means to be local. By the end of the year, I’ve had kids say, ‘I’ve really become aware of how I have these negative assumptions about white people,’ for instance.”

The first day of class this school year at Kailua was Monday. Miller, who teaches English, said he plans to spend the first three days discussing intellectual safety with his freshmen and seniors. After defining the term Tuesday, Wednesday’s lesson will focus on examples.

“We talk about what it is and isn’t,” he said. “Making fun of someone is not intellectually safe. Nor is anything that’s taking away from listening, like updating your Facebook status on your phone or chatting to the person next to you. That’s saying you don’t value my ideas or me as a person.”

This is a concept teachers return to throughout the year.

“If classrooms aren’t intellectually safe, then I don’t think real learning can happen,” Miller said.

Makaiau said it’s important to understand that a single program or class can’t transform a school; it’s all those working parts coming together that makes the difference.

“The whole school has to be on board with whatever this program is about and practice it in the classroom,” she said. “Then once you transform the culture in the schools, you transform the culture at-large. The schools are just mirrors of the culture.”

About the Author



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