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## Students send bullies a message

By Katherine Mortimer - Vernon Morning Star - February 24, 2008

On a recent Friday afternoon at Vernon secondary school, the sound of laughter, making weekend plans and rushing from one class to the next has been replaced by the sound of a powerful video being shown in every classroom, aimed at helping students understand bullying.

The video has been put together by VSS teacher Mike Sawka, who heads up the school's Effective Behavior Support (EBS) team, which has been working since September to address behavior issues that typically exist in schools.

"I hand-picked students that I saw had the potential to be fantastic leaders," he said. "Our big project and efforts for the last couple of months have been all centred around dealing with the issue of bullying in our school," he said.

Sawka said the team began with projects such as littering and attendance, but bullying is the issue the team has been working towards, in the hopes of improving awareness, and ultimately, eliminating it as much as possible.

"We wanted to take it seriously. It's something we as teachers don't see as much, because bullying tends not to happen when we're around," he said. "But we also wanted to show kids that it's not OK to do nothing when bullying is taking place or it will continue."

The EBS team — Taylor Bourgeois, Beth Wylie, Alyssa Kylo, Garrett Nickel, Nikki Golding, Allie Keeley and Leah Goldie — has come up with several powerful methods of getting the message out. On National Bully Awareness Day Feb. 15, the school's teachers and team members wore black T-shirts emblazoned with a variety of sayings, such as "I'll Be a Hero," "It Only Takes One," and "It Happens Here." The day began with team members holding up signs with the same words in a silent demonstration that piqued students' curiosity and had them asking questions.

It was all designed to get students talking and to prepare them for the powerful video, which Sawka put together using a variety of images taken from YouTube and around the school.

The video opens with some startling words, in an effective use of white titles on a black background, set to music, "One-third of today's youth live with a daily fear. It's having to walk through those doors Monday to Friday."

The video goes on to explain some of the forms that bullying takes, including emotional, physical and mental, and that low self-esteem is one of the main causes of bullying.

According to Norwegian researcher Dr. Dan Olweus, "Bullying...is a pattern of repeated aggressive behaviour, with negative intent, directed from one child to another where there is a power imbalance."

The video explains that bullying frequently takes place with a bystander present. Following the video, each class held a discussion to talk about the forms that bullying takes, examples students have witnessed at VSS and how onlookers

contribute to bullying.

As well, a box has been installed in the office, where students are invited to write notes about what they have seen, leave it in the box, and hopefully begin to make a difference in the school. The "I Can Be a Hero" drop box will be checked daily, with administrators following up on all notes.

"We've got choices to make every day, from clothing to the music you listen to," said teacher Mike Allen, who also narrates the video. "You can choose whether to stand by and do nothing, or you can help make a difference."

Sawka said kids fear being branded a "rat," if they talk about their experiences with bullying. But he said it's essential that those who are bullied keep talking about it until it stops.

"As of today, hopefully this will be the start," he said. "I would like to see this become a district-wide event, but I'm encouraged by what I've seen here today."

Next up for Sawka and his team is to re-work the video using photographs taken at the school, with the students holding up their signs.

"This is a good opportunity for the whole school to make a difference," said Grade 12 student Taylor Bourgeois. "Everybody has been bullied at some point — I changed schools because of bullying."

He said one student expressed surprise that VSS was home to bullying.

"This is not a one-week issue. And I think it's going to be successful at VSS, because everyone at our school is so involved."

For Grade 11 student Alyssa Kylo this is a chance for the students themselves to take a stand against bullying.

"The big message of the video is that you have the power to stop it yourself, and that you're not alone," she said. "People think nothing can be done, and it's been going on for so long, but we can have an impact."

Grade 12 student Jamie Ames found the video powerful and said she'd like to see its message offered in the elementary schools, to target bullying before students get to high school.

"People don't have the awareness, but I have no problem stepping in when I see someone being bullied," she said.

Grade 12 student Nina Gretzmacher said it's the Grade 8 and 9 students who seem to be most affected by bullying,

"They still haven't found their place in the school, but if we as older kids step in and say 'this isn't cool,' then maybe we can stop it," she said. "And I think it's important that we have the discussion about this. And it's important to understand that the sidekicks who stand by doing nothing are as much to blame."

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