

Bullying incident not unique
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The bullying that YouTube viewers saw from a Prince George school this weekend is not unique, authorities around the city told The Citizen Tuesday.

It was remarkable only in that it was videotaped and posted on the YouTube website and demonstrated in a five-minute package not only what typical bullying looks like, but also what ideal victim behaviour looked like.

Ironically, the incident that pitted lone 12-year-old Corbin Linklater against an antagonistic group of older students at Heather Park Middle School took place during national anti-bullying week. The Red Cross has been active all year with its RespectED program, which included a visit to Heather Park this year. Prince George co-ordinator April Fox said the theme for anti-bullying week is The Bystander, and that was one of the most chilling aspects of the attack on Linklater: all the students who did nothing to stop it.

"In 85 per cent of bullying instances there are bystanders," Fox said. "Peer pressure is phenomenal in the adult world, let alone for school kids. We have to set examples as adults to pass along the message that intervening and reporting what happened is the right thing to do. You can use humour to intervene, if that feels safe. You may enlist your friends to intervene as a group or nip things in the bud. What's important is to support the victim. And victims need to know it is not their fault and what the bullies are saying is not true."

Heather Park is certainly not unique by hosting a bully incident, Fox added, every school in the city has equal incidents. Nor are these bullies remarkable. "We are all capable of poor behaviour," Fox said. Red Cross averages are that an incident of school bullying happens every seven minutes somewhere in Canada.

A culture of bullying is what prompted the provincial Ministry of Education to legislate codes of conduct for all schools in B.C., and also provided a guide to help districts establish codes of conduct that meet provincial standards. Minister Shirley Bond attempted to watch the video on YouTube but the website had pulled it by noon Monday. Her staff saw it, however, and studied the incident.

"Bullying is clearly not appropriate and my heart goes out to the student who was bullied and his family," Bond said. "I understand the district is working to ensure that all students at Heather Park Middle School understand that bullying is inappropriate in our schools and that it is not acceptable for students to be bystanders to these actions. I understand the district is working towards enhancing its code of conduct to see that incidents of this nature are not repeated."

The RCMP are actively watching the incident as well, to ensure there is no such thing as retribution or vigilantism at the school.

"My understanding is that due to the age of the students, the fact the school moved so quickly with disciplinary action, and the clear remorse shown by some of the kids involved, that we are not pursuing charges at this time, but we are watching," said Prince George RCMP spokesman Const. Gary Godwin.

Godwin, Const. Terry Fehr and Cpl. Dale Girling were together at Heather Park in May 2006, for the province's first ever red serge graduation of students for the BRAVE program, the RCMP's anti-bully seminar that was invented by Girling in Prince George.

"We had 250-plus students graduate that day from Heather Park, and it still stands as our largest class. Heather Park administrators were leaders in bringing us in and getting so many students into that training. Usually we only do a classroom at a time in schools, and there are four schools in the district undergoing BRAVE training right now."

A big emphasis of BRAVE (Bully Resistance and Anti-Violence Education) is turning bystanders into interveners, Godwin said.

"Without these kids gathering, a lot of it wouldn't happen. The bully wants a forum. That's what YouTube is," Godwin said. "Our research shows that 60 per cent of identified bullies by age 24 have a criminal record. We would rather work with students and teachers to try to prevent that, so we don't have to deal with the offshoots of bullying later."

BRAVE research shows also that bullying stats go up at a school when the course is taught. It is a great sign, Godwin said, because what it really shows is not more bullying but more students empowered to recognize it and report it.

"You have to tell someone you trust, and you have to keep telling until something shifts," Fox said.

Part of changing the culture of bystanders is a creative contest being run by the Red Cross right now. Students can write a radio commercial on the anti-bullying message. For more information log on to www.Standup2Bullying.com.

Schools, youth groups and parents are urged to call both the Red Cross (564-6566) or the RCMP Community Policing Centre (561-3366) for information on education programs for your students.