



Creating a Caring Majority

SUMMARY

The Caring Majority program teaches sixth graders to be ambassadors who become helpful allies to their peers in a school-wide effort to eradicate bullying. Each cohort of trained caring majority ambassadors helps its younger counterparts to collaborate in creating a more harmonious school climate.

From the first day of school at

Boardman, first graders are taught our motto, “At School 9E, we don’t say you can’t play.” Boys and girls skip around at recess, pigtails flying, legs swinging on monkey bars. Smiles abound. Children’s voices call out, “Come play!” All is right with the world ... until one day, when all is not right. It’s an inevitable day ... a day when a child feels unwanted, whether another child isn’t following our school’s anthem, and tells him that he can’t play, or when a child conveniently ends the game of “House,” or soccer when another child approaches. Enter the Caring Majority.

**At Boardman School 9E
We have a Caring Majority
No need to bully
No need to shout
Peer mediation will work things out
Use good manners
And be polite
Treat others well
And they’ll treat you right
We’re Boardman School 9E
We’re Boardman
A Great Place to Be!!!**
— *To the tune of George Benson’s
“The Greatest Love of All”*

The plight of the unaccepted child, the one who was chosen last, the one who was not invited to birthday parties, the one who was called unkind names, or

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the one who was merely ignored, was brought to our attention again and again by parents as well as by the children themselves. We now know that social and emotional learning plays an important role in our classrooms. Helping our students recognize, understand, and regulate their feelings not only helps engage students in learning, but has a major influence on preventing bullying in our classrooms (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011).

Columbine came and the plight of the victim turned bully or perpetrator was brought to national and international headlines. Currently, 49 states have passed anti-bullying laws. New York state legislators finally took note with the unfortunate suicide of Tyler Clemente and many others, and the persistent and important lobbying of NYSUT and groups such as the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). Many pending bills finally became laws. While the research tells us that the bullying which takes place in the lives of the gay, lesbian, and transgender children far surpasses incidents in the heterosexual population (Brackett, et al., 2011) we know that this dilemma is widespread and can affect any student population.

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New York state definition of bullying

The definition of bullying is wide and varied, and it's hard to find two states with the same description. The New York State Education Department suggests the following language for the code of conduct in each school district:

"Harassment/bullying" means the creation of a hostile environment by conduct or by threats, intimidation or abuse, including cyberbullying as defined in Education Law §11(8), that

(a) has or would have the effect of unreasonably and substantially interfering with a student's educational performance, opportunities or benefits, or mental, emotional or physical well-being; or

(b) reasonably causes or would reasonably be expected to cause a student to fear for his or her physical safety; or

(c) reasonably causes or would reasonably be expected to cause physical injury or emotional harm to a student; or

(d) occurs off school property and creates or would foreseeably create a risk of substantial disruption within the school environment, where it is foreseeable that the conduct, threats, intimidation or abuse might reach school property.

(e) For purposes of this definition, the term "threats, intimidation or abuse" shall include verbal and non-verbal actions. (Education Law §11[7])

(f) *"Cyberbullying"* means harassment/bullying, as defined above, through any form of electronic communication.

(From: Amended Dignity for All Students Act: Student Discrimination, Harassment and Bullying Prevention and Intervention, NYSED.gov, 2013.)

There are three major players in the theatre of harassment: the bully (perpetrator), the victim (target) and the bystander (observer). Yet, it is the minority of kids who are using their power to inflict the pain.

Dynamics of Bullying

Bullying is an age-old problem, one that causes thousands of children to suffer through childhood and adolescence. In order for bullying to occur, there must be what is described as an “imbalance of power” and a desire to be in control of a situation. In addition, behaviors typically occur repeatedly and over time. In many cases a person who exhibits bullying behaviors wants the approval of the bystander as an audience. Bullying behaviors fall into the following categories:

- physical bullying: using physical means to show power (hitting, punching, kicking, etc.), damaging /stealing property
- verbal bullying: name calling, teasing, taunting, making offensive/discriminatory remarks, verbally threatening or intimidating
- social/emotional/relational bullying: intentionally excluding others from social interactions, spreading rumors, gossiping, ostracizing, alienating, using threatening looks or gestures, extortion
- cyberbullying: sending insulting and threatening messages through social media

There are three major players in the theatre of harassment: the bully (perpetrator), the victim (target) and the bystander (observer). Yet, it is the minority of kids who are using their power to inflict the pain. The majority of our students are bystanders so it made great sense to look to the power of the bystanders for the answers. Establishing new social norms in our schools that reward “upstanding” and frown upon “bullying” behaviors might hold the key.

Understanding the Bystander

There are many reasons that children who stand by and watch do not intervene. First and foremost, they fear becoming the next victim. They have watched what happened to the targeted child, and above all else do not want that happening to them. In addition, they feel powerless to help the victim because they have not been taught the strategies to help.

Even the youngest children in elementary school understand the concept of the bystander. They do because they have all been in the situation of passively watching bullying behaviors take place. When asked why they don’t speak up, you invariably hear the same answers, “I am afraid the bully will make me the next person he teases,” or “I am afraid he will turn all my

friends against me,” or “I don’t know what to say to the bully.” The older children may say, “I have reported it to adults before, but nothing ever happens. Even when the bully gets a consequence, he does it again, and again, and again.” The children reveal that they feel powerless and that they do not have the words or tools to stand up to the bully.

Evolution of the Caring Majority

Social learning theory postulates that students who have undergone and survived relevant experiences, are more credible role models for their peers. Interactions with peers who are successfully coping with their experiences result in positive changes in behavior (Salzer & Shear, 2002).

Putting theory into action, our work with creating a “Caring Majority” of students who speak up against bullying behaviors began. If the silent majority of kids — those that watch bullying behaviors take place — stand by helplessly, then they are implicitly allowing this to happen. If we can empower the silent majority to reduce the fears bullies create, then we could potentially strip the bullies of their power. It is the influence of the silent majority then, which would make the difference in the lives of so many.

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Theatre of harassment

The perpetrator

Let’s first take a look at the characteristics of the child with the bullying behaviors. Note that we hesitate to call this child a “bully” as the term is sometimes over used and can cause serious incrimination. Behaviors include a lack of empathy toward others, which typically develops in children around the age of 8. A child that displays these behaviors is physically and verbally aggressive and continually seeks and needs to feel power in relationships. He is easily slighted when not given this power by his classmates and may provoke fights when there has been little or no reason. Contrary to popular thought, the child with bullying behaviors has average levels of self-esteem (Olweus, 1993).

The target

The targeted child, or victim, falls into two categories. The passive victim often suffers from social anxiety, lacking social skills needed to defend herself against bullying behaviors. She is a people pleaser, is compliant and fears confrontation. The provocative victim is sometimes not recognized as a victim at all and sometimes falls into a bully/victim cycle. He is restless, irritating to others and does not have the skills to defend himself. This child is often diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (Olweus, 1993).

The bystander

In schools, it is the bystander who hears and sees what is happening, yet does not usually intervene. The data indicates that 85 percent of students are neither bully nor victim, but instead stand by as their classmates are either physically abused or emotionally alienated (Garrity, Jens, Porter, & Sager, 2002). According to Sagarese and Gianetti (2003), “bystanders make or break bullying episodes.” A Canadian study of student bystanders found that 43 percent of respondents said they tried to help a victim. The remaining 57 percent stood by and watched, but did nothing. Of that number 33 percent confessed that they should have attempted to help a victim but didn’t. Finally, 24 percent responded, “It was none of my business.”

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The findings about bullying were shared with our sixth graders. Interested students were asked to write a letter telling why they wanted to join our school's efforts to end bullying behaviors. The process evolved over the years to include an application that students complete describing their understanding of caring behaviors, as well as their desire to stand up for others. Even in the early days of the program, many children in the sixth grade volunteered to help out.

Their letters were inspiring as they shared the good deeds they had already accomplished in their short lives. They had volunteered in soup kitchens; they had donated their hair to Locks of Love; they had given up their snacks for a friend who did not have one. Based on the concept of a caring majority, students learned their help was needed in assisting the school community to turn around the children who stand by and watch bullying behaviors. They learned that it is important to speak up and help stamp out bullying (Garrity, C, Jens, K, Porter, W. & Sager, 2002). First though, they needed to be trained in how to do this and how they could then transfer what they learned to the other students in the school.

The children waited anxiously, wondering if they would be accepted as caring ambassadors. They received a

confidential, congratulatory letter, letting them know that they had been chosen for a special job in our school. The letter explained that with this position came a big responsibility, one that required their "best selves" to be displayed every day, because they were now role models for the rest of the students in our school. Students were assured that the adults would not be disappointed or angry if they didn't want to take on this big job. It involved missing some time from class for training, and many hours of recess time for small group work as they gathered information for their presentations and skits. They were also told any work missed in class had to be made up.

Each year sixth graders take this responsibility seriously and are proud for being chosen. The congratulatory letter asks for a parent and student signature agreeing that the student accepts the position and its duties, and that the parent approves as well.

The application asks: *Why do you want to be a Caring Majority Ambassador?* One sixth grader explained:

I want to be a Caring Majority Ambassador because I believe in being an up-stander and helping people. I get along and work well with adults and my peers. I am an excellent listener and I love to stand up for what is right.

When asked the next two questions, *What character traits do you possess that would make you a good Caring Majority Ambassador? How have you been a positive role model for others?*, the same student replied,

I have a big heart. I am very reliable, trustworthy, and I feel comfortable helping others. I always put myself in someone else's shoes and try to see the situation from their view. I am not judgmental and I enjoy leadership roles. I am involved in peer mediation and Kiwanis-Kids. It would be an honor to be selected to be a Caring Majority Ambassador.

Caring Majority Ambassador Training

Bullying prevention and positive school climate is not something new at our school. We aren't just beginning to have discussions about bullying, we are actively involved in its eradication. Every adult and child in our building, every day, lives with the knowledge that when we walk through our school's doors, we walk into a place of safety, where every person is respected, and valued.

With the pressure for high student performance, it is becoming more and more difficult to pull children from class. The sixth grade teachers meet

with the principal to determine a good day for training. The teachers realize the importance of maintaining a caring culture and know that the more comfortable children feel in school, the greater chance for academic growth. This is evidence that the Caring Majority has become an integral part of our school.

As we begin our day of training, the children are welcomed and thanked for volunteering to work to make our school a caring and welcoming place. They are also commended for their commitment and willingness to give up some of their time for our mission. They always share their own stories, and a bond begins to develop within the group.

We discuss the seriousness of bullying in schools, and share poignant videos about what can happen. They already know quite a bit from their own experiences as well as what they have seen in the news about suicides and bully-cides. It is important for the children to realize that bullying is rarely the sole reason for these suicides, and that there are other psychological and sociological components. However, it is stressed that we would never want to hear that a child's unkindness to another ever had a part in another child's desperate acts. A Power Point presentation gives information about

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Being an Upstander

Directly Intervene

by discouraging the bully, defending the victim, or redirecting the situation away from the bullying.

Get Help

by rallying support from peers to stand up against bullying or by reporting the bullying to adults.

the causes of bullying (psychological, familial, school), the characteristics of the bully, the victim, and the bystander, and the statistics about bullying in schools. The focus of our discussions is the importance of turning the children who stand by and watch into students who take a stand against bullying. We talk about turning the *bystanders* into *upstanders*.

Through discussion and role playing the new ambassadors realize that being able to speak up for their friends takes courage. They learn about a study done by Charisse Nixon and Stan Davis, called *The Youth Voice Research Project*. In this study, 13,000 targeted students were surveyed to find out the most effective peer interventions. The results indicated that things got better for the target when their peers did the following: spent time with them, talked to them, helped them get away, and called them after the incident to see how they were doing. The least effective interventions included: blaming the target, ignoring the situation, and confronting the bully. (Davis & Nixon, 2010).

We also use the term “allies” to define the children who *befriend* the targeted child, and suggest that at least two or three allies work together when confronting a bullying situation. It stands to reason, that if bullying behaviors involve an imbalance of power, with the bully wielding this power, it will take more than one child to ask him or her to stop. If a group of children come to the aid of a target, it begins to strip the bully of his powers, eventually leaving him alone, with no audience for his unkindness.

The Ambassadors Work

Once given the background knowledge about bullying and strategies to empower the bystanders, the ambassadors get to work. They divide into small teams and through consensus choose a lower grade level as their audience. They take the information they have learned and create their own PowerPoint presentations and skits to inform their younger classmates how to become upstanders and members of the Caring Majority in our school. They take their work very seriously, and come during their recess time to develop their plan. They are helped with editing and revising their presentations and when ready, a grade level presentation is scheduled for each of the groups. It’s great to watch how they take ownership of the work they are doing and how they feel responsible for imparting what they have learned to their younger classmates.

The ambassadors bond with the younger students, as they ask the children to relate experiences of times they felt left out or of times that someone said something unkind that hurt their feelings. Younger students were also asked about times they saw feelings being hurt, and what they did in those situations. Not surprisingly, most students were bystanders; the children who hear and see what is happening, yet do not intervene.

Each new group of ambassadors is amazing in their commitment and dedication to teaching all the children in our school how to become *upstanders*.

The younger students listen attentively to the ambassadors as they stand in front of them teaching them about kindness, caring, and inclusion and as they give them the tools to become helpful allies to their peers. Through these conversations they come to understand that the bystanders provide the audience a bully craves and the silent acceptance that allows bullies to continue their hurtful behavior. They realize that passively accepting bullying by watching and doing nothing is not acceptable. They learn that encouraging the bullying by laughing or cheering actually makes them complicit in the bullying situation, without having been the one who actually initiated it. Through discussion, the ambassadors agree that the key to stopping bullying

would be to turn the *silent majority of bystanders into a caring majority of upstanders*.

The ambassadors continue the work with their young students throughout the year. They visit their classrooms, share lunch tables and spend time during recess. They are there as role models and friends to their

younger classmates. They listen to their problems and help them find solutions as they develop powerful and lifelong bonds.

“The children in my class know that the Caring Majority ambassadors can be counted on, that they have now become a part of their support system, along with their parents and teachers. Students need only ask if they can talk to an ambassador, and it will be arranged. The help and guidance given by these ambassadors, their peers, can often be more valuable than that offered by an adult.”



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Creating a Caring Majority



In the Classroom

From first grade on, children know about the Caring Majority. Many aspire to one day be a Caring Majority ambassador. Each year, two or three ambassadors are assigned to each room, and become part of the fabric of that classroom. Just like the teacher has a leadership role in the classroom, so do the ambassadors.

Before beginning this effort in any setting, it is essential that the school culture that the importance of a safe and nurturing environment. Without mutual respect among all constituents, asking our students to stand up for each other will not be successful. With high-stakes testing and teacher evaluations that now have so much importance for both students and teachers, everyone should understand the value of an environment of caring and trust. Schools have to be welcoming places.

It is crucial to be particularly aware of the child who is not easily assimilated with his peers, who may be lacking in social skills, and to give him an extra special greeting each morning. Knowing that someone is happy to see

us each day adds incentive to wanting to be in school to learn. The common element among schools reporting an increase in academic success, improved quality of relationships between teachers and students, and a decrease in problem behavior, is a *systematic process* for promoting children's [and teachers'] social and emotional growth. As one Boardman teacher explained:

“Our feelings and our attitudes affect the whole room. Even if we don't realize what we are doing or how we're behaving, I think we send out signals subconsciously and the children pick them up. As soon as I focused on Farah's positive characteristics and spotlighted her in the classroom, everyone else looked at her that way, too ... She is now branching out to other children. If the girls she seeks out aren't very receptive, she joins another group. The other girls seem happy to have her. Things really changed for Farah. There is no question.”

Teachers understand that by modeling positive and supportive interactions, by providing opportunities for students to work together in the classroom, and by developing class rules that value kindness and preclude exclusion, they can support the development of positive peer relationships and minimize harassment.

Another teacher knew her change in practice was important and effective when she revealed that her student was opening up and trusting her more.

“When you get to know a child better, when you listen deeply to what he has to share, you start to understand his life. You can’t help but feel for him. When he opened up it was wonderful. I have to attribute this change to my own change in belief about my role in the classroom and to my own change in actions.

Principals and educators must continue to realize that to reach the academic goals we are striving for, we cannot forget the social and emotional needs of our students. The time spent creating positive relationships among all members of our school community is valuable and essential. Mentoring programs such as the one described here are easily transportable and can play a vital role in any school community. Students clearly respect the opinions of their peers, and with proper guidance from caring adults who give their students the autonomy to share ideas with their classmates, programs such as this one have a powerful effect in our schools.

Positive School Culture (what we do in schools) = Positive School Climate (how we feel in schools)

- Display warmth, positive tone, interest and involvement
- Talk to each other and students with respect and understanding
- Alert other staff members if they are displaying unacceptable behavior toward a student
- Structure activities to minimize opportunities for exclusion

Conclusion

A school community that values the importance of kindness and inclusion of all students and teaches strategies for standing up for others understands the importance of creating a positive school climate. Coupled with meaningful integration of social and emotional learning strategies into existing curriculum, valuable strides can be made in creating citizens with respect for the diversity and uniqueness of all members of our society.

Talking to the children encourages our work to continue. When asked how they feel when they stand up for others, some replied:

- I feel like a hero when I save a person’s social life ... I feel like that person looks up to me and I know then that I am really a part of the Caring Majority.
- I feel great because I know I’ve done something great today.

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Creating a Caring Majority

We are showing children how to stand tall, how to stand up for themselves and others, and how to stand up for what's right.

- When I help I am not scared because I know my friends and classmates will support me.
- I feel anger at the bully and sadness for the victim. Sometimes I am afraid to ask the bully to stop. This year, I'll speak up whenever I feel it is necessary.

The Caring Majority program is part of our efforts to support positive school climate as the backbone of our bullying prevention plan. Our work to develop empathy and caring in our students has reaped great rewards, not only for our students today, but for them throughout their lifetimes. Heightening understanding about recognizing and regulating emotions, coupled with our students learning strategies to stand up for themselves and others has had a valuable impact on our school. Any child at Boardman Elementary School can tell you that life around our school means being kind, caring and inclusive to all. Our school song says it well, "Visit our school and you will see, we have a Caring Majority."

The Caring Majority plays a powerful role in teaching children that the power of the bystander is one solution to the age-old problem of bullying. At Boardman, we are showing children how to stand tall, how to stand up for themselves and others, and how to stand up for what's right.

We are proud of the culture of caring that is evident in our classrooms, hallways, lunchroom, and playgrounds. This is validated by parents as they report their children's understandings of positive relationships with friends and family. We encourage all members of our school community, staff members as well as parents, to model the behaviors that we espouse and hope that our students exhibit the same behaviors in their daily lives. Once this is achieved, we will make progress in changing the dynamics of bullying.

If you are interested in starting a Caring Majority program at your school, feel free to contact us at *bullyinterventionexperts@gmail.com*. We are happy to help!

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