

# Effective Research-based Solutions to Bullying

Ohio Community Service-learning

Richard E Rieser MS JD



## Introduction

Any school can be successful in reducing the number of harmful student interactions that occur in the school environment. Schools with ever-present bullying problems often lack the proper planning, team development or resources required for success. Service-learning provides a comprehensive positive social learning framework that schools can use to create an effective anti-bullying program.<sup>1</sup> Quality Service-learning programs incorporate the essential elements of effective anti-bullying practices, including civic engagement, acquisition of leadership skills, and personal/social development.

## Solutions

Recent surveys<sup>2</sup> conclude that the most effective bullying prevention and intervention programs are multi-tiered and integrated efforts with the following components:

- 1) An ultimate objective with ongoing goals
- 2) Strong support from parents and teachers
- 3) High levels of student participation in the initiation of the program
- 4) A multifaceted approach that targets the bullying issue with several well-coordinated strategies
- 5) An approach supported by research or best practices such as Service-learning

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<sup>1</sup> Shelley H. Billig, Using evidence to make the case for service-learning as an academic achievement intervention in K-12 schools, RMC Research Corporation

<sup>2</sup> Bradshaw, C.P., & Waasdorp, T. E. (2009). Measuring and changing a “culture of bullying”. School Psychology Review, 38, 356-361.

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Consistent with Service-learning standards, effective anti-bully programs should begin with an assessment of the school's strengths and weaknesses with input from students, parents and teachers. Schools that understand and enhance their strengths will achieve progress more rapidly than those that do not.

For example, programs that focus primarily on punitive measures to make their school safe such as zero tolerance practices can actually increase the instances of problem behavior.<sup>3</sup> Such interventions have been proven to be ineffective and counterproductive versus teaching students prosocial, adaptive skills to replace the counterproductive behaviors.<sup>4</sup>

Some schools are currently utilizing some form of positive social learning to address school culture problems that interfere with student learning. The term positive social learning encompasses a broad range of approaches and tools, some more effective than others.

Service-learning, however, is an effective positive social learning intervention that is specific in its application and mirrors best practice anti-bully programming.<sup>5</sup>

- 1) Service-learning promotes the necessary partnerships required to support an ongoing student effort to reduce bullying. Every successful school campaign against bullying has a strong team leading the charge.<sup>6</sup>
- 2) Anti-bully programs that start with a student-led initiative achieve their goals much more quickly and effectively than those that don't.<sup>7</sup>
- 3) An effective campaign against bullying requires a coordinated, long-term effort between students, parents and teachers.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> American Psychological Association (2006). Zero Tolerance Policies Can Have Unintended Effects, APA report finds. Retrieved on May 26, 2010 from [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)

<sup>4</sup> National Association of Social Workers (2009). *Social Work Speaks: National Association of Social Workers Policy Statements 2009-2012*. Eighth Edition. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

<sup>5</sup> Shelley H. Billig, Using Evidence to Make the case for service-learning as an academic achievement intervention in K-12, RMC Research Corporation Berger, C., Karimpour, R. & Rodkin, P.C. (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Horner, R. H., Sugai, & Anderson, C. M. (2010) Examining the evidence base for school-wide positive behavior support. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 42 (8). 1-14

<sup>7</sup> We're not going to take it: A student driven anti-bully approach, Packman, Lepkowski, Overton and Smaby. Project Innovation (2005)

<sup>8</sup> McKeivitt, B. C. & Braaksma, A. (2008). Best practices in developing a positive behavior support system at the school level. In A. Thomas and J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology* (Vol. 3; pp. 735-747). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

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## Leveraging student support

While nearly every student in school can be affected by bullying behaviors, the actual numbers of bullies in schools are fairly limited.<sup>9</sup> Anti-bully programs that leverage the majority of students who interact with others in a positive, healthy manner will make more progress than those that do not. As more students feel safe to interact in a healthy and positive manner; bullying decreases and academic achievement increases.<sup>10 11 12 13</sup>

Comparison of Pro-Social Student Characteristics versus Bullies and Victims		
Most Children and Adolescents	Bullies	Victims
Make friends based on common interests	Friendship circles are a means to an end	Compliant with adults and peers
Can both give and get friendship	Can be socially isolated	Can be depressed
Can make new friends while maintaining existing friendships	Can be socially integrated	Can have friends but still feel alone
Emotional growth through achievement	View others as a way to gain social dominance	Are different in some way, physically, mentally, emotionally, or culturally
Can empathize with others'	Will target others if necessary to obtain power	Can lack self confidence
Awkwardly try on new behaviors	Lack empathy	Could have previously been victimized
	Will repeatedly use harmful words and actions to gain social dominance	Are likely empathetic towards others' feelings

<sup>9</sup> There is a limited amount of information on the actual percentage of persistent bullies in schools. Moreover, information on the percentage of bullies varies by research study and location. Most studies indicate that approximately 15% of students in a school setting engage in persistent acts of harmful interactions. See: Nansel, T. Overpeck, M., Pilla, R.S., Ruan, W.J., Simmons-Morton, B. Schmidt, P. (2001). Bullying behaviors among US youth. *Journal of American Medical Association*, 285, 2094-2100. The percentage of bullies reported at 13%

<sup>10</sup> Palermo, F., Hanish, L. D., Martin, C. L., Fabes, R. A., & Reiser, M. (2007). Preschoolers' academic readiness: What role does the teacher-child relationship play? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 22(4), 407-422.

<sup>11</sup> Caprara, G.V., Barbaranelli, C., Pastorelli, C., Bandura, A & Zimbardo, P.G (2000). prosocial foundations of children's academic achievement. *Psychological Science* 11(4), 302-306

<sup>12</sup> Miles, S.B. & Stipek, D. (2006). Contemporaneous and longitudinal associations between social behavior and literacy achievement in a sample of low-income elementary school children. *Child Development*, 77, 103-117

<sup>13</sup> Wentzel, K. R. (1993). Social and academic goals at school: Motivation and achievement in early adolescence. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 13, 4-20.

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Therefore, the most effective approach is to create a comprehensive positive social framework that permits the prosocial majority of students in any school to “live out” and promote positive social interaction styles in the learning environment. Over time, it will also isolate the minority of students using bullying behaviors so that they can be more effectively addressed by the school administration.<sup>14</sup>

For all students, including bullies and victims, this process will include the acquisition of new skills. Community Service-learning fosters the development of these important personal and social skills.<sup>15</sup> Some students will become leaders. Other students will become actively engaged in a process to create a school culture that embraces positive social norms. Even bullies can change, as it has been consistently proven that building prosocial skills can effectively decrease students’ learned aggressive behaviors.<sup>16</sup>



“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

- Ann Frank

### Developing a Plan

Service-learning programs can help schools create school cultures where prosocial behaviors are expected and encouraged. The following chart compares best practice anti-bully program components with the standards associated with high quality Service-learning programs. Schools that systematically adopt these program elements will be more likely to have deep and lasting impact.

<sup>14</sup> Rieser, *Why America Might Lose the Battle Against Bullying, How We Can Win!* (2012)

<sup>15</sup> Guidance for Community Service-Learning, Ohio Department of Education, 2011

<sup>16</sup> Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

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	Service-learning Standards	Best Practice Anti-bully Program Components
1) Partnerships	Service-learning partnerships are collaborative, mutually beneficial, and address community needs	Successful anti-bully interventions are an integrated partnership of parents, teachers and students
2) Youth Voice	Service-learning provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating Service-learning experiences with guidance from adults	Students are involved from the start; including assessment of the school culture, anti-bullying program development, implementation and communication of the program goals
3) Duration and Intensity	Service-learning has sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes	Successful anti-bully programs are systematic and ongoing throughout the entire school year.
4) Meaningful Service	Service-learning actively engages participants in meaningful and personally relevant activities	Bullying is a genuine problem in the school culture. Students who participate in creating solutions for their school are engaging in a meaningful and important process.
5) Link to Curriculum	Service-learning is intentionally used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or academic content standards	The positive social learning goals of the anti-bullying program are clearly articulated. Academic learning, curriculum and class time is made available to support the needs and goals of the program.
6) Progress Monitoring	Service-learning engages participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals, and uses the results to improve the program	Program outcomes are measurable and measured. The ongoing results of the program are reviewed and utilized to modify or sustain program elements.
7) Reflection	Service-learning incorporates multiple reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society	Student committee members have time to reflect on the results of their efforts.  The entire school reflects and celebrates when project milestones are reached.
8) Diversity	Service-learning promotes understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants	Students create a culture where differences are viewed as a collective strength

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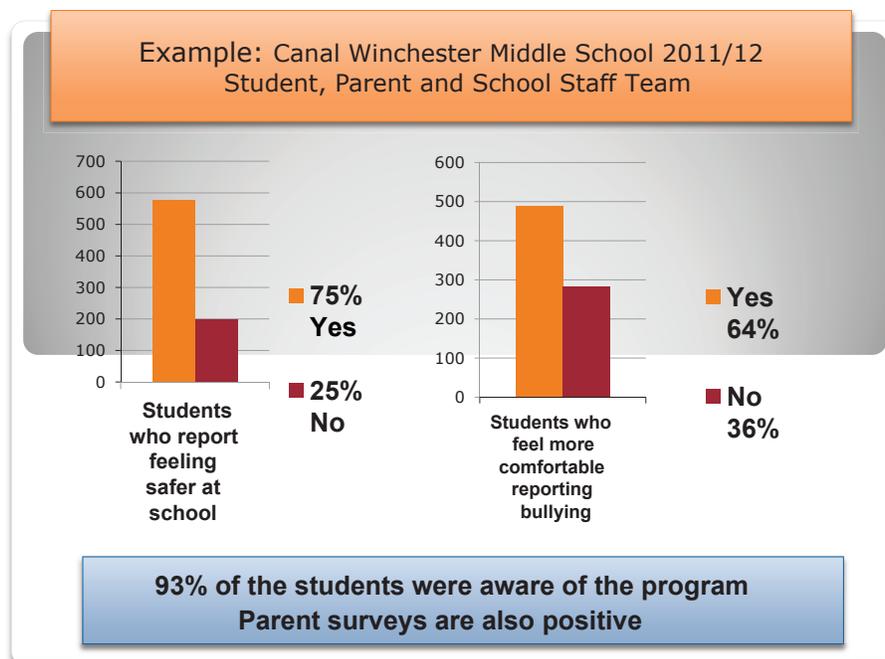
## Applying Theory to Action: Case Study



In school year 2011/12 Canal Winchester Middle School (CWMS) in Canal Winchester, Ohio, successfully implemented a comprehensive program to measurably reduce the number of harmful student interactions occurring in their school. The planning and implementation of this program was based on positive social learning and Service-learning principles, including:

- 1) **Student, parent and school team** CWMS created a student, parent and school team to establish a positive school culture
- 2) **Evidence-based interventions** CWMS utilized program elements that have been proven to be effective such as positive social learning and Service-learning
- 3) **Measures** CWMS utilized measures to pre-test and post-test the school environment. They also utilized methods to measure success throughout the year

The results from their year one pilot program were remarkable:



Following the implementation of the program, 75% of the students reported that they felt significantly safer, and 64% were more likely to report bullying.

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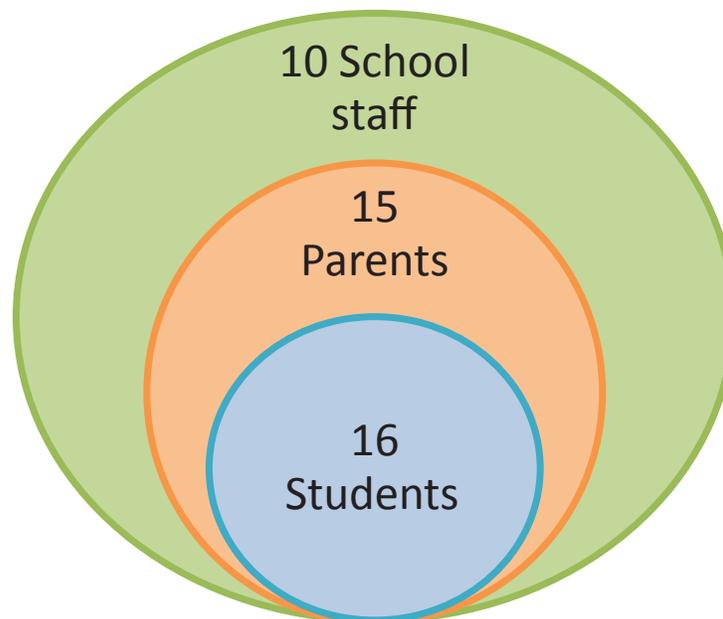
## The Similar But Different Program

In school year 2011/12, Canal Winchester Middle School staff sought to proactively implement a program to address bullying concerns common in middle school populations.

In October 2011, students, parents and administrators formed a collaborative team to discuss the school culture at Canal Winchester<sup>17</sup>. Research studies have shown that utilizing a collaborative “student, parent and teacher team” approach to implement positive social learning programs is associated with significant reductions in problem behavior including aggression, fighting, and harassment; significant increases in the perception of school safety and the promotion of prosocial behaviors.<sup>18</sup>

The collaborative team met several times and utilized a Service-learning framework to assemble the team, assess the needs of the school and implement a program.

Students were involved from the start of the project and were identified as the critical leaders of the program.<sup>19</sup>



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<sup>17</sup> Service-Learning Tool, Partnerships: Service learning partnerships are collaborative, mutually beneficial, and address community needs

<sup>18</sup> Horner, R. H., Sugai, & Anderson, C. M. (2010) Examining the evidence base for school-wide positive behavior support. Focus on Exceptional Children, 42 (8). 1-14

<sup>19</sup> Service-Learning Tool, Youth Voice: Service-learning provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating Service-learning experiences with guidance from adults

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Approximately 16 students, 15 parents and 10 school staff, including the Principal, participated in the group. The 16 students were selected from a racial, cultural and social cross section of the school community.

The team conducted an initial assessment of the school's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis), then created a plan to address the identified areas of concern.

The collaborative team concluded that:

1. Canal Winchester Middle School is a school where **caring and support** is a high priority
2. There was a genuine need to address bullying behaviors common to middle school populations.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, the student group reported that students were not permitted to “be themselves” and that individual differences were not being appreciated or respected.”
3. The intervention should be ongoing rather than a one-time event.<sup>21</sup>

## Program Development and Implementation

The collaborative team identified their respective roles in re-establishing the school culture:

- 1) Students will have the power to create and “live out” the school culture.
- 2) Parents will influence their child's behavior at home and have the opportunity to be involved at the school through program involvement.
- 3) School staff and administration will model the school culture and enforce the rules.

The students continued to meet and named their emerging program “Similar But Different” which reflected the goal of the program. The students wanted Canal Winchester students to understand that similarities between students bring them together, but differences make them stronger individually and as a group.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Service-Learning Tool, Meaningful Service: Service learning actively engages participants in meaningful and personally relevant activities

<sup>21</sup> Service-Learning Tool, Duration and Intensity: Service-learning has sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes

<sup>22</sup> Service-Learning Tool: Diversity: Service-learning promotes understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants

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While developing the program, the student group created a questionnaire to obtain information regarding the scope of the bullying issue at their school. Rather than asking students about their attitudes (what they think), the group decided to focus the questionnaire on student behaviors (what they do).

Please read the statements below and put a checkmark in the response that best describes you		Always	Sometimes	Never
1	I sit with students who need a friend	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	I listen to rumors about other students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	When I see a student hurt another, I report it	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	I stop my friends when they say something mean	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	I feel supported by teachers at this school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	I have lots of friends at this school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	I share rumors with other students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	Students in this school respect me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	I harm other students with my words and actions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	I accept others for who they are	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Most students at this school are bullies Yes___ No___            Have you been harmed by another student's words or actions in the last 3 months? Yes___ No___</p> <p>I am a boy___ girl___ I am in the ___ grade</p>				

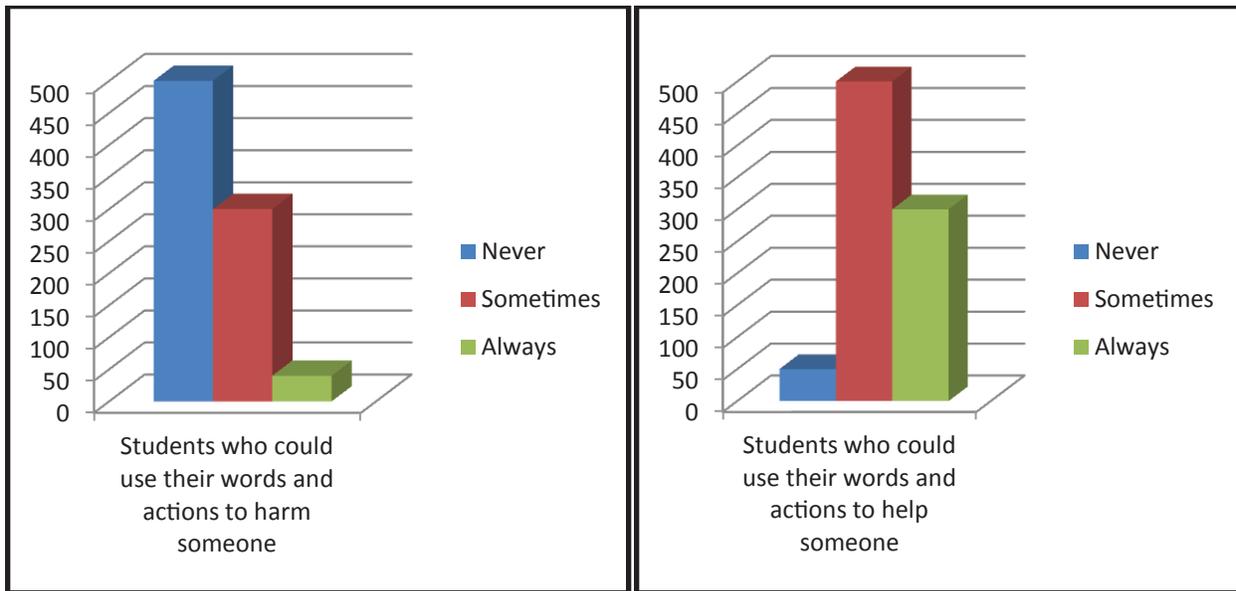
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With the help of school staff, the students calculated and interpreted the results of the survey.<sup>23</sup> They were surprised to learn that most of the students in the school were not bullies. In fact, many of the students either wanted to or had the potential to live out a positive school culture.



Based on this information, the students decided that the goals of the Similar But Different program would be to:

- 1) Launch an ongoing positive social learning movement to re-establish the positive social norms of the school environment (students, parents and school staff).
- 2) Communicate to the student body that condescending cliques and vicious rumors were no longer acceptable (students and school staff).
- 3) Build on the strength of the majority of students who stated that they would choose to interact in a positive manner (students and school staff)
- 4) Model and highlight positive social behaviors. For instance, sit with a student who is alone, stop rumors, make friends with new students, make eye contact and smile to students who are different (students, parents and teachers).

<sup>23</sup> Service-Learning Tool, Link to Curriculum: Service learning is intentionally used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or academic content standards

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- 5) Accept new members whose positive behaviors persistently reflected the program goals into the Similar But Different movement.
- 6) Isolate and report students who continued to bully (students).
- 7) Address reported incidents of bullying quickly and effectively (teachers, parents and school staff).
- 8) Create a system to measure progress (students and school staff)
- 9) Create a parent group and inform all parents about the goals of the program (parents and school staff).
- 10) Reflect on<sup>24</sup> and celebrate results with the entire school (students, parents and teachers)

In November, the program was launched and each grade level attended an assembly. Student leaders conducted the assembly with the support of parents and teachers. The student group outlined the goals of the program in detail and provided examples of the types of behaviors that would help students achieve those goals.

<p><b>Stop Vicious Rumors</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Don't intentionally listen to rumors</li><li>2) Use positive words when describing others</li><li>3) Don't spread rumors</li><li>4) Stop someone when they are spreading rumors</li><li>5) Report those who are using their words to harm others</li></ol>	<p><b>Eliminate Condescending Cliques</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Sit with a student who is alone</li><li>2) Make/spend time with other students who need support</li><li>3) Invite a new friend to your lunch table</li><li>4) Make eye contact with other students</li><li>5) Introduce yourself to someone you do not know</li></ol>	<p><b>Let Students be Themselves</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Learn about</li><li>2) Understand</li><li>3) Appreciate</li><li>4) Respect, and</li><li>5) Help</li></ol> <p>Students who are different than yourself</p>
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<sup>24</sup> Service-Learning Tool, Reflection: Service-learning incorporates multiple reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society

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After the assembly, the student group followed up with a number of activities and opportunities to demonstrate that the movement was “alive:”

- 1) They used language arts to write poetry and other writings to communicate program messages.
- 2) They created a “Wall of Commitment” on which any student could post a message, writing or saying that could be helpful to others.
- 3) They modeled the positive social behaviors in the hallways and at lunch. Examples included helping a student who dropped his or her books, stopping a rumor and eating lunch with the isolated student that no one had sat with for months.

While it took time, other students began to trust the program and felt that it was safe for them to begin to “live out” the goals of the program consistent with what they had indicated on the survey. In general, the student body could see the clear distinction between a culture of bullying and the Similar But Different program.

## **Similar But Different Students**

**Students who use words  
and actions:**

- 1) **Repeatedly**
- 2) **That target other  
students**
- 3) **To help them**

**For the purpose of  
helping everyone gain  
power to succeed**

## **Bullies**

**Students who use words  
and actions:**

- 1) **Repeatedly**
- 2) **That target other  
students**
- 3) **To harm them**

**For the purpose of  
gaining personal power  
or social dominance**

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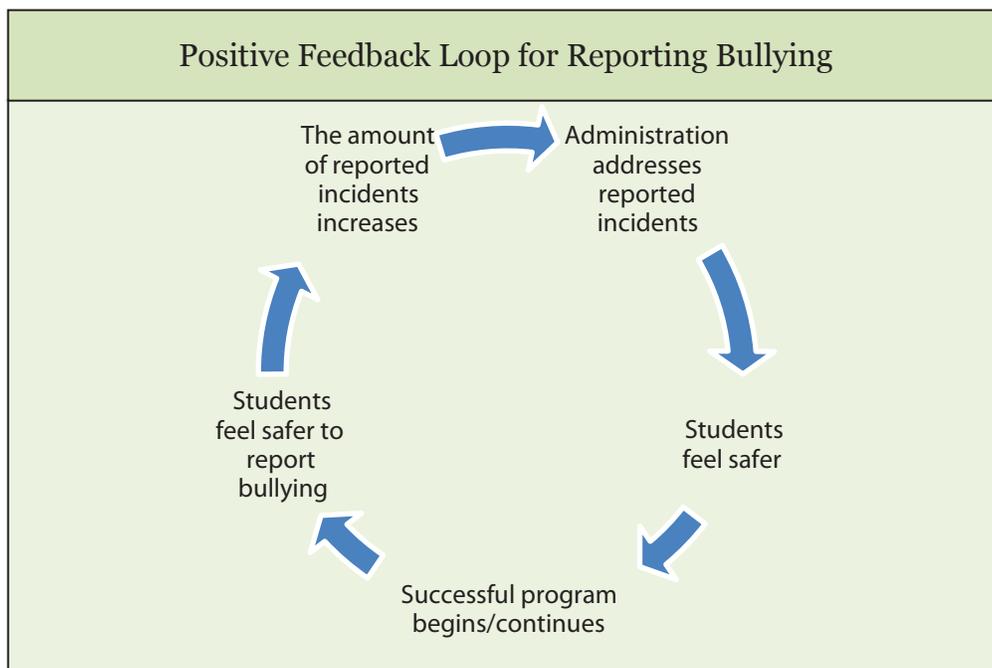


After a period of several months, hundreds of students had joined the movement. The student committee continued to meet regularly and discussed program progress and areas for improvement. They also discussed which students in the school were living out the program goals with persistent positive behaviors.

When new students were chosen to join the movement, their names were called during morning announcements by student leaders, at which time they received a Similar But Different wristband. Their names were also written on the Wall of Commitment and were recognized in subsequent school assemblies as Similar But Different students.

As the number of student members increased, the smaller group of students whose behaviors were inconsistent with program goals became more apparent. Students also felt safer reporting bullying.

As bullying reporting increased, the school administration was able to directly and effectively handle the harmful behavior.



This created a positive feedback loop that sustained the momentum of the program.

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The parent portion of the collaborative team also organized “all school” parent meetings in the evenings to talk about the program. The overall goals of the program were outlined and questions were answered.

As the program’s momentum increased, a need for a parent to parent resource for families that were dealing with bullying issues was identified. A parent resource group was formed for parents to talk about their individual situations and how to effectively report bullying and the needs of victims.

### The Future

The Canal Winchester Middle School and District are pleased with the results they have achieved. They also realize that the success of any school program is fragile and must be sustained by the daily, weekly and monthly focus of students, parents and teachers.

In school year 2012/13, Canal Winchester will expand this program to its elementary school so that the Similar But Different culture takes root at an earlier age. This development also allows student progress to be measured longitudinally as they move through the system.

Areas that have been identified for expansion or improvement in school year 2012/13 include:

- 1) Measures: The student created pre- and post test will continue to be utilized. However, one validated pre- and post instrument will be selected as an additional measure of program efficacy.<sup>25</sup>
- 2) Measures: The students will use a monthly “behavior checklist” to monitor and measure the observable behaviors of the student body. Trained students, teachers and parents will observe students to document the number of positive social behaviors and harmful interactions that take place. This information will be utilized by the student group to gauge the program’s progress.

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<sup>25</sup> Measuring Bullying Victimization, Perpetration, and Bystander Experiences: A Compendium of Assessment Tools, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012)

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- 3) The link to curriculum will be further integrated into the teachers' academic planning. Now that the goals of the program have become a part of the school expectations and culture, teachers will be able to plan curriculum links systematically at the beginning of the year to support the program. For instance, teachers can tailor their lesson plans to use art, history, reading and English curriculum goals as an integrated way to foster prosocial behavior through academic instruction. Lessons can include reading about important historical leaders, writing poems and articles and making posters for the program. Math lessons can help students organize and interpret program results through percentage calculations and statistical analysis. Social studies classes can compare and contrast how various cultures approach social change or respond to natural disasters.

The teachers will complete a survey at the beginning of the year that will allow them to suggest curriculum links and indicate how they can leverage academic instruction to support the goals of the Similar But Different movement.

### Conclusion

Any school can be successful in its effort to reduce harmful student interactions. Positive social learning and Service-learning provide a template for schools seeking to implement effective solutions to this important problem.

For more information on Service-learning see <http://education.ohio.gov> and search for Community Service Learning. Schools seeking information to implement programming to reduce harmful student interactions should contact Rick Rieser MS JD at [rrieser@rickrieser.com](mailto:rrieser@rickrieser.com).