

LMS tries to stem increase in bullying

New program looks to open conversations

By Caitlyn May
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There's a stack of papers in Emily Wren's desk. She hasn't finished going through them yet.

They've been filled out by students at Lincoln Middle School and each one offers a new bit of heartbreak.

"When you call me dumb, it makes me feel like I am nothing."

It's an answer to a prompt printed on each piece of paper: When you call me _____, it makes me feel _____. There are 520 students enrolled in Lincoln and the stack on Wren's desk is easily compromised of 500 sheets.

"Only two kids so far, haven't taken it seriously," Wren, who's vice principal at Lincoln said, flipping through the stack of papers she's begun sorting into three separate piles; used, not used and still to be gone through.

It's all part of the "Choose a Different Word" campaign at Lincoln, a program meant to stem bullying within the school and give students an outlet. The prompts will be scrubbed of identifying language and placed

around the school while leadership students have utilized the information to create posters to hang in hallways. The decorations though, are a baby step in a road littered with outside, complicating factors.

"Verbal referrals accounted for 22 percent of the referrals," Wren said. "Now, three months in, they're at 44 percent." Something has changed in the last year.

Students who are caught verbally harassing their classmates are given a referral and sent to the Tiger Pride Room—a space dedicated to restorative conversations. Essentially, bullies are placed in a room with their victims and walked through a conversation with a mediator to come to a better understanding of their actions, consequences and forge a line of communication between the two parties.

Of the five leadership students sitting on Wren's couch, excused from class to partake in a discussion about the campaign, three say the Tiger Pride room works. Two, disagree.

"Of course it doesn't work," Nancy Willard has spent the last five years studying bullying and possible approaches schools

can take to better address the issue. She's worked in the Salem-Keizer district and is working on material that can be utilized around the state.

"The restorative process doesn't work for this situation," she said. "This school is leaps and bounds ahead because they are trying. But it won't work. It will get worse."

The current process, according to Willard, allows the student with an advanced social standing to maintain that standing. "They know exactly what to say during the conversation," she said.

According to Wren, students who harass other students know when to act as well. "We can correct it when we catch it," she said. "But the last prompt says 'I wish my teachers knew 'blank' and they say that they wished we knew bullies are sneaky,'" she said.

Insults being flung around Lincoln, according to student prompts include unfortunately standard pejoratives such as "prostitute" and "whore." But newer insults have emerged including, "Go back to Mexico" and "Go home."

"They hear it on the news,

they hear it at home," Wren said.

So, while students' parents are also contacted in addition to referrals, it's not always a solution.

The next step, according to Wren, is to teach kids how to stand up to bullies. As a self-described former 'mean girl,' Wren said she can relate to the students who stand by and do nothing.

"My friends would say horrible things and I would laugh because it was easier and safer than standing up," she said. She also noted that students are being made aware of the real-world consequences of their actions. "We're letting them know, if these things happened in their workplace, they would be fired," she said.

"It sounds like they're (Lincoln Middle School) doing the best they can and they need to be recognized for that," Willard said. "What schools nationwide are doing is not working. This is not the fault of educators. What they have been told about bullying is inaccurate and the way they have been told to try to handle these situations will never be effective."

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