Are Christian schools safe? What makes Christian schools environments where parents want their children to be? Does bullying need to be addressed at Christian schools? These are critical questions when considering the culturally changing environment of our multicultural and international schools today.

Many of our schools are becoming more and more multicultural. As Christian leaders in the Christian school setting, it is important to effectively address bullying at the same time that we teach multicultural awareness. It is easy to sweep this issue under the rug when other concerns, such as developing high academic standards for the school and ensuring the highest quality education for each student, become more pressing.

Nevertheless, bullying has a negative effect on students that will stay with them for a lifetime. How can we be sensitive to the weaker students and still appreciate the unique blending of cultures within a multicultural school? This is especially important to take note of during the most volatile years of higher elementary and middle school.

Research shows that being the victim of bullying is affecting middle school students the most. It is well known that adolescence can be the hardest time in a child’s life. The questions of “Who am I?” “Why am I here?” and “What is the meaning of life?” do not stop when children walk out the front door of their homes. These questions are carried with them throughout their scholastic experiences.

Bullying is most simply defined as “a physical or verbal attack that devalues another person.” There are a great many possible scenarios involving bullying within an international school setting. They can range anywhere from the age-ranking hierarchy of some Asian students to the social-class-specific society found among many Latin American students. Bullying shares common aspects in every school culture. Tactics such as intimidation, harassment, physical violence, gossip and rumors, and verbal threats all contribute to a negative environment where learning takes a backseat.

Bullying can play a role in classroom discipline problems, which have the potential to increase over the years. This is especially important in Christian schools, where students could develop a dislike of Christianity if the bullying student portrays himself or herself as a Christian. If we do not address bullying effectively within the Christian school setting, we create the potential of victimized students leaving this setting bitter and resentful toward Jesus Christ and the gospel. We must take action and we must work together, recognizing the facts of the effects of bullying. Victims of bullying will start to lose their self-confidence and, as a result, have a permanent sense of low self-esteem.

The sad irony is that victims of bullying often become bullies themselves, and this fact applies to the Christian school setting as well. For example, an elementary student receives a punch in the stomach and is forced to give up his or her lunch in return for being left alone. In later school years, that child might apply the same kinds of bullying tactics to others.

When we are in a position of Christian school leadership, such as principal, it can be hard to pinpoint the specific acts of bullying as they take place. Most bullying is done between classes, in our hallways, on our playgrounds, at lunch, and before and after school. These times and places present the most challenges for supervising student behavior. When confronting specific bullying events, it often becomes one student’s word against another. This issue must be addressed fairly for all parties involved.

How can we successfully deal with bullying and eliminate it from our schools? Here are four ingredients in an effective formula:

1. Taking an active role. When dealing with bullying, administrators must take time to make wise decisions. Leaders must actively combat bullying. Students and parents expect Christian leaders to play a key role in creating a safe environment.
A secondary principal cannot drop investigations into specific incidents simply because he or she doesn’t have time to follow up. This time must be taken. If several students are involved, they must all come to the attention of the administrator if he or she wants to pinpoint the problem. The biggest challenge to uncovering the truth is the number of lies that surface during these confrontations, because bullying students will employ deceptive devices to avoid punishment.

Another difficulty when investigating a potential bullying case is dealing with friends who want to protect the bully. The school’s administrators must be able to weed out information to make a case that is loving, truthful, and just. In many ways, the principal takes on the role of judge, attorney, pastor, and counselor. In this process, we must partner with teachers and parents who may bring insight to specific instances of bullying.

Finally, we must be ready to confront bullies with the facts found in the investigation and to then apply discipline. When a bullying issue is resolved, it cannot be seen as a victory for school administration. It is simply a step toward making the school a safer environment. In this process of confronting bullying students, it is important to remember that the bully has equal value with the victim and must be treated with love, kindness, and patience. Both the aggressors and the victims need to be able to see Christ in their administrators through this process.

2. Partnering with teachers. Administrators are responsible for giving teachers the tools they need to better recognize bullying and to know how to deal with it. Students want teachers who give them firm guidelines and who possess good classroom management skills. Students also want to learn in a loving and respectful environment. Teachers must be vigilant in watching for signs of bullying that might surface within the classroom.

3. Partnering with students. Administrators and teachers must find ways to identify bullying occurrences and partner with student leaders. To do this, school staff must actively search for those students who have become role models for their peers. An important task is to train these student leaders in peer mediation, which will equip them to deal with bullying on a peer level.

4. Involving the parents. It is important to bring parents in as partners in the process. Both the parents of victims and the parents of aggressors must be dealt with fairly to bring restitution to specific situations. The desired result is to bring out the truth and to correct the unacceptable behavior of the students participating in the bullying acts.

However, victory is not achieved by breaking students down and having them confess their mistakes. True victory is achieved when students see a loving teacher or principal who cares about them as individuals, even through the process of correction. The by-products are confession, discipline, and restoration.

On a personal note, I am a principal at an international Christian school. When I come to the end of a disciplinary process, I often tell the student involved, “I want you to know that I don’t look at you any differently than I did before all this information came to light. You are a sinner saved by grace, and I am a sinner saved by grace. I am here to help you, not to destroy you. You made a mistake, and I trust you learned from it.”

After describing the discipline that will result from a student’s specific actions, I ask if I can pray for him or her. After the student agrees, we bow our heads in prayer. Restoration, redemption, patience, kindness, and finally love are all important components in confronting students in such situations.

One of the most important keys to working through accounts of bullying is to continue to pray for wisdom from Jesus. We must invite the Holy Spirit to work in each person so that the truth will come out. At the end of the day, the school’s administrators will have to make decisions that will affect students, parents, faculty, and staff.

The beautiful thing in the Christian school setting is that no one is alone in this process. The administrator is one part of a triangle. Parents and students make up the other two parts. In the center of the triangle is Jesus Christ, working in and through us. Let’s confront bullying in our schools, using a balance of justice and love. This balance will help make Christian schools safe places.

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