

Vail Valley Voices: Putting an end to bullying

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The percentage of high school students who reported being bullied on school property is higher in Eagle County than in Colorado and in the U.S. (Eagle County is 32.3 percent and Colorado is 19.9 percent, according to the 2009 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey).

House Bill 1254, introduced in the House in February and aimed at decreasing bullying in public schools, was largely in response to a recent string of teen suicides related to bullying throughout the country. With bullying instances on the rise in Eagle County Schools, local organizations have risen to the occasion to offer youth services targeted at preventing bullying. Thanks to the collaborative efforts of the Eagle River Youth Coalition and the support of Eagle County Schools, progress is being made to address the importance of safe learning environments for our youngest citizens here in Eagle County.

The following is from a panel of youth service providers speaking out on concerns and efforts related to bullying.

The panel included:

- Michelle Hartel, executive director of The Eagle River Youth Coalition
- Mike Gass, Eagle County Schools executive director of student services and innovative programs
- Mike Santambrosio, health and fitness coordinator of The Youth Foundation.
- Mikayla Curtis, interim program director of SOS Outreach.
- Kerri Thelen, MS, youth advocacy coordinator of The Bright Future Foundation.
- Jeanne McQueeney, executive director of Early Childhood Partners.
- Julia Kozusko, LPC, mental health consultant of early childhood partners and child and family therapist at Colorado West Mental Health.

Hartel: What efforts are you currently managing that address bullying?

Gass: Eagle County Schools has various school-wide programs and supports in place, such as Safe to Tell, Life Skills Curriculum, Crime Stoppers and certified counselors to provide necessary interventions. ECS also has a Code of Conduct, which includes all of the statutory regulations around school safety and bullying. We also are fortunate to have local nonprofit participation in our after-school programs that provide necessary support around anti-bullying efforts.

Santambrosio: The Youth Foundation partners with Eagle County Schools to promote positive values through anti-bullying and self-defense classes at Gypsum Creek and Berry Creek Middle Schools, as well as presentations at Meadow Mountain and Avon Elementary Schools.

Curtis: SOS Outreach integrates conflict resolution and mental health awareness into staff trainings. SOS also facilitates student-led advocacy projects on bullying awareness and bullying prevention.

Thelen: The Bright Future Foundation partners with Eagle County Schools to offer courses on healthy relationships, emotional regulation and bullying prevention and awareness to elementary, middle and high school students. In addition, the Bright Future Foundation offers presentations on teen dating violence, sexual assault as well as informational sessions to PTA groups on bullying prevention/ awareness and healthy relationships. The Bright Future Foundation has several therapists that work directly with children in individual counseling. The Bright Future Foundation also has a long standing Buddy Mentor program that supports healthy relationships, positive role modeling, and mentorship.

McQueeney: At Early Childhood Partners, we help enhance social-emotional skills in many of our local early learning environments in the valley and believe that increasing these skills in young children can help prevent bullying. We use a variety of social-emotional curricula such as Second Step, a violence prevention curriculum for preschool children that was created by the Committee for Children, a nonprofit that works globally to prevent bullying. We also help support programs that are implementing the Pyramid Model, which promotes social and emotional competence in infants, toddlers and preschoolers through evidence-based practices.

Kozusko: Colorado West Mental Health Center has no formalized anti-bullying programs but we have three therapists who work to increase social and emotional skills such as empathy, assertiveness, and emotional literacy in children.

Hartel: Current research on bullying suggests that targeting bystanders to stand up for those being bullied is the key to decreasing bullying behaviors. (How) does your program encourage students to stand up for each other?

Gass: Eagle County Schools' programs in place have a component that encourages and promotes people to either act, intervene or report situations that involve bullying.

Santambrosio: By promoting tolerance, acceptance, respect and love for oneself and others, The Youth Foundation hopes to strengthen children's sense of self, which will allow them to feel empowered to do the right thing. Standing with another child is much more powerful than standing over them.

Curtis: SOS Outreach encourages small-group activities focused on positive youth development. Bullying behavior is not permitted, and mentors focus on strength-based activities.

Thelen: The Bright Future Foundation supports an educational approach to bullying. Having open and honest conversations with children about the roles they play within the dynamics of bullying behaviors (gossip/ rumors, physical and emotional abuse) support ending the cycle of destructive and unhealthy behavior. The bystander is educated on the appropriate steps he or she may take in a situation where they are witnessing unhealthy behaviors.

Hartel: How can parents and other community members support in decreasing bullying behaviors in school and community climates?

Gass: It really comes back to the whole "it takes a village" concept, starting with parent-student education at home. Before kids even enter our system, we encourage our parents to educate their children on appreciation for and acceptance of one another's differences, respecting your peers and treating one another the way they want to be treated. It is critical that we instill these values in our children at an early age.

Santambrosio Community members can support by attending sessions offered by local organizations that highlight the importance and prevalence of bullying prevention in our valley. Parents can do their best to foster an environment that promotes healthy relationships and does not allow bullying tendencies within their homes.

Curtis: Education is the key. I think the more that parents and community members are aware of the signs of bullying and the effects of bullying on others, they can be more proactive in addressing the concern. Having open dialogue between the schools, parents, and students about the types of bullying that's been occurring and how it has impacted the school community is important.

McQueeney: Each school community needs to have access to convenient, age-appropriate individual and group counseling where the skills of assertiveness, empathy and emotional literacy are taught.

Hartel: What are the positive outcomes you have recognized as a result of your bullying prevention efforts?

Gass: We see kids understanding the importance of taking care of one another, valuing their relationships and taking pride in their school and in their community. We see kids who are more willing to play a more active role in their community through service projects and volunteer opportunities.

Santambrosio: The Youth Foundation has noticed an increase in self-confidence and togetherness among the children in our programs. By promoting acceptance and respect, we have seen that there has been a decrease in separation between the children we serve. Our hope is that this effect will spread throughout the community.

Curtis: SOS Outreach has noticed great group cohesion that really brings students together who may not have been friends before. By the end of the program, these students are talking positively about each other and giving words of encouragement during the activity.

Thelen: Through working with over 850 local children through therapeutic after-school programs and in-school groups and presentations, The Bright Future Foundation has been able to expose a broad range of young people to therapeutic psycho-education curriculum. Our healthy relationship presentations include conversations about friendships, dating relationships, defining bullying behavior, and identifying and dealing with unhealthy relationships. Our multi-week in- and after-school programs at June Creek Elementary, Edwards Elementary, Avon Elementary and Brush Creek Elementary schools integrate this healthy relationship curriculum with a focus on emotional awareness and regulation to better equip children with the necessary skills they require to handle conflict resolution appropriately and effectively.

Hartel: What can we expect to see in the future with anti-bullying programs and efforts in your agency?

Gass: Eagle County Schools will continue to try and promote opportunities for kids to be educated on anti-bullying efforts and ways to get involved in their schools and the community. The intent is that our kids will form more meaningful relationships with one another, which will in turn create a mutual respect amongst our students.

Santambrosio: The Youth Foundation is eager to bring in professionals to provide information, resources and knowledge on this issue through training opportunities so that community members can be proactive rather than reactive to this sensitive issue. We will also continue to provide programs that teach respect for self and others, unity, togetherness and tolerance. As a staff, the Youth Foundation will continue to stay on top of trainings and education regarding bullying and bullying prevention so that we can maintain the utmost professionalism and effectiveness throughout all of our efforts.

Curtis: SOS Outreach is expecting to see increasing projects regarding awareness and advocacy of bullying prevention by the students. We will provide continued group teambuilding opportunities that encourage positive support structures, behavior and language, as well as a continued effort to train staff on the signs and effects of bullying and effective intervening methods.

Thelen: The Bright Futures Foundation is proud of the number of students we reached this year. Our services are free to our community schools through local donations and grant funding and we hope to increase our efforts next year.

For more information, please contact The Eagle River Youth Coalition at www.eagle-youth.org or 970-949-9250.

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