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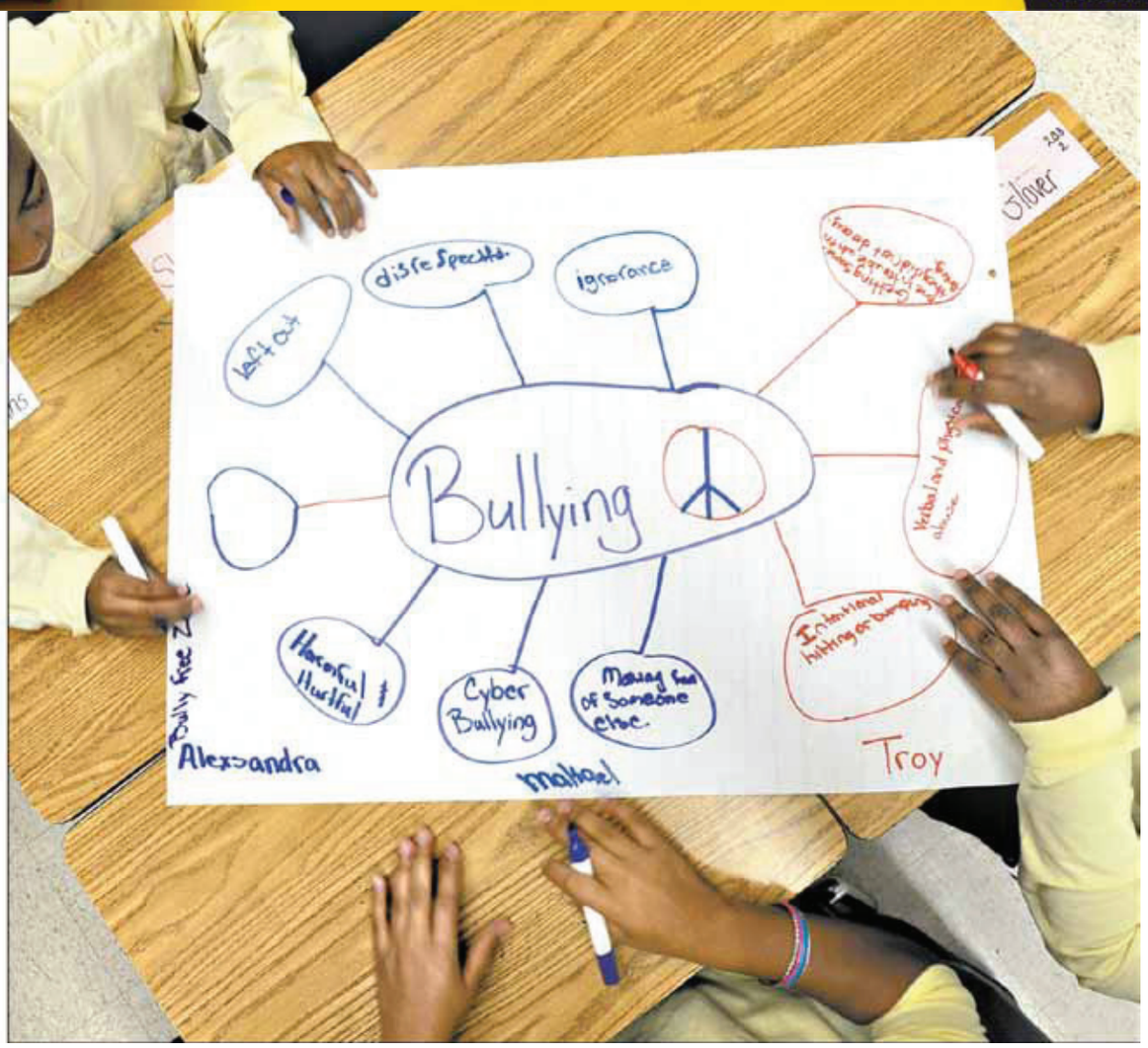
Some Antiviolence Efforts Are Working

They are being applied haphazardly across the Phila. School District. Other programs have faded away.

PART 6 OF 7 ASSAULT ON LEARNING Inquirer INVESTIGATION



CLEM MURRAY / Staff Photographer

A group of sixth graders at A.B. Day Elementary School works on a project during an anti-bullying discussion. "We're not a perfect school," principal Karen Dean said, "but when things happen, we deal with them, and we report them."

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INQUIRER STAFF WRITERS

Ask nearly any student at A.B. Day Elementary what the school rules are, and he or she will rattle them off without a second thought:

Be respectful. Be obedient. Have a positive attitude. Be responsible.

The rules are tacked up to bulletin boards. They are displayed in the hallways. They're important, said fifth grader Jeremy Reynolds.

"We try to be nice to people," Jeremy said. "We try to be good and not bully."

Social skills, character education, bullying prevention, and a program that sets up a system of rules and consequences called Positive Be-

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John Bailie, of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, which administers a violence prevention program used and dropped in the district

CLEM MURRAY/Staff Photographer

Teacher Carla Russell talks with fifth graders at A.B. Day Elementary, including (from left) Andre Wright, Andre Cole, and Kibre Beard, on words that can break a heart or can mend one.

havior Supports (PBS) have long been embedded in the Day curriculum.

In the Philadelphia School District, effective violence-prevention programs have flourished in small pockets, at Day and elsewhere. But the district has failed to replicate them on a large scale.

Demand for them is growing, however. Citywide, students have urged the district to embrace antiviolence efforts.

There are no magic formulas, but Day — a school much like the district as a whole, with an African American majority and three-quarters of its students considered economically disadvantaged — is better because of these violence-prevention measures, said the principal, Karen Dean.

"We're not a perfect school," Dean said, "but when things happen, we deal with them, and we report them."

At Day, which ranks low for violence among elementary schools, incidents have dropped since the 500-student K-8 school moved toward the PBS model seven years ago. Day had 14 violent incidents in 2003-04, for instance, and just two in 2009-10.

The school, on Crittenden Street where East Germantown borders Mount Airy, stands in marked contrast to the high school it feeds — Martin Luther King, which has a higher violence rate and was as recently as 2007-08 on the state's persistently dangerous list.

Day has what many schools do not: A long-term principal, stable teaching force, formal staff training in antiviolence programs, and the will to keep them in place.

Dean and her team have seen funding for different programs wax and wane. But they seek out lessons in best practices whenever they can find them, and carry over what works from year to year, the principal said.

Teachers, students, and staff all agree on the school's rules, Dean said, and, more than adults just reciting them to students, they teach in their classes specifically what good behavior looks like in the lunchroom, in the hallway, moving to another classroom.

It's obvious to anyone who walks through the school.

Academics have also improved since the school began focusing on violence prevention. In 2003-04, 33 percent of Day's students met state goals in math and 30 percent in reading. In 2010, 69 percent met goals in math and 61 percent in reading.

"The child can focus on learning, and the teachers can teach. It really helps with classroom management. It gets better every year," Dean said.

'A long way to go'

Top district officials acknowledge that they haven't been able to duplicate Day's successes districtwide.

Deputy Superintendent Leroy Nunery said that the district was "just at the very beginning of implementing a comprehensive approach" to violence.

And Superintendent Arlene C. Ackerman acknowledged that the district still had "a long

Students at A.B. Day Elementary School, from left, sixth grader Troy Taylor, and fifth graders Ashley Holloway and Jeremy Reynolds. They say it's a good school and that they feel safe there.

way to go" in getting all of its schools to implement programs effectively.

Over the years, multiple violence-prevention programs have been hailed as models, but then they have either fallen out of favor with the district's administration, failed to spread, or been implemented haphazardly.

The district lost a $600,000 grant to implement Positive Behavior Supports over disputes on how to carry the program out. The district pressed ahead and now, some experts say, the program is floundering.

At Washington High and a handful of other schools, students are defusing problems through peer mediation, but the approach remains underused, some say. The district has also laid off the two staffers responsible for training others.

Restorative Practices, another program that focuses not on punishing offenders but on repairing harm done and addressing underlying problems, helped calm an out-of-control West Philadelphia High over three years. But administrative changes ordered by Ackerman last school year effectively ended the program. Some staff say the loss of the program has contributed to an increase in violence.

The nationally recognized program "I Can Problem Solve" got some traction in Philadelphia beginning in the 1970s but ended for lack of administrative support in the early 1990s.

"There have been so many good ideas about what to do about violence that have gone by the wayside," said David Fair, a former Philadelphia Department of Human Services deputy commissioner and United Way executive who has dealt with the district for 20 years. "There's this addiction to trying the flavor of the month, instead of bringing to scale the things that are proven to work."

Tomás Hanna, an associate superintendent, said the district was trying to expand proven programs. This year, teams of senior staffers are concentrating on the district's "Focus 46" schools — those deemed most troubled.

Each school is graded on its progress in addressing various problems, from safety flaws to lagging academics. Ackerman has said that violence can often be traced to students who are performing poorly.

"You've got some schools that are working it, and you've got some that are struggling," Hanna said.

The district has also implemented two anti-violence programs in 139 of its 257 schools — Second Step for grades K through 8, and School Connect for high school grades.

Still, Hanna said, the district doesn't believe any one program should be foisted on every school.

"We want to make sure that schools are providing an environment where teachers can teach and young people can learn, but for us, this notion of a cookie cutter is problematic," Hanna said.

Problems with program

PBS, a nationally recognized, data-driven program that calls for schools to develop and teach clear, consistent school rules, and reinforce good behavior, is supposed to be in place in all district schools.

There are interventions for students with chronic behavior problems, and incident data are examined closely.

PBS requires ongoing training, resources, and staff buy-in, but when fully implemented, it often leads to a reduction in violent incidents and a better school climate, research shows.

Beginning last school year, United Way offered a $600,000 challenge grant over three years to implement PBS in 10 district schools. The money would go to an outside organization, in this case the nonprofit Public Citizens for Children and Youth, to administer a pilot program, with help from other city nonprofits.

The district said it would have had to pay an additional $400,000 for coaching.

There were problems almost from the start, from central office staff turnover to differences in vision for the scope of the program, according to Fair, who was a United Way vice president at the time.

At first, the district insisted the pilot happen in 20 schools, not 10, he said.

Then Hanna told Fair that Ackerman was having second thoughts about PBS as a demonstration project.

"She thought that a lot of this was common

sense, that we should just do more training and eventually the staff would adopt this by osmosis, I guess," Fair said.

There were disagreements over how much training and oversight the program required.

In a statement, Ackerman held to her position that the program can work even if the district doesn't follow the United Way's model. In fact, her Imagine 2014 strategic plan for the district includes that strategy.

"Much of what is prescribed in PBS are in fact things that a good school principal should already be implementing in his or her school," Ackerman said.

Hanna and Ackerman said the pilot targeted the wrong schools, bypassing the neediest, and that its timetable was too slow — it would have taken up to five years to bring the program to scale districtwide.

"Don't get me wrong, we value partnerships," Hanna said. "We didn't disagree on the what - ensuring a safe environment for all. We disagreed on the how, and the how quickly."

Now, the district is doing without the United Way grant, which was revoked last year.

Fair said he couldn't tell his donors that PBS, now compromised in his eyes, would work.

"I really have no confidence in any approach that assumes you can implement something in 250 schools at once, with all the blockages and problems and funding challenges of a big school system," he said. "Dr. Ackerman wanted to do it overnight, and with no money. It was absurd."

PBS is "successful only when it is implemented with all of its parts, including coaching and data analysis," said Shelly Yanoff, director of the nonprofit that was poised to administer the grant. "When it's 'Name five rules' and doesn't do much else, it can't fulfill its promise."

Philadelphia's limited execution of PBS is typical, said John Bailie, an official with the International Institute for Restorative Practices in Bethlehem, Pa., which administers another violence prevention program that has been dropped by the district but is used elsewhere.

"There's tons of good ideas out there," Bailie said. "Almost none of them get fully implemented. That's why schools look at one program after another. They say, 'We tried this program last year and it didn't work,' but really, they never put the program in place."

Peer mediating

It started with a pencil flying across a ninth grade classroom early this school year. One George Washington High student was hit; the student who threw the object laughed, and so did another girl. Tensions ran high, and there was talk of a fight.

The situation could have escalated into a major incident.

Instead, it ended in a small room in the Northeast Philadelphia school's ground floor, where Washington seniors Daquan Cooper and Amira Coleman — trained mediators — talked the three freshmen girls through the situation.

Ultimately, the ninth graders arrived at their own solution — agreeing to be civil in class and steering clear of each other in the hallways — then signed documents saying they would keep their word or risk consequences. Unless they act out again, the problem remains confidential, with no parents notified or disciplinary record.

"It was a misunderstanding," Cooper, 18, said of the pencil incident. "By the end, they agreed to go their separate ways and everything was fine."

The neighborhood high school on Bustleton Avenue has successfully used peer mediation for 25 years. About 300 incidents — all nonviolent disputes — were mediated last school year, and teachers say that because students are more comfortable confiding in peers than adults, the program successfully circumvents a no-snitching culture.

The school also offers Peer-Group Connections, a popular class for seniors who are trained to welcome at-risk freshmen to Washington and encourage them to avoid conflict.

"I had problems when I first came into high school," student Keisha Weeks, 17, said. "No one should have to go it alone."

Washington is a diverse school with 2,000 students, 58 percent of whom are considered economically disadvantaged. And its violence rate is low among neighborhood high schools. Last year, it recorded 50 violent incidents or 2.3 incidents per 100 students.

While Ackerman's Imagine 2014 five-year plan calls for all district schools to adopt peer mentoring, it has stalled.

Staffers at 92 schools got training last year, but the program hasn't taken off, said Curry Bailey, who along with Sharon Arnold trained the staffers.

Bailey, Arnold, 33 climate

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Curry Bailey talks with Washington High senior Mahdi Sorrell. Bailey trained staff to develop student mediators before he was laid off due to budget cuts.

RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

managers, and 17 nonteaching assistants were laid off during the last year.

Peer mentoring "has been a grossly underutilized program in the district," Bailey said. "Dr. Ackerman has tried to standardize the instruction piece, and that's great. But the other side is lagging. You can't measure everything by test scores — the schools have to be safe."

While the district isn't doing any new training this year, a report released Thursday said that 24 schools have working programs. Hanna said the district hoped to expand peer mentoring next year.

Prevention matters, insisted Bailey.

In 2004, 16-year-old Jalil Speaks was shot and killed by a classmate near Strawberry Mansion High School. An unpaid debt sparked the quarrel between the two.

Bailey talked with some of the students after Speaks was killed.

"That death could have been stopped," Bailey said. "Most of what ends up in tragedy, the big stuff, starts over something small. And most of it can be prevented."

More than tough talk

Effective antiviolence programs work because they deal with children's social and emotional learning, said Myrna B. Shure, a developmental psychologist and Drexel professor whose research on violence prevention and problem solving for children has been recognized by the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Children should be taught conflict resolution beginning at the youngest grades, Shure said.

"Kids whose teachers rated their behavior as more aggressive, more impatient — they don't relate well to others," said Shure. "They're not sensitive to others, and they have trouble problem-solving."

For decades, Shure's nationally acclaimed "I Can Problem Solve" curriculum was a successful prevention tool in the district. But it fell out of favor and is no longer used.

Schools that don't pay attention to children's social and emotional learning often pay the price in violent incidents, said Jonathan Cohen, president of the New York-based National School Climate Center.

"Everyone's worrying about reading, science, and math tests, and they're not recognizing the underlying social and emotional issues, which aren't being measured," Cohen said. "This, I believe, is one of the underlying causes of violence in public education."

Another dropped program

The Restorative Practices program, which focuses on treating students with respect, repairing harm done by violence and fixing problems, was credited, in part, with turning West Philadelphia High from one of the city's most dangerous schools into a much calmer place.

But after a district shake-up of the school, the program — which focuses in part on offenders taking responsibility for their actions and facing their victims — is gone and violence has inched up. The school's violence rate was 2.3 per 100 students as of Dec. 31, up from 1.1 in the same period last year.

Students also see value in the program, which is not found in any other district school. Bailie's group, however, just received funding for some training at South Philadelphia High.

The student group Youth United for Change recently called on the district to implement Restorative Practices "in all schools."

Another student organization, the Philadelphia Student Union, has launched the "Campaign for Nonviolent Schools," which calls for proactive anti-violence programs such as Restorative Practices, more student supports, and youth voice in school safety teams. Organizations around the city have signed on to the campaign, which the district has vowed to support.

Restorative Practices — which costs about $50,000 per school for a two-year training — is also used in Mastery Charter schools in Philadelphia and in Baltimore, Detroit, New York City, and Tucson, Ariz., districts.

"In Philadelphia, if we had some traction on funding, we'd have many schools lined up to work with us already," said Bailie, director of trainers at the International Institute for Restorative Practices. "When there's high-level support and a plan to carry out a program, it can really make some dramatic changes."

Ackerman has expressed support for the program. And in an interview, associate superintendent Hanna said the program was "on our radar to put it on the menu of options. It's not as widespread as we'd like it to be."

Confronted with a violence problem, administrators often resort to tough talk - zero tolerance, a hard line on crime, Bailie said. But, he added, there needs to be more.

"I can get some good behavior out of increased monitoring and a little bit of fear, but it's not long-term and it doesn't address the root problem," Bailie said. "Cultural programs like restorative practices are far cheaper than security cameras and police officers."