

"LifeZette" OpEd *The Violence in our Schools Must Stop*

The violence in our schools must stop. On May 16th a student of Dixon High School (alma mater of President Ronald Reagan) in Illinois opened fire near the school gym where students gathered for a graduation rehearsal. His mother said he was bullied and recently had been beaten so badly, his jaw was broken while others watched and no one offered to help him. The recent bullying left her son troubled and could have been the catalyst to the shooting. On May 18th, eight students and two teachers were killed and ten more were injured by a 17-year-old boy in a shooting at Santa Fe High School in Texas. It appears the shooter targeted and killed a 16-year-old girl who publicly rejected his advances. Her parents said later that she had told them that he was harassing her.

As in all of these horrific school shootings, there is an abundance of recommendations to prevent this from happening again. This is the 22nd school shooting in our country and there is once again a call to action among local state and federal officials. However earnest and urgent these calls are, there are still very few programs designed to prevent violence in our schools. Such programs begin by raising awareness of emotional health and fostering a positive school culture. Student shooters share common characteristics. They appear to have experienced pain and hopelessness in their young lives to the degree that they want to cause destructiveness of others within the institution that was the source of their pain. Schools are the locus of many students' anger, fears, jealousies, and sense of self. For many adolescents, school is the setting where their sense of identity and self-worth is either forged or fractured. Essentially, our students need programs which teach them early on the true meaning of friendship, the attribute of empathy, and provide intervention, especially in later grades, to help the victim as well as the perpetrator. A positive school culture is necessary for the emotional health and safety of its students.

As the President of the **Best Friends Foundation**, I have seen up close the problem of the deterioration of social/emotional behavior, which is the root of bullying and violence among students and have sought to address it. Recent research from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) states that, "20.8% of students report being bullied at school." Another form of bullying that is even more pervasive and possibly deadly is relationship violence. Youth Risk

Behavior Survey (YRBS) states that nearly 21% of female high school students and 13.4% of male high school students report being physically or sexually abused by a dating partner.

Research tells us that students who are bullies in adolescence are more likely to be abusive to their partners later. An American College Health Association (ACHA) study from 2016 cites that "...many victims of sexual violence, stalking, and intimate partner violence were first victimized at a young age..." It seems that the "Me Too" movement should acknowledge this noted origin of later violence. Also, we have reliable information from students at Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida that the shooter was bullied mercilessly throughout his middle and high school years. Later in high school in apparent retaliation, he physically attacked the boyfriend of a girl who had dated him and later rejected him and posted a picture of his handgun as a threat to the teen. Youth are known to internalize the detrimental effects of bullying which may turn a victim into a bully or at worst a sociopath.

According to a study recently published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, children bullied continually at school have "...declining test scores, a growing dislike of school, and failing confidence in their abilities," which can lead to anti-social behavior. The **Best Friends Program**, which originated in 1987 at Georgetown University Child Development Center, has served over 30,000 students nation-wide, including 20,000 in D.C. Public Schools. Nearly ten years ago we developed and successfully delivered a series of in-school seminars which utilize dance, music, and curriculum materials to provide information as to where and how to get help. In our musical number "**It's Not Cool to Be Mean**" students are actively involved in presenting statistics and hotline numbers on stage in a school assembly to their peers. They are encouraged to take a stand against bullying, are taught that what they send in a text lasts forever, and that they have a responsibility to intervene when their friends have extreme anger or despondency.

In the **Best Friends** and **Best Men Program**, we teach that peers are in a much better position to intervene, as "cyber friends" have access to online posts and pictures that are simply unavailable to adults. Our research showed us that nearly all of the participants would encourage their fellow students to use the hotline cards provided. School counselors tell us that respect for authority has also decreased and they believe it has led to a deterioration of the code of conduct that previously

existed in our nation's schools. In one post-seminar survey, **31%** of the students reported that their school culture was negative. Evidence from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that "...school-based programs can reduce aggressive behavior, including bullying...associated with youth violence".

We salute the First Lady's admirable effort to encourage students to reject bullying and to choose their best behavior. In the past, initiatives by other First Ladies were embraced and encouraged on both sides of the aisle. It is time to put aside politics and to work together for the good of our youth. The harassment and destructive treatment of youth by each other is an issue which transcends all politics. Everyone agrees that school violence and shootings must stop. To do that, bullying and violence prevention programs should be in place at all levels in all schools.