

School officials encourage students to report bullying



Thirty-two 'Buddy Benches' were installed at Tuscaloosa city and county schools in an effort to stop bullying in 2016. The benches are designed to be bully-free zones, where learn about acceptance and how to get along with one another. Administrators at Tuscaloosa city and county schools have taken a variety of measures to stem the growth of bullying. [STAFF FILE PHOTO]

Administrators say communication is the key

By Drew Taylor
Staff Writer

Before leaving to bury her niece Saturday afternoon, Eddwina Harris spoke about what she hopes for the future.

Harris' niece, McKenzie Adams, a 9-year-old student at U.S. Jones Elementary School, took her own life Dec. 3, according to family members. While the Demopolis and Linden police departments

are still investigating the circumstances surrounding McKenzie's death, the family has said they believe bullying drove her to commit suicide.

As the hearse carrying McKenzie was preparing to leave

the funeral, Harris said she hoped McKenzie's story would be a catalyst to ensure that what happened to her never happens to another child.

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"If you knew your child was at a place where there was a ticking time bomb, you would come and get them out," Harris said. "The time is now to get them out of a dangerous situation."

McKenzie's death has highlighted the problem of bullying, and experts say parents and teachers have a powerful tool to combat the problem: ensuring the lines of communication are open with youngsters.

While it is unclear at this time what avenge McKenzie's family took to tell school administrators about her harassment or what type of reporting mechanism the school system takes for such issues, other school systems from across Alabama and the country have been looking at the issue of bullying and its prevalence nationwide.

In the last year, the Alabama Legislature has created laws to ensure that school systems statewide look at ways to prevent cyberbullying and bullying off-campus. Earlier this year, the Jamari Terrell Williams Student Harassment Act was passed, named after a 10-year-old boy from Montgomery who committed suicide in 2017 after a period of bullying. Locally, both Tuscaloosa City Schools and the Tuscaloosa County School System have their own system of monitoring bullying and collecting reports on incidents.

In TCS, parents and those subjected to bullying can report bullying online at the school system's website. Parents or students can go to www.tuscaloosacityschools.com, click on "Links" and then the "Report Bullying" link. From there, an anonymous report can be made to the specific school.

"The report goes to the counselor at that school," said Portia Martin, coordinator of student services at TCS.

The online tool is the latest addition to the school system's long-running program,



Jasmine Adams and her boyfriend Marjunna Richardson attend the funeral of Jasmine's daughter McKenzie Adams at U.S. Jones Elementary School in Demopolis on Saturday. (STAFF PHOTO/DREW TAYLOR)

Harassment Awareness Learning Together (HALT), TCS first implemented in 2012 to work on identifying bullying and stopping it.

"We tried to make sure students had a way of making their voices heard," Martin said. "Some people don't want these things out here, so we made sure they could do it anonymously."

Jackie Hudgens, director of accountability for TCSS, said that over the last few years, counselors across the school system have taken time to read up on the latest research on school bullying and have held meetings with administrators to detail signs to look for.

"Through just regular exposure, we have our counselors are presenting bullying concepts on a monthly basis," Hudgens said.

Since 2014, TCSS has used the Building Responsibility Acceptance through Voice Empowerment (BRAVE), a program similar to HALT that encourages the community to end bullying by calling out bad behavior and identifying trends.

Both Martin and Hudgens agreed that the most effective way of reporting and ending

bullying is making sure students have healthy relationships with teachers and faculty, so the students can confide in them about issues.

"It's so important and it's so easy now," Hudgens said. "You can send an email or respond in so many other ways."

Travia Wilkerson, a licensed professional counselor at Family Counseling Service of West Alabama, said that while bullying is not the sole cause of childhood suicide, it can be a contributing factor.

"I have had many clients dealing with bullying from elementary school to high school and adults," Wilkerson said. "This is an ongoing issue."

While not a new phenomenon, childhood bullying in schools has been causing concerns among researchers because of its prevalence over the last decade. In 2008, researchers at Yale University who were analyzing the link between bullying and suicide, ultimately concluding that there was a "a likely association," according to Young-Shin Kim, assistant professor at Yale School of Medicine's Child Study Center who led the review. The

Yale researchers also cited five studies that concluded bullying victims were two to nine times more likely to report suicidal thoughts than children who were not bullied.

However, other researchers point to other factors that can contribute to a child's mental state and the possibility of suicidal thoughts or self-harm, such as home life, mental state and other issues.

Wilkerson said that ultimately, children are likely targets of bullying due to perceived weakness or difference and that bullying can often take place among other bullies once the victim has been isolated. Wilkerson said she always encourages victims to display confidence, take pride in extracurricular activities and to not put themselves in situations where they can be targeted.

"If there is a bully, do not go to unsupervised areas," she said.

Like Martin and Hudgens, Wilkerson said it is important for children to feel that they can come to adults with their problems. However, Wilkerson said it is important that parents and teachers look for warning signs,

Signs your child is being bullied

- Unexplainable injuries
- Lost or destroyed clothing, books, electronics, or jewelry
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches, feeling sick or faking illness
- Changes in eating habits, like suddenly skipping meals or binge eating. Kids may come home from school hungry because they did not eat lunch.
- Difficulty sleeping or frequent nightmares
- Declining grades, loss of interest in schoolwork, or not wanting to go to school
- Sudden loss of friends or avoidance of social situations
- Feelings of helplessness or decreased self-esteem
- Self-destructive behaviors such as running away from home, harming themselves, or talking about suicide

Source: www.stopbullying.gov

especially when they begin to show increased signs of depression or lethargy.

"When children have issues not wanting to talk, one thing they can do is emphasize to the child that their emotions are valued," she said.

In addition to the website, students and parents at TCS can anonymously report bullying on the phone at 662-368-2530. At TCSS, those facing bullying or know someone facing bullying can call the Student Services Office at 205-342-2724. Wilkerson said parents can also email principals and counselors about issues their children are facing.

Those dealing with bullying can visit www.stopbullying.gov. For those dealing with depression or suicidal thoughts, call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 or text "HOME" to the Crisis Text Line at 741741.

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