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Thursday, Feb 16, 2006

Opinion 

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SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Putting a stop to bullying

BY KEVIN JENNINGS

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Recent events in two Florida middle schools again have focused the country's attention on school violence. In both Miami and Orlando, we've seen how what is often chalked up to just "boys being boys" became the scene for two violent assaults. What should be havens for learning are for too many students

a scary, isolating and sometimes dangerous place. In this time of reflection and assessment, many teachers and school administrators took a stand by participating in No Name-Calling Week.

Inspired by the young-adult author James Howe's book, *The Misfits*, No Name-Calling Week, began on Monday and ended yesterday. It is a project of GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) and Simon & Schuster Childrens' Publishing, in collaboration with more than 40 education, mental-health, youth-advocacy and social-justice organizations. No Name-Calling Week sought to provide teachers and students with the tools that they need to begin an ongoing dialogue about ways to address and eliminate bullying in their schools.

More than 1,400 students from across the country took part in a creative-expression contest while thousands of their teachers, counselors and principals have registered online and expressed their interests in the program.

Recent studies bring the issue of name-calling in schools to light and reinforce what I have heard from years of working with students, teachers and school administrators throughout Florida and the country. According to a national study, "From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America" (conducted by Harris Interactive and commissioned by GLSEN), nearly half of students (47 percent) and a majority of teachers (64 percent) in junior high and middle schools consider bullying and harassment a serious problem in their schools. In a subsequent report focusing on Florida students, less than half (43 percent) report feeling safe in their school.

Often we may hear reactions to bullying like "boys will be boys," or "teasing is just a part of growing up." If kids are worried about getting bullied or harassed, they won't be worried about their next test, doing their homework or going to college. The effects of bullying and harassment like low self-esteem, depression and physical abuse should never be considered a rite of passage.

In speaking with teachers and school administrators all over the country, I am often asked, "What can I do?" That question is part of what we are trying to address with No Name-Calling Week. Having a supportive teacher makes a big difference, but some students don't feel comfortable turning to teachers when name-calling, bullying and harassment occur. According to the report on school climate in Florida, 60 percent of those harassed say they have never even bothered to report this mistreatment to school staff.

Even more sadly, nearly 20 percent of those who did speak up about harassment reported that school personnel did not take the steps necessary to make sure the harassment stopped.

We know that there are thousands of teachers in Florida committed to helping make schools a safe haven for learning. But they need to have appropriate training to respond more effectively. They also need comprehensive anti-bullying/anti-harassment policies that include categories like religion, race and sexual orientation. "From Teasing to Torment" tells us that students in schools without inclusive anti-bullying/anti-harassment policies were nearly twice as likely to report bullying was a serious issue (52

percent vs. 28 percent). Yet more than a quarter of Florida students report that they don't even know if their school has any such policy. The state of Florida, like 40 other states, lacks one as a whole.

All of us want to protect students from name-calling, bullying and harassment in schools, and No Name-Calling Week is a step in the right direction. Working together, teachers, students, parents, school administrators and community leaders can help make sure that students aren't scared to go to school -- and that No Name-Calling Week can be *every* week of the year.

Kevin Jennings is the founder and executive director of Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

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