



Alternatives to Suspension

By **Kevin Hamlin**, Vice-principal, Cardinal Carter Catholic SS, Windsor-Essex CDSB

One of my more enjoyable tasks this year was delivering the *Shaping Safer Catholic Schools* workshops. The opportunity to meet with other administrators from across the province to share experiences has been invaluable. These discussions presented alternate methods and processes to deal with some of the challenges facing us in our schools. Inevitably, the issues surrounding the ineffectiveness of our suspension policies and procedures surface at nearly every workshop. Administrators are often frustrated with the process whereby students who are suspended return to school having learned nothing about their behaviour and consequently offend again. This revolving door syndrome has very little positive impact either on the suspended students or on the larger school environment.

In early September 2006 members of our school community were invited to participate on our Safe School Team to develop a bully prevention plan for the whole school. Our group consisted of a senior level student, a few teachers, a guidance counsellor, a social worker, our campus minister, a police officer and representatives from both bus companies that service our school. Using the framework developed from our CPCO workshop, we discussed what our plan should include. We decided to involve as many departments as possible to create a school plan that was reflective of the entire school.

Our administrative team advocates giving suspended students take-home assignments. We wanted assignments that would enable students to learn from and take ownership for their inappropriate behaviour. Students would be offered the option of completing this take-home assignment while suspended. If they accepted the assignment, they would be

permitted to return to school one day early. This would be the carrot to entice the student to complete the task. It became apparent that we would have to develop such assignments, as it was difficult to find existing material that suited our needs. We wanted students to be accountable for their actions and empathize with those that they had offended. Our Safe School Team developed a few assignments and we began to get positive feedback from students and parents.

I invited our dance teacher, Maggy Sonoski to help with our whole school bully prevention program. We understood the importance of getting the students involved in our plan. Students reach other students at a deeper level and the message is more believable when they are involved. This talented teacher produced a multimedia dance performance that included 20 girls, a slide presentation and extraordinary music to depict the ill effects of bullying. We began to utilize their performance at student assemblies, parent information nights and feeder school visits. It became a major component of our bully prevention plan.

We decided to have the multimedia dance routine professionally filmed, edited and distributed on DVD. The dance would be the main information piece on our anti-bullying DVD. At the same time, students in selected English classes were creating skits depicting various bullying scenarios, each with an important message. Our English department head assisted in developing an assignment, with a literacy component, which is included with the DVD. We never miss an opportunity to improve our literacy skills even if the student is suspended for bullying. Our

communications technology department videotaped the skits and packaged the DVD. The finished program was ready for student consumption.

We do not know yet what impact this project will have on bullying in our school. However, the team effort and wide cross section of students involved truly made this a whole school project.

In April 2007 I introduced our DVD at the *I am Safe!* conference in Ottawa. The focus of the conference was bullying and victimization. People in attendance had an opportunity to see our students perform live and view the accompanying slide presentation. I explained how we were using the presentation as part of our suspension strategy as a method of changing behaviour. I was ecstatic with the response from the conference participants. At the end of the day, we only had a few DVDs remaining of the 95 that we had brought.

This DVD is a great resource for secondary and elementary schools looking for strategies for dealing with bullying. It is appropriate for grades 6 to 12. More importantly, this is a great example of staff and students working together on a project that positively affects the climate of the school.

My involvement in the *Shaping Safer Catholic Schools* workshop has been a tremendous learning opportunity for me. This experience has widened my perspective on provincial issues and it has afforded me an opportunity to bring new ideas to my own school. I look forward to further involvement with CPCO initiatives.

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