

By [Peter Rowe](#), UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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## BULLYING ON LOCAL CAMPUSES

The California Department of Education has collected data on bullying-related incidents since January 2009; to date, statistics have been compiled only for the first six months of that year.

In San Diego County, a total of 13 suspensions and one expulsion occurred at these schools:

Hidden Valley Middle School, Escondido Union:	one suspension
Monte Vista High School, Grossmont Union High:	one suspension
Grossmont High School, Grossmont Union High:	two suspensions
La Mesa Middle School, La Mesa-Spring Valley:	two suspensions
Tierra del Sol Middle School, Lakeside Union Elementary:	one suspension
Mt. Carmel High School, Poway Unified:	two suspensions
Olive Peirce Middle School, Ramona City Unified:	two suspensions and one expulsion
Nubia Leadership Academy, San Diego Unified:	two suspensions

Even before the January suicide of Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old Massachusetts girl who had been tormented by classmates, parents in San Diego County feared for the lives of their bullied children.

“My prevailing thought when I wake up in the morning is, ‘I don’t want to find my son hanging from the rafters,’” said the mother of a Lakeside middle schooler who has been bullied for three years. She asked that her name not be used for fear of further assaults on her son.

He has been punched, slapped, hit with rocks, called names. Asked about transferring to another campus, he declined. What if the same fate — or worse — awaited him there?

“And why should he have to leave?” his mother asked. (The students and parents interviewed for this story asked that their names not be used for fear of further assaults.)

For bullies, opportunities have never been greater. While some studies show that the American schoolyard is safer than it was just seven years ago, bullies have found new places to ambush kids. With text messaging and social-media sites, they can attack at any time, any place.

And even if physical violence is declining, there’s still no shortage of victims. Just ask David Bristol, a Solana Beach lawyer.

“My most egregious case?” said Bristol, who says he is contacted weekly by the parents of harassed children. “Some kid sitting in class sets another kid’s hair on fire. That happened twice.”

While Phoebe Prince’s suicide has stirred national outrage, anti-bullying efforts show signs of progress. A Department of Justice-funded survey released last month noted that the percentage of children reporting they were being bullied fell from 22 percent in 2003 to just under 15 percent in 2008. The report credits a spate of aggressive school campaigns, many adopted after the 1999 Columbine High School massacre.

In San Diego County, schools are training staffers at all levels. In May, a bullying workshop will be held for Chula Vista district bus drivers.

Sacramento has pitched in, too. Since 2009, state law has allowed districts to suspend or expel habitual bullies. In the first six months of last year, 1,382 California bullies were suspended and 13 expelled. In San Diego County, there were 13 suspensions and one expulsion.

Still, there's no telling whether those schools have more than their share of problem kids or are run by hypervigilant administrators. Maya Madrigal-Weiss, a counselor who instructs San Diego County teachers on how to handle this problem, notes that not every fight is a case of bullying. True bullying is repeated, intentional and pits the strong against the weak, she said.

It's also most prevalent among middle and high school students.

"There could be nowhere else where you could see people being hit, pushed, shoved," said Audrey Hokoda, a child-and-family-development professor at San Diego State University. "You can imagine that in the workplace, how people would react — this would go to human resources and someone might get fired."

Children may bully, but experts insist that it's dangerous to regard it as harmless kid stuff. Often, victims fall into depression; neglect studies and skip classes; and, in rare cases, commit suicide or try to kill their real or perceived tormentors.

Bullies, too, face unhappy futures — but not thanks to low self-esteem. "That's just not true," said Rana Sampson, a San Diego-based crime consultant who wrote "Bullying in Schools," a guide commissioned by the Justice Department. "Bullies have high self-esteem."

But they seem to have low moral standards. A Norwegian study found that bullies who use violence are four times more likely to grow up and commit crimes as adults.

If those are the dangers, what are the solutions?

Sampson researched and wrote "Bullying in Schools" in 2002, in the shadow of the March 5, 2001, shootings at Santana High School. Andy Williams, the 15-year-old freshman who killed two students and wounded 13 others at the Santee campus, had been bullied for years.

Sampson read everything about the topic and kept bumping into one name.

"When you looked at the record, it all pointed to Olweus," she said.

Dan Olweus is a Swedish-born social scientist who has studied bullies for 40 years. He preaches a total-campus approach, one that requires a clear understanding of behaviors and consequences from the entire faculty, staff and student body.

"Here's the problem: You can't just do a little," Sampson said. "Doing little, negligible things just doesn't do it. And schools are so overwhelmed with all their current responsibilities, they don't know how to take on additional ones. So, they look for easy things to do — 'no bullying allowed,' 'zero tolerance.'"

Even at a school committed to ending bullying, some forms of this abuse may go unnoticed by adults. When Alex Cortes, principal at Silver Wing Elementary in San Diego, surveyed his 435 students last year, he was shocked to find that children were excluded, picked on and hit with racial slurs around the seemingly peaceful basketball courts.

“We would walk by and think, ‘Oh, kids playing basketball — everything is great,’” Cortes said. “But that’s where the kids felt a lot of bullying was happening.”

Now, Silver Wing staffers spend more time watching and listening to those games.

But can teachers take on this additional task? Tom Letson doubts it. In Howell, N.J., the counselor has the full-time job of addressing bullying on three middle school campuses.

Bullies, though, tend to have powerful allies: their parents.

“They naturally come to the defense of their kids who are bullying,” Letson said. “Sometimes administrators bend to that.”

In some parents’ views, sometimes administrators act uninterested. The Lakeside mother of the bullied middle schooler said she was unable to get the school’s attention, although her son was repeatedly attacked.

“I have not been provided with any school policies on bullying, harassment or retaliation,” she said. “I asked about training and policies. Nothing.”

She and her husband hired Bristol, the Solana Beach education lawyer. Since then, the administration has been more responsive, she said.

Twila Godley, president of the Lakeside Union School District board, said the district’s anti-bullying policy is available to the public in the district offices.

“We do not tolerate bullying,” she said, noting that the district’s Lemon Crest Elementary is a national demonstration site for **PeaceBuilders**, a peer counseling program.

Even the strongest campaigns may not eliminate all bullying. A Point Loma High School senior praised his campus’ security team, although he was beaten by three students a month ago after leaving a school event. He asked that his name not be used for fear of reprisals.

“Bullying happens all the time,” he said.

Why? “There’s a lot of stuff that doesn’t get told. People want to be popular, want to be accepted by other people. People don’t want to say things, and then it never stops.”

Students need to know that “tattling” is OK — in fact, that it’s right — said Wenda Alvarez of the San Diego Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force.

“We tell kids to always go to your parents or another respected adult if anything makes you hurt or makes you uncomfortable,” she said.

On his own, the Point Loma High senior reached the same conclusion. Though peers warned him to shut up, he told teachers about the assault and identified his attackers.

“I figured they already didn’t like me,” he said.

One assailant was suspended. Police questioned all three. And the student who spoke up? He was bothered no more.