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EDITOR'S PICK

TOPICAL

'No easy, quick solution': Bullying experts describe trends in schools following tragedy

Ben Tsujimoto

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Jesus Rivera and Blanca Martinez's 12-year-old grandson Dariel Rivera Reyes died by suicide after bullying in Buffalo Public Schools, and the grandparents are urging the district to confront the issue.

Joseph Cooke, Buffalo News

Ben Tsujimoto

The suicide of a bilingual 12-year-old student after months of bullying at Martin Luther King Jr. School 48 has led parents, teachers and community leaders to implore Buffalo Public Schools to revisit its policies and practices.

But two more incidents revealed last week – a second in Buffalo and one in Lancaster – also reveal the harassment that his family said caused **Dariel Rivera Reyes** to feel he had “no way out” is hardly unique to his school.

All three instances of bullying also give a snapshot of trends common to the circumstances that preceded Reyes’ death. They involved middle school students, the use of social media as a weapon and the targeting of disadvantaged populations.

The structure to address bullying is in place – and experts said it can be very effective – but as teachers at School 48 found when multiple reports were filed against Reyes’ bully, it’s not always followed.

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School leaders' biggest concern? Students' mental health

That's why persistence and other reporting avenues could be necessary for parents and teachers, said Stacie Dziwulski, director of the **Mental Health Advocates of WNY** family support program.

"Bullying is so often dismissed," she said. "It's dismissed by parents, school personnel, but if people are seeing something happen, then they really need to keep at it."

Buffalo Schools' **school climate survey dashboard** heatmap, which targets trouble areas using 12,500 student responses, shows bullying worsened by five percentage points in the district over the last year and remains the greatest concern among school safety categories.

Regional mental health experts say the most important takeaway is acknowledging that bullying is a significant challenge, and that discussions among educators, community organizations and students are vital to moving forward.

“There are so many overarching areas of concern, and we are so under-resourced in many areas,” said Kelly Dumas, executive director of **Healing Hub of NY**, which helps vulnerable individuals address unresolved trauma. “There are all these challenges in the schools. Bullying has been there but has been able to fly under the radar, unfortunately. It is still very much a problem.”

“Society has realized this is a huge concern – it can have a devastating impact,” said Amanda B. Nickerson, director of the **Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention** at the University at Buffalo.

Other incidents



Family demands change in Buffalo Schools after a 12-year-old, bullied relentlessly, dies by suicide

Ebony McMillan, caregiver for a refugee student at International School 45, described to the Buffalo School Board last week how her sixth-grader was struck repeatedly on the head on the playground, leaving welts and prompting fears for his safety.

McMillan said a video of the incident was shared widely on social media, adding to the student's humiliation.

McMillan said she pulled the student out of school because the interim principal and associate superintendent for school leadership were slow and inadequate in response. She told The Buffalo News that when school leaders offered her child a spot in a criteria-based school, she felt "insulted" because "all schools should be safe."



Bullying and assault accusation made in lawsuit involving a second high school wrestling team

Elsewhere, Michelle Treece, the mother of a Lancaster Middle School special needs student, filed a lawsuit last week alleging her daughter suffered "several physical and emotional damages" from bullying over three years.

The suit describes the nature of the bullying as physical attacks, verbal threats and cyberbullying, plus intimidation by school administration with "no action reasonably calculated to eliminate the hostile environment and ensure the safety" of the girl.

In both cases, the student targets of alleged bullying were ultimately moved to home instruction due to poor mental health and fears for their safety.





A procession of cars travels down Busti Avenue toward the intersection with Hudson Street in Buffalo's lower West Side on May 23, the day before the funeral for 12-year-old Buffalo Schools student Dariel Rivera Reyes, who died by suicide after relentless bullying. Family members and friends watched the caravan.

Video contributed by the Rivera family

Disturbing themes

Much of the bullying that Reyes endured prior to his death fits the modern definition. He was bullied because he was different: the aggressor referred to Reyes and his friends as “those Spanish kids,” which teachers said made them easier targets because of the language barrier.

The bully at School 48 used TikTok and Discord – social media platforms where he was building influence – to show off to friends his control over Reyes. Treece’s daughter and her friends were cyberbullied on multiple social platforms, with the aggressor sometimes using aliases, the Lancaster lawsuit maintains – but the social problem can run even deeper.

“TikTok is one of the worst things that’s ever been invented,” Dziwulski said.

Add in the challenges most kids experience in sixth grade, and conditions are ripe for bullying.

“Middle school is extremely tough,” Dziwulski said. “The youth don’t want to be little kids anymore, but they’re not mature in any way, shape or form. There’s a lot of hormones, a lot of drama.”



One in five children experiences bullying, according to the Alberti Center’s Nickerson. That ratio is higher for economically disadvantaged students, the LGBTQ+ community, English language learners like Reyes and special education students like Treece’s daughter, she said.

As districts rush to address a mental health crisis worsened by Covid-19, Dumas said inequities within the pandemic may be starting to show through youth behavior in certain populations.

“Many people suffered significant loss, and we’re talking about marginalized communities, communities of color, that experienced loss at a greater rate,” the Healing Hub executive director said. “That impacts emotional and mental wellness at a greater level. You won’t always see it immediately (in children) – that can show up over years.”



Against the Storm Foundation bolsters mental health in Cheektowaga schools

Stigma against seeking mental health support has dwindled, but research shows some disadvantaged communities may not immediately trust help from professionals.

“It may take time to build trust, to have authentic conversations, to learn what your needs are and how I can best support you,” Dumas said. “We have training and tools, but they might not work for your situation. We have to learn and hear first.”

School district efforts

The 2012 **Dignity for All Students Act (DASA)** gave New York schools a roadmap to prevent and respond to bullying, defined as a power imbalance between students, with an aggressor threatening or causing harm repeatedly. It requires each school to identify an employee to serve as a DASA coordinator responsible for leading bullying investigations, determining the severity of an incident, and reviewing and communicating reports to school leaders.

District mandates are extensive. Students must be educated about identifying and responding to bullying – including how to file a DASA incident report – and they must have access to information in multiple languages. DASA demands a bullying incident be reported orally to a principal or superintendent within 24 hours and a written report to be filed within 48 hours.



Coaching, petty cash, social-emotional wellness: What you may not have noticed about new Buffalo teachers contract

“I think the intent of DASA was very much about prevention and school climate and instruction for students,” Nickerson said. “I don’t know that we collectively as a state have done as well with that.” Her recent work has focused on “bystander intervention training,” which equips students to better recognize bullying situations happening around them and to act with empathy.

Buffalo Schools has policies and some personnel in place to stymie bullying. The topic falls under “safety, security and wellness,” one of Buffalo Schools Superintendent Tonja M. Williams’ five goals to achieve by 2025.

To reach the goal, Williams has emphasized forming robust student support teams – comprising counselors, psychologists, social workers and attendance teachers – to help students confront mental health challenges, resolve conflicts with peers and cultivate key social and emotional skills.



Could a crisis center in Buffalo improve mental health care, take pressure off ECMC?

Districts across the region offer family support centers. Lancaster's touts partnerships with 17 community organizations dedicated to mental health, substance abuse and child abuse.

What should parents do?

Mental Health Advocates and others encourage parents to find a school employee with whom they connect well – a teacher, counselor or principal – to be an “ear” for them inside the school.

“Don’t give up,” Dziwulski said. “Don’t take no for answer.”

She and others encouraged parents and guardians to keep an open dialogue with their children and closely monitor any changes in their behavior. “Anything your child says to you is important, and you want to hear it,” Dziwulski said.

Adult check-ins with students to discuss emotional health are key, whether that’s school workers or parents. “Without that, the educational piece doesn’t come,” said Heist, the BestSelf program director.

Bullying prevention is paramount, said the Alberti Center’s Nickerson. “What are we doing in a systematic, holistic way to be helping children from a young age to treat others with respect and kindness?” Nickerson stressed teaching students about the behavior expected of them and buttressing with positive behavior supports and correcting and having consequences.

For change to happen, focus cannot wane, said Dumas, of Healing Hub. “They see and feel it for a moment, then people are ready to move on to what’s next. There’s always another tragedy. It’s about intentionally keeping bullying at the forefront.”

There are many ways to reach out to a trained counselor in times of crisis. Crisis Services of Erie County operates a 24-hour hotline at 716-834-3131. The Niagara County crisis hotline is 716-285-3515. The national Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is 988.

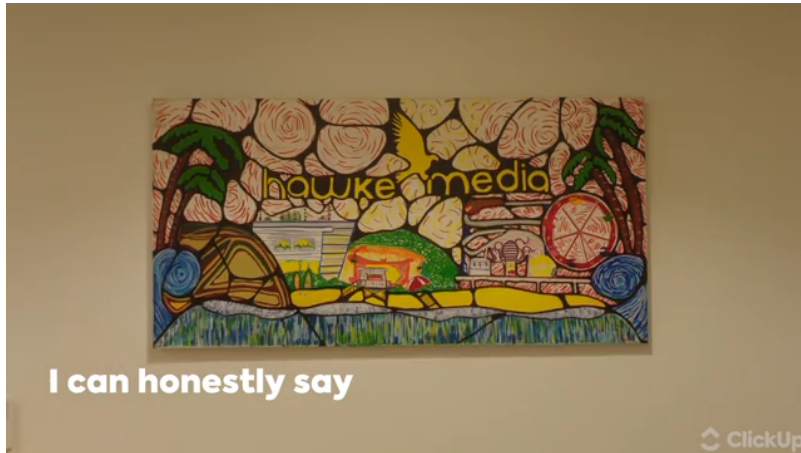
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