



**IN STONE MOUNTAIN** After seeing a skit, students act out a bullying scene

felt "persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked or injured." And bullying is why more than 160,000 children skip school every day, according to the National Association of School Psychologists.

Georgia began its pioneering efforts to legislate against bullying after two school tragedies. In 1994 Brian Head, a chubby, bespectacled 15-year-old who had been taunted for years, broke when a classmate at Etowah High School in Woodstock slapped him. He shouted, "I can't take it anymore!" pulled out a gun and shot himself in the head. Four years later, Josh Belluaro was punched in the head—and killed—by a bully who also attended Etowah. The next year, Georgia passed a three-strikes-and-you're-out policy. After three bullying offenses, middle and high school students may be shipped to a school for problem kids.

That kind of heavy hand has its opponents. William Pollack, a psychologist who wrote *Real Boys' Voices*, an exploration of boyhood, contends that such a punitive approach criminalizes childhood behavior and fails to address the root causes of bullying. Dorothy Espelage, an assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who co-authored a study on bullies, favors a comprehensive approach. "As soon as you pull a bully out of a school, another will take his place," she says. A deeper shift in school culture is required, she argues, because ultimately peer groups, not individuals, promote an ethic of aggression. She adds, "We need to change the climate so that most kids feel it's inappropriate to tease and harass."

That's what McNair Elementary in Hazelwood, Mo., attempts to do. In 1992 principal Peggy Dolan instituted a program to unteach kids what many had learned at home—that they should fight back when bullied. Instead, students are instructed to respond verbally, first with "I don't like what you said to me," then "I'm going to ask you to stop" and, if necessary, "I'm going to get help." Victims fill out a form describing the incident to a teacher or counselor. The issue is taken to peer mediation, and the offender is encouraged to sign an agreement not to bully.

Before the program went into effect, Dolan dealt with 55 fights a year; now she averages six. Also, the school's standardized math and reading scores have risen from the 40th to the 60th percentile—in

# LET BULLIES BEWARE

Politicians are going after them. But what works best? Banishing them—or changing the culture?

By **NADYA LABI**

**T**HE 450 FRESHMEN AND SOPHOMORES gathered in the auditorium of Stephenson High School in Stone Mountain, Ga., are contemplating a red poster with a drawing of a large angry face and the word BULLY. That poster and two others, marked VICTIM and BYSTANDER, form the backdrop for the action onstage. Victor—with his black beret and long, stringy hair that scream "Victim!"—is enduring a stream of abuse from Brad. "I can call you anything I want because I'm a man and you're a punk sissy nerd!" Brad shouts after stealing Victor's hat. The audience laughs hysterically. "We don't want punk sissy nerds like you hanging around our school. Right?" asks Brad, prompting the watching kids to chant "Punk sissy nerd" in an unconscious display of bystander cravenness. But when the play is over, the students are more reflective. "It was really good," says Shina Mills, a sophomore. "It helps teenagers not to resolve problems on their own but to get help."

A skit about big bad bullies may seem ludicrously quaint against the backdrop of teen shootings like the one last week in El Cajon, Calif. But the professional production, part of the local school district's efforts to combat bullying, seeks in a small way to

change the weekly headlines. More and more schools around the country are implementing antibullying policies. New laws in Georgia, New Hampshire and Vermont require them, and Colorado, home to the Columbine school massacre, is debating a measure. Skeptics say such legislation is fruitless and serves merely as a platform for politicians to display their practiced empathy. But some innovative programs around the country are showing concrete results that challenge the laissez-faire mentality that, after all, kids will be kids.

That bullying is a destructive force is not in dispute. Last fall the National Threat Assessment Center, run by the U.S. Secret Service, found that in more than two-thirds of 37 recent school shootings, the attackers

## TFK POLL

TIME FOR KIDS, our sister publication, in an online poll last week, asked its readers:

**HAS A BULLY EVER PICKED ON YOU IN SCHOOL?**

**Yes, I've been picked on** **41%**

**No, I haven't been picked on** **32%**

**No, I usually do the bullying** **27%**

Total Respondents: 4,019