

Marshall Memo: Students as Potential Leaders Against Bullying

In this Principal Leadership article, author and Empower Program founder Rosalind Wiseman says that students can play a key role in turning around a negative school culture – but only if they are taught some principles of ethical leadership.

She uses the example of a high school in which students were able to trot out the ostensible values – tolerance, respect for diversity, proud traditions, caring teachers, school spirit – but also reported incidents of derogatory language (That’s so gay. Sk---. Don’t be a p----), offensive racial and ethnic jokes, religious intolerance (If you don’t believe in Jesus, you’re going straight to hell), and misogyny (Shut up, woman!). In addition, students reported that they didn’t fully trust their elected student council members to represent school values and stand up to student bullies.

Wiseman suggests several leadership arguments to help students step up to the plate and begin to change their school’s culture:

- Redefine loyalty.

Wiseman says that students need to get to the place where they see that loyalty means “standing up to someone to whom they are close and respectfully telling that person when he or she is wrong. Loyalty is not backing someone up or saying nothing when he or she does something unethical. That’s not being loyal; that’s being manipulated.”

- Differentiate between snitching and reporting.

Snitching is trying to get someone in trouble. Reporting is meant to fix a problem that’s beyond the capacity of the individual to fix, to right a wrong. Sure, there’s the danger that a clueless adult may make the situation worse, but Wiseman says we need to help students find the adult who can be their best advocate in the situation.

- Practice with real situations.

Students learn best by discussing actual case studies similar to situations they are likely to face. How should they talk to peers in leadership positions who aren’t doing their jobs? How can they talk to peers who aren’t taking them seriously?

- Educate adult leaders.

“Adults in the school community can’t ask students to do work that they aren’t willing to do themselves,” says Wiseman. That means exposing them to the same anti-bullying training that students get, and urging them to support students as they take on leadership roles with their peers.

But in the end, concludes Wiseman, kids can do some of the heaviest lifting. “Students have the potential to be leaders in ways that adults in the community can’t be,” she says. “If they receive the training, skills, and resources that they need – and if adults are in the background, guiding the student leaders – students have far more power to effect positive change than faculty members ever would.”

“The Leadership Dilemma” by Rosalind Wiseman in *Principal Leadership*, October 2009 (Vol. 10, #2, p. 40-43), no e-link available;