Every two years, the statewide Healthy Youth Survey1 takes a snapshot of the well-being of our community's children. And every two years, we're troubled once again by what we learn about the level of harassment that takes place in our schools, despite many schools’ efforts to quell bullying.

Twenty-six percent of 8th graders in King County, for example, report having been bullied at least once in the past 30 days. Eighteen percent report having been harassed or intimidated at school because of their gender. Fourteen percent, because of their “race, ethnicity, or national origin or what someone thought it was.” Thirteen percent, because “someone thought [they] were gay, lesbian or bisexual (whether [they were] or not).” Ten percent, because of their “religion or what someone thought it was.” Nine percent because they “have a health problem or physical or mental disability, or someone thought [they] did.”

The numbers are similar for the state as a whole, largely unchanged since 2004 (29% had been bullied then vs. 27% now).

Sexual harassment seems to be down in King County (23% then, 18% now). But the questions were worded differently so comparing the results is squishy. In fact, the old questions asked if you had ever experienced each kind of harassment, whereas the new questions focus just on the past 30 days. So even if things had gotten no better, you’d expect the numbers to drop. Given that, it's possible that racial harassment may be slightly better, too (17% then, 15% now).

Disability harassment seems to be alarmingly more prevalent than just two years ago (6% then, 9% now). Similarly, homophobic harassment seems to be significantly worse than it was two years ago (10% then, 13% now) even though children were asked only about the past 30 days this time. In any case, we – grown-ups – should be ashamed of the numbers.

It isn’t that the schools aren’t trying. Every school district addresses bullying in one way or another. But policies alone, even consistently and soberly enforced policies, stop bullying only when an adult is in earshot. They do nothing about the back row in a classroom or the locker room, playground or bus stop. The only way to end bullying that occurs when adults aren’t around is to build community, teach compassion and risk

controversy by addressing prejudice head on ... because too many instances of bullying are bias-based.

The problem: Precious few bullying programs address prejudice. They teach children to tell the offender to stop. They teach them to tell an adult. Some suggest simplistic, stilted language and promise easy answers that kids know are unrealistic. But even the best programs rarely discuss the elephant in the corner: sexism, racism, and bias based on gender expression, sexual orientation, country of origin, religion and disability.

Schools are not as safe as they could be if adults got more training in prejudice reduction. They are not as safe as they would be if they implemented school-wide programs that spoke directly to the biases in our culture ... in the music and movies and jokes and advertising that surround children every day.

We can see those numbers drop. Watch the numbers over the next few years in the districts that DO address bias without flinching. We can turn the terror of bullying around.

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http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/opinion/309373_safeschools29.html