

Parochial schools not immune to bullies

by [Charley Honey](#)

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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (RNS) Middle school is no picnic for a lot of students, but for Alec McGuire, it was intolerable.

He transferred from one Catholic school to another in eighth grade to get away from another student whom he said harassed and ridiculed him. Whether making fun of his parents' divorce or throwing a basketball at him, the student and his friends made Alec's daily life miserable.

"I could not take it," said McGuire, now 18, who recently graduated from West Catholic High School in Grand Rapids, Mich.

He said he continued to withstand the teasing as an underclassman. But helped by administrators, he did well in school, serving as band president and on the Mayor's Youth Council.

Still, he believes schools need to take bullying more seriously, including Catholic and Christian schools.

"I think it's a problem that a vast majority of people (choose) to ignore," said McGuire, who is headed to college at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Mich.

As students like Alec leave school for the summer, many secretly nurse wounds of hallway humiliation and locker-room torture. Some still may see hateful messages pop up on their cellphones. And some may struggle to reconcile their faith with how they've been treated.

While Christian schools pride themselves on teaching faith values as well as academics, many students' experiences are at odds with Jesus' love-thy-neighbor teachings. While public schools have garnered more

attention, faith-based schools also need to guard against bullying, say those working on the problem.

"Sometimes there's this false perception that if your kids go to a Catholic or Christian school, you should not have to expect any mean behavior going on," said Marcia McEvoy, a consultant on bullying and violence. "Kids are kids are kids. There's mean behavior going on in all those places."

The bullying problem has loomed larger since the January 2010 suicide of Phoebe Prince, a Massachusetts 15-year-old who was harassed in school and online. The White House held a conference on bullying in March, and the Michigan Civil Rights Commission and Mayor's Youth Council held forums in Grand Rapids this spring.

Michigan is one of five states without an anti-bullying law.

"We need to become community activists, every one of us, to tackle this," said Kevin Epling of East Lansing, whose son, Matt, committed suicide at age 14. "This is a problem that's always been there, but it's growing increasingly worse."

Epling, co-director of Bully Police USA, said at least 10 Michigan students have committed "bullycide" since 2001.

Some blame increased bullying on the rise of social media and a generally meaner society.

"There may have been a time when you could say, 'Kids will be kids,' but in the last 25 years it's really spiraled," said Bernie Stanko, principal of Sacred Heart of Jesus School, which is instituting an anti-bullying program. "There's a correlation between our lack of civility and this increase in bullying."

McEvoy agrees that bullying is encouraged by "a coarsening of our culture."

"If you take a look at how adults behave in games, sporting events and in traffic, we're modeling a lot of mean and disrespectful behavior," said McEvoy, a West Catholic graduate. "Kids are going to

follow what we do, not what we say."

Studies have found that nearly half of all teens report having been bullied online. Facebook and text messaging allow bullies to follow their targets from school to home.

Dave Faber, superintendent of schools for the Grand Rapids Catholic Diocese, said he rarely dealt with in-school bullying when he was a K-8 school principal. However, Faber added, "I would get parent complaints that their (children) got a text message at 1 a.m., a horrible type of message -- racial slurs, sexual harassment."

The Rev. Louis Stasker, superintendent of Catholic Secondary Schools, said it's difficult for today's students to escape bullies.

"When I was a kid, you go home and you're free of it," Stasker said. "Now you go home and get it in your emails and on the computer. There's no relief."

In Grand Rapids Christian Schools, online abuse has pushed bullying "underground," said Superintendent Tom DeJonge.

"Social media bullying is a big deal," said DeJonge, adding a couple students in his schools have been disciplined for it. "Kids have access to electronic communications today they didn't have two years ago. Younger and younger kids are being exposed."

Liz Caputo, an eighth-grader at Holy Spirit School, spoke on cyber-bullying at a Mayor's Youth Council forum in April. She says she's not experienced it herself, but the problem is evident.

"The bully can hide behind a user name, so the person that's being bullied doesn't know it's them," said Liz, 14.

She says Holy Spirit effectively controls bullying and that students know they can anonymously report it to teachers and counselors.

Stasker said all Catholic secondary schools follow the diocese's Student Dignity Policy, which specifies acts of harassment and spells out procedures for handling it.

Alec McGuire said West Catholic handled his bullying problems "very well." As for students who bully, they should take their faith more seriously, he added.

"Catholic social teaching states everyone should be treated like a human being, with dignity and compassion," Alec said firmly. "Even if you don't like someone, you should still be respectful of them."