

Fighting for Dignity

Rosalind Wiseman talks about addressing complex bullying situations and developing a school culture aimed at treating everyone with dignity

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One student goes to the bathroom and leaves their backpack outside in the hallway. Two other students remove the student's cellphone from the backpack and take an inappropriate picture with it. The two students then send the photo to a girl that the student likes. The two students put the cellphone back into the backpack and the student comes out of the bathroom without knowing what just happened. The parents of the girl who received the inappropriate photo contact the school district upset and demand that the student be punished.

These are the types of complex bullying scenarios that school districts are facing today. Rosalind Wiseman, a best-selling author and expert on school bullying and ethical leadership, said these situations demand that school leaders address these issues justly.

"The school has to have the ability, the knowledge, and the trust of the parents and of the community to say, 'We have to figure out who this kid is. Just because it's from this child's phone doesn't necessarily mean that it is him,'" Wiseman said. "And the school has to know that. That is the

world that we are living in today."

Addressing school bullying is messy and complex. Unlike most movies, in real life, it can be hard to see who is the perpetrator and who is the victim. It can also be challenging to distinguish between what is bullying and everyday drama. The work of school leaders, Wiseman says, is to create environments where students can reach their potential and give students the ability to empower themselves.

"We want you to have mastery over your own life to the best extent you can," Wiseman said, talking as a school leader to a student. "It's about you having control over your life with the understanding that messed up things are going to happen. People are going to abuse their power, they're going to try and silence you so you need to be prepared so that you can have the best chance of your truth being heard."

Wiseman said this begins with the adults and leaders in the school district modeling appropriate behavior. How students treat each other is a reflection of how they see their teachers, principals, school board members and administrators interact with each other. For instance,

Wiseman said that even well-intentioned adults will sometimes look the other way when they see other adults abusing power. Young people see that and lose trust in the adults around them and are going to be much more reluctant to go to an adult when they have a problem.

"When young people have confidence in the capacity and the confidence of the adults in the school, they are much more likely to come forward," Wiseman said.

Adults can build confidence among their students, parents, peers and community members by acknowledging when they failed or could have done better and when they treated someone poorly. As part of this process, Wiseman said, it's absolutely crucial that the school board treats all of its members and community members who come before the board with dignity.

"This is hard but we're only asking ourselves what we regularly ask our students to do and that is to take responsibility to hold ourselves accountable and to do the right thing when it's hard," Wiseman said. "We're fighting for what matters most — our collective right to be treated with dignity." ■

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