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Capital Chatter: Bills address bullying, youth resilience

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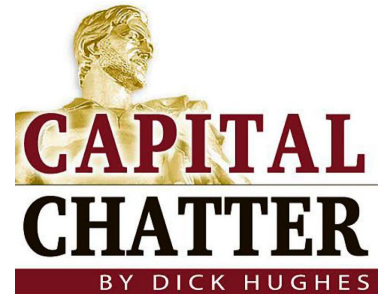
For many, middle school has an outsized impact on the course of their lives, sending them into a tailspin or helping them develop the needed resilience.

The scars from bullying and being bullied can sting for decades.

As the 2019 Legislature deals with anti-bullying, suicide prevention and youth resilience legislation, Senate Bill 108 provides one evidence-based approach.

It would create statewide grants for school districts to provide effective bullying prevention and youth empowerment programs. The proposed price tag,

including a statewide conference to bring together educators from every secondary school in Oregon, is \$6 million. That equals \$45 for every middle-schooler in the state.



For many youth, middle school has an outsized impact on the course of their lives, whether sending them into a tailspin or helping them develop the needed resilience to handle life's up and downs. Oregon lawmakers have heard numerous stories about bullying throughout the school years, and they have added their own.

"You experienced things in high school that we're trying to prevent kids today from experiencing," Verna Wise Matthews responded to Sen. Dallas Heard, R-Roseburg, at a December hearing on the proposed legislation.

Matthews is executive director of Ophelia's Place, which was founded in Eugene as a center for girls but has expanded into effective, research-tested anti-bullying programs for both boys and girls in Lane and Linn county schools.

(The Ophelia's Place website explains: "In Shakespeare's 'Hamlet,' Ophelia was a young woman whose tragic circumstances and lack of support prevented her from developing healthy relationships and achieving her own potential. Early interventions can help prevent tragic and costly outcomes such as domestic violence, low educational achievement, early pregnancy, or drug and alcohol abuse.")

"All students need to be taught bullying prevention skills," Wiseman has told legislators at hearings. "All educators and support staff need to be trained in effective intervention and support skills. And all parents should be given the opportunity to receive information and skills so that they as parents can support their own child's social and emotional well-being."

Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay, who is a retired math teacher and high school principal, noted the lifelong value of teaching students better habits of mind and soul before they become bullies or are bullied.

As someone who experienced childhood bullying and being a bully (maybe as a result), I wish Ophelia's Place had been around to help people like me.

The grants proposed in SB 180 would pay for programs with "proven results in raising student self-esteem, decreasing peer victimization and improving social support among peers." There would be four interrelated components: classroom presentations for all youth, empowerment groups for all youth, school staff training and parent education.

Rep. Nancy Nathanson, D-Eugene, and Sen. Sara Gelser, D-Corvallis, have sponsored similar legislation in the House — HB 2604.

When compared with students in other middle schools, a research study showed Ophelia's Place programs yielded significantly higher self-esteem and positive, supportive relationships among students and less victimization by peers.

As a longtime trainer locally and nationally, I am suspicious of many supposed training programs because I question their effectiveness over the long-term. What reassures me about the approach used by Ophelia's Place is that it goes far beyond teaching do's and don'ts to kids.

Students are the experts on their own lives, and the school-based programs help them understand the whys of bullying and develop their own options for dealing with bullying.

"Ophelia's Place is about critical-thinking skills and developing those for each student," Matthews told legislators.

The return on investment is high, according to Tigard-Tualatin Superintendent Sue Rieke-Smith, who worked with Ophelia's Place when she was school superintendent in Springfield. "Ophelia's Place hits all the right notes for the middle school-age population," she told legislators.

Like many other education bills in the 2019 Legislature, SB 108 is in the Legislature's Joint Committee on Student Success, which is co-chaired by Roblan and Rep. Barbara Smith Warner, D-Portland. After spending a year examining the state's educational needs, the committee must set priorities and decide how to pay for them.

Democratic lawmakers hope to raise \$2 billion in business taxes over the next two years – mostly for specific school programs.

Education from guns to drugs to graduation: At the Senate Education Committee on Wednesday, Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, testified in favor of Senate Bill 665, which would allow schools to keep the opiate overdose-reversing drug naloxone on hand and administer it by trained individuals.

The Oregon School Boards Association asked her to sponsor the legislation. It was suggested by Tillamook School Board member Nick Troxel, a Tillamook police detective.

The Senate committee quickly endorsed the bill and sent it off to a vote of the full Senate.

Roblan testified for Senate Bill 692, a bipartisan bill whose aim is to help the 17,500 Oregonians ages 16-21 who have left school without a regular diploma or GED. The bill would create a program to reengage them so they could graduate.

He made the perceptive point that "dropout" inaccurately describes someone who leaves school. In reality, Roblan said, the so-called dropout usually "pushed out" by an educational system that cannot adjust to the family, health, academic or other challenges faced by the student.

Rep. Sherrie Sprenger, R-Scio, and Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, testified for Senate Bill 801. It would allow, but not require, school districts to offer 30-minute gun safety classes for first-graders. The students would be taught what to do if they saw a gun: Stop, don't touch, run away and tell a grownup.

Sen. Lee Beyer, D-Springfield, also sponsored the bill.

Committee chair Rob Wagner, D-Lake Oswego, said he welcomed the discussion, adding, "I'm not exactly the darling with the gun lobby this legislative session."

He co-sponsored Senate Bill 501, the most-restrictive gun control measure this session, although it does not appear to be going anywhere.

Wagner recounted his experience of being an 8-year-old and going over to the house — with no adults around — of a friend who proudly showed him the loaded revolver the boy's father kept in a pile of sweaters next to the bed.

Dick Hughes, who writes the weekly Capital Chatter column, has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976. Contact him at TheHughesisms@Gmail.com, [Facebook.com/Hughesisms](https://www.facebook.com/Hughesisms), [YouTube.com/DickHughes](https://www.youtube.com/DickHughes) or [Twitter.com/DickHughes](https://www.twitter.com/DickHughes).

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