

# Helping bullies tame their inner

By Doug McPherson

A stranger pulls into a Colorado high school parking lot, parks, exits his car and slowly approaches the school — and then enters — undetected.

He wanders the hallways for minutes, his hard-soled shoes echo rhythmically through the air. No one seems to notice or care — even though he doesn't belong there. He's not a teacher, a substitute or a parent of a child there.

Yet he continues to walk — unfettered from suspicion or distrust — peering into classrooms, watching students and teachers go about their daily customs of questions and answers.

Eventually he reaches the main office, quietly opens the door and asks politely to see the principal.

The man is Del Elliott. And ironically enough, he's at the school on business — to talk about student safety.

*"When you have a good school environment where kids feel respected — that helps prevent violence."*

— Del Elliott

That's because student safety is his business. He's the director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, a research program that's part of CU's Institute of Behavioral Science. The center, celebrating its 15th anniversary this year, has the sole purpose of understanding and preventing violence.

His unchallenged tour of the school — as incidents in Colorado and Pennsylvania last fall sadly confirm — could have involved someone harboring deadly intent toward students.

Elliott admits it's what worries him most — intruder violence.

"The Bailey and Amish community incidents are almost impossible to stop," he says. "If someone is suicidal and wants to enter a school and kill, it may very well happen."

And perhaps even more unsettling, security experts acknowledge that schools could be a terrorist target.

But, if there can be good news about such an unthinkable act, it's this: Intruder violence at schools is rare. Elliott says it had been 20 years since intruders like the ones at Bailey, Colo., and the Amish school in Pennsylvania attacked students.

That doesn't mean he and others don't work to prevent it. "Schools have plans to follow if something like that happens, but we need to constantly work and carry out drills to make the plans better," he says.

## Culprit No. 1: Bullying

But what Elliott and other researchers at the center have learned about violence at schools is that it's mostly done by students to their fellow classmates.

Student-on-student violence is much more prevalent — nearly 400 American students have lost their lives to fellow students since 1992, according to the National School Safety Center.

Why do students hurt other students? Bullying. Research shows that it is the seed that can grow into murder. The U.S. Secret Service found that bullying was a factor in more than 50 percent of student deaths.

And Elliott says bullying is out of control. "Bullying has never been worse than it is today." A report from the Colorado Department of Education for the 2004-05 school year found that during a year in one metro Denver school district, incidents of bullying increased from 138 to 322.

And what's got Elliott especially agitated is that most schools are reluctant to employ bully-prevention programs — even ones proven to work.

Why? Administrative egos, he says.

"There's a pervasive localism at school districts that keeps them from adopting anything from outside their own district," Elliott says.

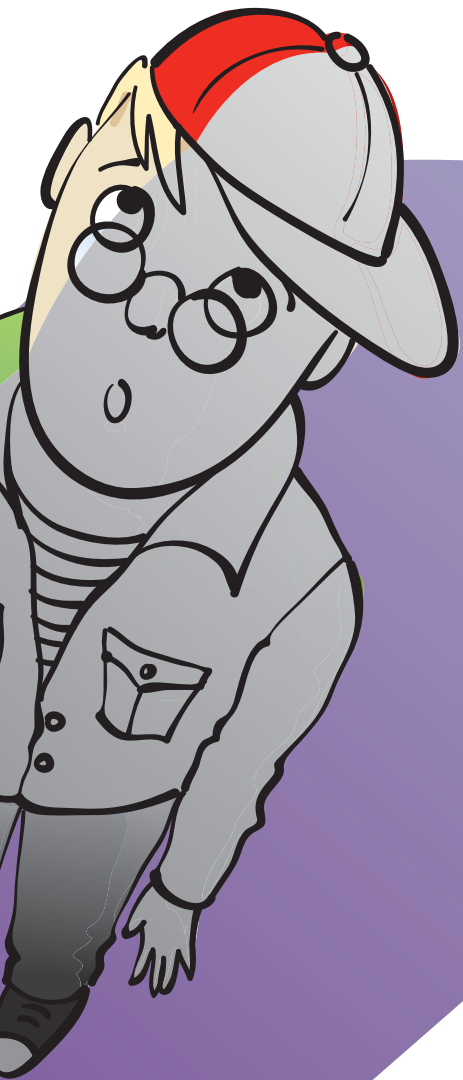
He says school officials believe some of the programs work "because they're told by those selling the programs that they work. There's no real research behind them. We don't do this with airplanes — we have to test and retest to make sure they work. A meeting in the gym to talk about bullying doesn't do it."

A key problem, Elliott says, is that the term evidence-based is not defined. He says agencies are working to develop standard lingo that will help ease the problem.

## Use what works

One effort Elliott does recommend is called the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program developed in Norway that assesses the prevalence of bullying, then offers intervention plans, recommends a committee





coordinate the program and suggests increased supervision of students at “hot spots” for bullying.

Studies show the program reduces bullying, vandalism, fighting, theft and truancy, and it improves the social

climate of schools, which in turn improves attitudes toward schoolwork.

Katy Patrick, program manager for Safe and Drug-free Schools with the Denver Public School District, says 25 elementary and middle schools that used Olweus from 2003 to 2005 reported a 9 percent drop in aggressive behavior and bullying-related suspensions.

Olga West, principal at Harborside Elementary in Chula Vista, Calif., started using Olweus in 2003 when she learned 45 percent of her students

admitted to bullying and 18 percent said they were bullied at least once a week. By 2005, West says those numbers had dropped significantly.

“The program defines exactly what behavior is unacceptable, it teaches kids to always tell an adult about any bullying, and every infraction is reported and tracked,” West says. “It creates peer

pressure against bullies.”

Olweus costs about \$200 per school plus \$65 per teacher. Money, by the way, Elliott says, is not a problem. “Schools are getting monies to implement programs.”

Regardless of his frustrations, Elliott says progress is being made. “It’s been recommended that legislatures fund only those programs proven to work. But that’s not required. We need to take that next step and mandate tax money to programs that work.”

## A non-lethal weapon

Beyond bully-proofing, experts say another weapon against violence is communication — people talking with one another, parents to kids, kids to teachers, teachers to administrators. A cacophony of talk.

The U.S. Secret Service reports that in over 75 percent of attacks in U.S. schools, others (mostly students) knew about the attacks before they happened. But in only two of the incidents was an adult told of the attacks before they occurred.

That statistic gave birth to a post-Columbine 24-hour toll-free number anyone can call to report potential danger at or near schools: **877-542-SAFE**.

Callers are given anonymity, and information is forwarded to the school and police. And all calls are investigated. In 2006 the hot line yielded more than 200 tips — some of which thwarted potentially deadly events, according to officials. Even so, Elliott says he’d like to see the number promoted more.


In Colorado legislators have passed a bill that requires school districts to share information with law enforcement about troubled students.


Elliott says he’s seen schools promoting alternative-thinking strategies, which help children regulate their emotions and reduce aggressive behavior.

But beyond programs, laws and hot-lines, Elliott says schools must work on

creating a “more social climate” where there’s a lot of activity at schools with plenty of adults, parents and volunteers.

“It’s the best protection I’ve seen,” he says. “I’ve been to the White House conference on school violence and I’ve heard a lot of ideas about building fortresses around schools with no windows. That’s not the way to go. Schools are about learning, and learning can’t happen in places without windows.

“When you have a good school environment where kids feel respected — that helps prevent violence.” 

 For a list of programs that have proven to be successful based on research by CU’s Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, visit [www.colorado.edu/cspv](http://www.colorado.edu/cspv) and click on “Blueprints.”

*With two young children of his own, Centennial freelance writer Doug McPherson believes safety at schools is one of society’s most important tasks.*

## Be a bully whisperer

What can the average citizen do to help prevent violence in schools? Experts and officials who consult with the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence say:

- Start or serve on a bully-proofing committee at a local school.
- Encourage your child to share problems with you; assure them it’s not tattling.
- Praise and encourage your child — a confident child is less likely to be bullied.
- Help your child develop new friendships.
- Share any bullying episodes with school officials.
- Encourage your child to participate in sports or other activities to improve self-esteem.