

Rite of Passage?

Handling Hazing

By Christine Netznik

It was all in good fun. Students from Glenbrook North High School in Northbrook, Ill., had gathered at a local forest preserve for annual spring initiation rites. Just as there had been for decades before, there was to be a “powder puff” girls’ football game, seniors versus juniors, to initiate the junior girls into their upcoming last year of high school. While the school had long ago stopped sanctioning the event, it continued as an off-campus, off-hours tradition.

But this time, on a Sunday in May 2003, things got terribly out of hand. There was no football game. Instead, there was hazing. About 20 junior class participants were kicked and beaten, smeared with paint, feces and urine, shot with paintball guns, and doused with animal guts. Meanwhile, an estimated crowd of 100 students watched, drinking beer from a keg provided by some parents. In the end, at least five participants required medical attention, 15 senior girls were charged with battery, and two adults were charged with providing alcohol to minors.

“We’ve got some of the best kids in the world,” says Glenbrook High School District 225 Superintendent Dr. Dave Hales. Indeed, there was little to predict this event. Glenbrook North is a consistently high-achieving school. About 85 percent of its students meet or exceed state testing requirements, compared to 50 to 60 percent of students statewide. Its students’ ACT scores rank in the top 3 percent nationally. Only about 2 percent of Glenbrook North students are from low-income families, and 95 percent of them graduate. And, there were more than 1,800 Glenbrook North students who did *not* attend the powder puff football game that day.

Perhaps it is this backdrop that helped attract the media’s attention to the incident. Soon, a student’s videotape of the hazing was airing on television, and reporters from all over the country, from Oprah to CNN, were covering the story.

Do something!

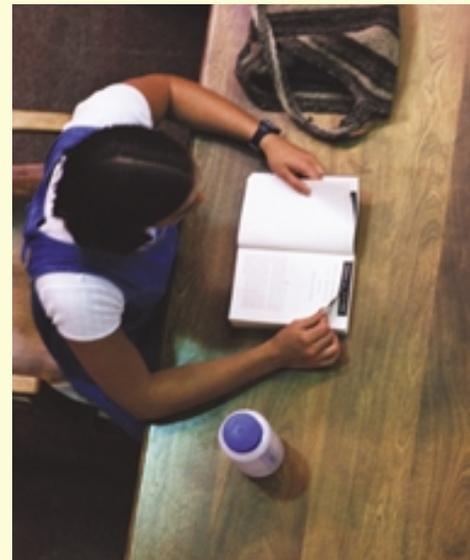
The school district and the communities of Glenview and Northbrook reacted swiftly. A coalition task force was formed. The school expelled 33 seniors, suspended 1 senior and 20 juniors, and successfully fought off legal action by parents of several punished students.

“Even though this was an awful situation to go through, the results have been positive,” Dr. Hales reports.

The task force brought together more than 30 individuals representing a broad array of groups, including parents, school officials, law enforcement, elected officials, church leaders and preventionists. After working together for more than six months, the task force submitted a 70-page report with dozens of recommendations for the school district and the community.

The resulting actions seem to be working. “We have brought our kids, our faculty and our community together,” Dr. Hales says. “We have heightened awareness.”

The school district has implemented several programs aimed at preventing hazing and other incidents. Incoming freshmen and their parents now attend a three-hour orientation session called



High School 101, which acquaints them with the school, the administrators and their peer leaders. Senior-class Peer Group program student leaders work directly with freshmen to help them make healthy choices in dealing with the pressures of being a teenager.

The faculty has become more involved in prevention. Around the time of spring break and prom each year, they meet with juniors and seniors in small groups to discuss situations that the teens might face and how to exercise good judgment. The school board has expanded the positions of student assistance coordinators from half-time at each school in the district to full-time at each school.

School administrators have increased their vigilance. Dr. Hales reports: "We are much more sensitive to notifying parents when we hear about potential events that are rumored to be planned, such as a drinking party at a house where the parents are out of town. We may have not said anything in the past, but now we do. We have taken the position that it is better to be safe than sorry."

Sponsors and coaches of extracurricular activities and teams have been asked to re-examine their practices and traditions. Toilet papering the homes of new team members has been discontinued. "We have turned things into positives," Dr. Hales remarks. "Some teams now have a breakfast for [incoming] freshmen. It is now more of a welcoming than an initiation."

And, the school is working more closely with community agencies and law enforcement. Reciprocal reporting agreements ensure that the school will be notified any time a student is involved in a drug- or alcohol-related incident, even if it is outside of school hours and off school property. The school's code of conduct provides punishment for such incidents if they have any impact on or connection to the school, the educational environment or school safety. Penalties can include restriction of extracurricular activities or even expulsion.



Local agency Response

Center provides training to senior-class TeenREACH facilitators and to student leaders for Operation Snowball. "TeenREACH was going on before [the hazing incident], but there has been a renewed commitment to it," says Marie Goulet-Raffety, outreach coordinator for Response Center.

Superintendent Hales urges educators and other adults to address hazing and related issues proactively. "I have spoken to many different groups all over the state and in three other states," Dr. Hales says. "People think, 'This will never happen to us.' Probably it is happening, and they don't realize it. If it can happen to us, it can happen to anybody."

"Schools can take a few small steps. Have students meet in small groups with adult leaders. Clearly define hazing, bullying and aggressive behavior, and have up-to-date discipline policies. Make sure students know what to do if it happens to them, and what to do if they hear about it happening to someone else. That prevention will go miles and miles. It doesn't take much time to lay a positive foundation."

Will efforts at Glenbrook North High School be successful over the long term? Dr. Hales thinks so. "I am hopeful to the point of being confident."

Putting Prevention in Full Swing

The experience of the Glenbrook High School District underscores the importance of comprehensive prevention initiatives. After the powder puff football hazing, Glenbrook North High School undertook a complete prevention program, while Glenbrook South High School implemented only some parts of the program.

"South didn't do [prevention] as intensely, with small groups and faculty interventions, and lo and behold, we had another incident," said district superintendent Dr. Dave Hales. Less than a year after the powder puff football hazing by Glenbrook North students, members of the Glenbrook South lacrosse team were punished for an initiation gathering that included drinking alcohol and paddling new members of the team.

Glenbrook South canceled the 2004 lacrosse season and adopted all of the prevention programs of its sister school, Glenbrook North. Since then, there have been no reports of hazing or related incidents at either school.

Hales said, "It's not harmless fun. There can be serious ramifications. This is not how we want people treated in our schools or in our communities."

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