

Bullying is a problem that continues to affect about one out of every three students in the U.S. In Salinas, a pilot project is underway to see if a bullying prevention program created in Norway can help local elementary school students.

Fifth Grade teacher Roberto Zamora started off the school year at Los Padres Elementary School in Salinas knowing just a couple of things about his new class of students. The kids had been together as a group since kindergarten and, “this was a difficult class to deal with and they had a lot of bullying issues,” said Zamora.

So he aimed to address the problem right from the start. He laid out classroom rules and negative consequences, and set up weekly classroom meetings to address the problems. His approach backfired. “Because the kids were actually looking for someone to make a little mistake to have something to say during the class meetings. So the class meetings were mostly focused on misbehavior,” said Zamora.

And the bullying persisted. That is until Zamora started implementing the [Olweus Bullying Prevention Program](#). The decades old program founded in Norway has been implemented in schools around the world and now in Salinas.

The non-profit group, [Harmony At Home](#), is bringing the program to two Salinas elementary schools, Los Padres and Sherwood. In this first year of this three year pilot project only Los Padres will get the program. Through student surveys Harmony At Home will gauge whether Los Padres sees a greater reduction in bullying than Sherwood.

Frances Weesner is the Olweus Program Coordinator. She says the ultimate goal is to make both these schools safer. “Bullying is intimidation. Bullying is aggression. Bullying is misuse of power, it’s peer abuse. Well any place abuse is happening human beings don’t feel safe,” said Weesner.

The Olweus Program takes a holistic approach to prevention. It goes beyond focusing solely on the bully and target, and encourages everyone at the school to get involved from the Principal to the cafeteria workers to the students and their parents. “If it’s happening here we’re trying to develop the eyes and the ears. We are trying to be more aware, not ignoring,” said Weesner, “you name it, you identify it as bullying and you say we don’t do that here.”

Olweus has four anti-bullying rules that are posted in every classroom. Rule number one: we will not bully others. Number two: we will try to help students who are bullied. “Number three is we will try to include students who are left out. And the fourth one is if we know that someone is being bullied we will tell an adult at school and an adult at home,” said Weesner.

The program had a gradual roll out starting at the beginning of the school year with most classrooms on board by January. Already Los Padres Principal Gabriel Ramirez has noticed a difference. “Both myself and the Assistant Principal do get students come up to us and say hey I need your help. This is happening over here, and we try to take care of it at the moment,” said Ramirez.

The difference is also becoming clear in Roberto Zamora’s fifth grade classroom. He’s continuing with the weekly meetings, as encouraged by Olweus, but has shifted the focus from the negative to the positive.

Each meeting starts off with the kids start giving each other kudos. Students Sammie Mae says that’s made a big difference. “The bullies have been stopping and saying wow I actually got positive things, I think I should put more effort into it,” said Mae. Her classmate Diego Silva added, “it’s been good now we are more bonded. We’re like a family. We’re not concentrating on the bad things, we concentrating on the good things.”

Olweus encourages students to shift from being by-standers to up-standers and report bullying when it happens. Student Martha Alvarez has noticed the difference. “I feel more safe here, and I feel now I have someone to trust. Someone who I can tell and actually do something about it,” said student Martha Alvarez. She says that person she can trust is Mr. Zamora.

“That makes me feel like I’m doing my job. I’m teaching, but at the same time the students feel safe, and they feel comfortable approaching me when there’s an issue going on,” said Roberto Zamora.

Harmony At Home is raising the money to rollout the Olweus program at Los Padres and Sherwood Elementary . Next, if the pilot project proves a success, it hopes to convince the [Salinas City Elementary School District](#) to fund Olweus in its eleven other schools.