Bullying Prevention: Creating Safe Schools in the Pacific

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## PREL

PREL is a non-profit organization governed by a board of directors from across the Pacific, and our work is guided by several advisory councils.

Through PREL's mission, *enhancing community well-being through partnerships in education*, we envision strong schools, healthy communities, and thriving cultures with Pacific hearts and global minds.

U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Islands
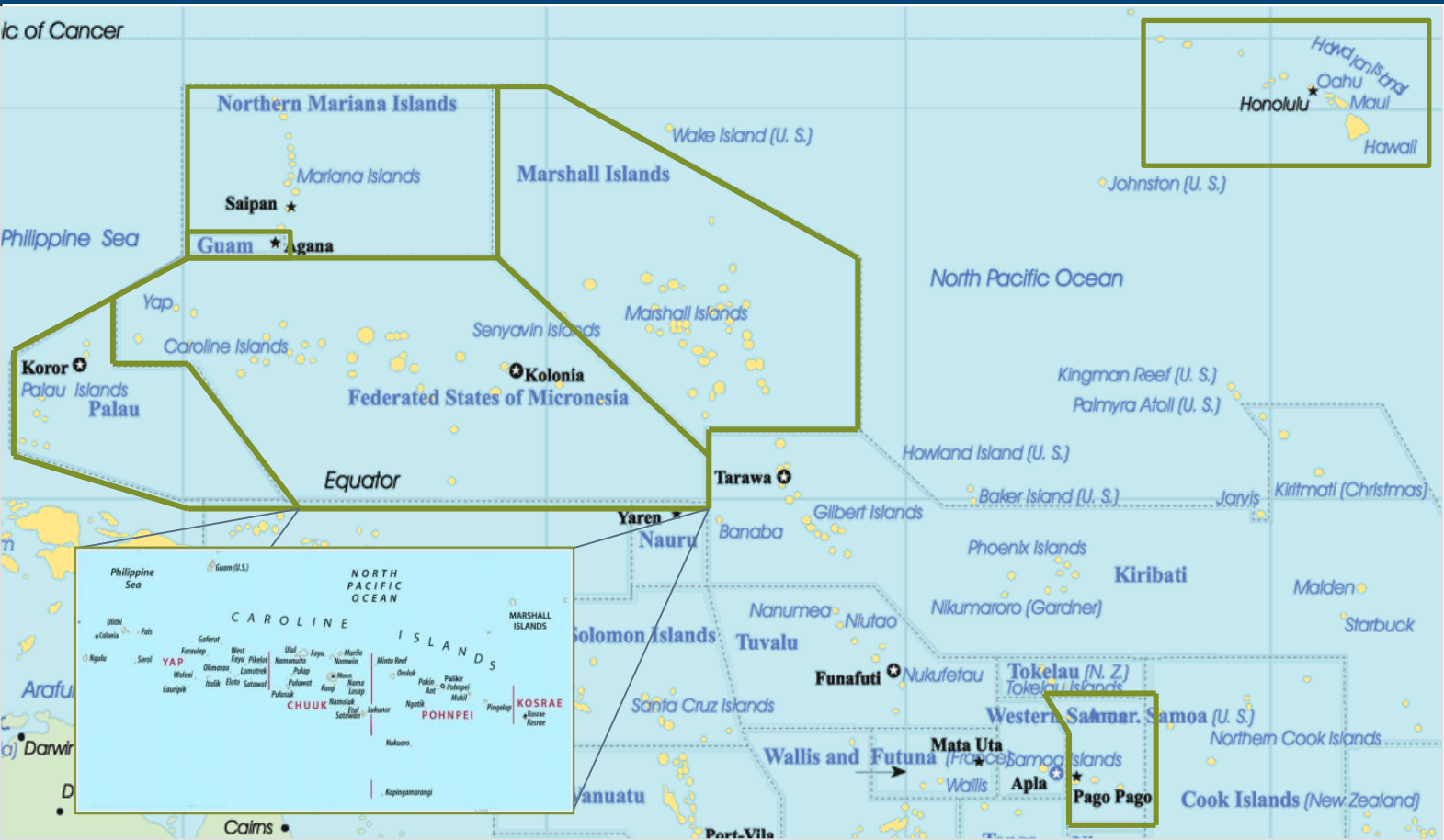
In addition to the state of Hawai'i, the U.S.-affiliated Pacific consists of: Territory of American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Territory of Guam, Republic of Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI).

Scattered over 4.9 million square miles of ocean, the U.S.-affiliated Pacific islands are a culturally and linguistically diverse group. Among the region's 1.6 million people, at least 9 different Pacific cultures are present and more than 30 languages are spoken.

Introduction

Bullying is a significant issue for the physical and psychological health of children, which, if left unaddressed, can lead to low-self esteem, truancy, drop out, and suicide. Studies report that 160,000 students nationwide are absent from school daily for fear of being bullied.

Preventing bullying is the responsibility of every member of the educational community, including administrators, teachers, counselors, support staff, parents, and students. Workshops on bullying prevention provide a critical opportunity to open up dialogue on the subject, build awareness, disseminate preventative knowledge and skills, and promote equality.

Program Design

PREL's bullying prevention initiative has provided training across the Pacific, with the core program occurring in partnership with the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Public School System (CNMI PSS). Over 250 participants from across the Mariana Islands (Saipan, Rota and Tinian) have been involved in the bullying prevention workshops which focused on two high need areas identified by the CNMI PSS; bullying on the basis of perceived sexual orientation and cyberbullying.

The PREL/CNMI PSS bullying prevention initiative brings together counselors with students, parents, teachers, and principals through group work and community forums. Through these activities participants recognize warning signs, learn how to intervene effectively, and develop skills to prevent bullying while working to evaluate their school, create a vision and develop an action plan to address bullying. The program's approach is to create training and resources that are not only research-based and accessible, but also contextualized and relevant for Pacific island communities.
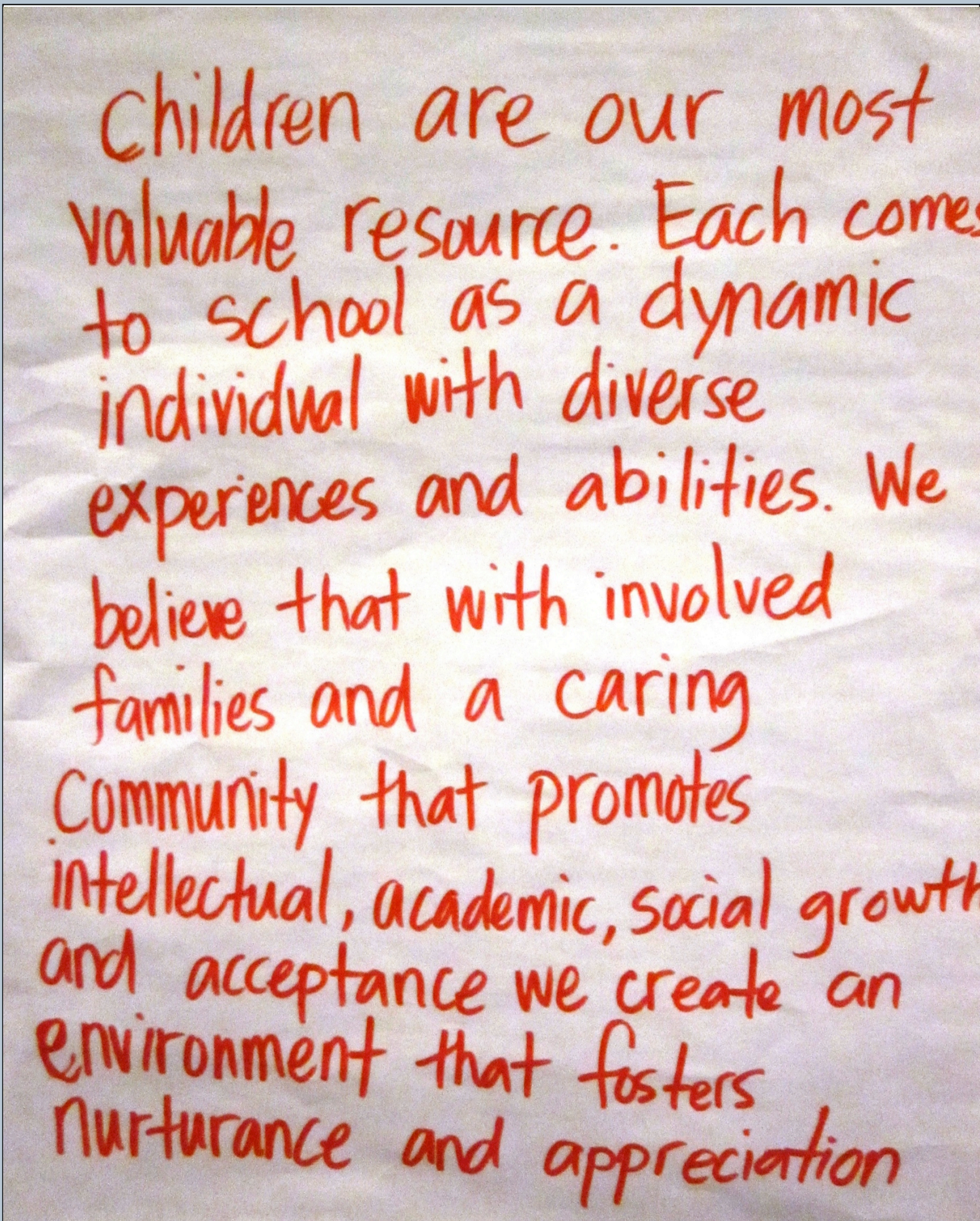
One school's vision for a safe and supportive school environment

Cyberbullying

Increasingly prevalent is *cyberbullying*, which occurs through the use of technology such as computer, cell phones and other electronic devices. It can include sending offensive, humiliating, or threatening text messages to others and spreading rumors or lies on social networks. Bullying with technology is very different from face-to-face bullying because message and images can be sent:

- Anonymously,
- At any time,
- To a wide audience,
- Very quickly

Research has found that young people who have been cyberbullied are significantly more likely to have low self-esteem, use alcohol and drugs, skip school, and experience in-person bullying or victimization. A workshop lead by PREL at the CNMI PSS statewide professional development week discussed the different forms of cyberbullying, its impact on children, and strategies to prevent and address cyberbully both in and out of school.

Sexual Orientation

The CNMI PSS 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) results indicate that 56% of middle school students report being bullied on school property. The statistics on bullying related to actual or perceived sexual orientation of students are staggering:

In a 2009 national school climate survey, 9 out of 10 students reported verbal harassment at school because of their perceived sexual orientation; while two out of three were harassed because of their gender expression. Nearly a quarter of students were physically assaulted.

Bullying and harassment of students, particularly on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation, leads to declining academic performance and increased truancy and dropout. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) students, dropout rates are reported at three times the national average, robbing them of their academic potential.

The most tragic cases are those students who make the ultimate decision to end their lives, which has been seen in the increasingly frequent media reports of LGBT suicide. Although accurate figures are difficult to ascertain, studies have reported that LGBT victimization is associated with a 2.5-fold increased risk of self-harm and suicide ideation. The presence of a single supportive adult in the lives of LGBT students at school is the most critical factor in increasing their sense of safety and academic achievement, and in decreasing the risk of truancy and dropout.

Discussion

Program outcomes indicate that critical components to the long-term sustainability of safe climates in schools and the community include: Garnering institutional support, securing necessary resources, providing professional development opportunities, fostering partnerships and involving a diversity of stakeholders throughout program implementation.

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