Some students taking online classes to avoid bullies at school

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Kelsey Hooten, 16, (right) works on an art project with sisters Hannah, 11, (left) and Lexie, 14, at home in Dayton, Ohio, on Nov. 15, 2013. Because of bullying at school, Kelsey enrolled in an online school. All three sisters attend the online school at different grade levels. Photo: Bill Lackey/Dayton Daily News/MCT

DAYTON, Ohio — Krista Hooten knew something had to be done when she saw "terror" in her daughter Kelsey's eyes. After all, all they were doing was a bit of back-to-school shopping for seventh grade.

There was a reason for Kelsey's fear. She had been bullied (https://www.newsela.com/?tag=bullying) the previous year. It started with other girls calling her ugly and spreading rumors about her. But it quickly turned physical. Her tormentors pulled her hair on the bus and shoved her to the ground.

"It changed her personality," Hooten said. "It was a horrible, horrible year."

Hooten and her husband decided it was time to make a change. They pulled Kelsey from public school and enrolled her in an online school called the Ohio Virtual Academy. That school is connected with the national education company K12.

An Escape from School Bullying

Nearly a quarter of parents who enrolled their children in online K12 programs said bullying in school was one main reason. About 94 percent said going online helped end the problem.

Bullying in school is a large and complicated problem. One-third of all U.S. children — an estimated 13 million students — are targeted each year, according to the White House. Those students are "more likely to have challenges in school, to abuse drugs and alcohol, and to have health and mental health issues." In some cases, victims have committed suicide.

Krista Hooten said her daughter did not talk about the extent to which she was bullied during sixth grade.

Even when the attacks became physical, the teenager would "act like she was dealing with it and it wasn't that big a deal."

She added, "All I knew at that point was she didn't want to go" to school. It was "to the point where (when) she would leave in the morning, she cried all the way to the bus stop."

Hooten talked to her daughter's teachers and school administrators. Their only suggestion, she said, was that Kelsey should "find another group of friends."

Now 16 and in 10th grade, Kelsey said she has been able to escape bullying since she started attending the Ohio Virtual Academy.

But No Escape from Cyberbullying

The academy now enrolls more than 12,600 students across the state. While it may be good at protecting students from bullying, so far it hasn't been that good at educating them. It was given an "F" on the latest state report card, which measures what percent of students passed achievement and graduation tests. Only about 42 percent of its students graduate in four years.

The online school was created in 2006, and has grown as an option for bullied students. Students are given home computers and watch live videos and do chats with licensed teachers. The school also offers extracurricular activities, dances and other get-togethers for students.

Bullying has always been an issue, of course, but it's even more of a problem today because of the rise of activity online.

"Because of cyberbullying, students can't escape it," said Susan Davies, who trains school counselors to deal with bullying. "It's not something that's just happening at school. They're being targeted in their home when they're not even around other kids. That has become really difficult to address at the school level." What and how much should schools do, she asks.

Davis added, "The kids are so savvy that they're kind of escaping notice of the adults in their lives. As soon as we get on whatever the next hot social media site is and start monitoring kids," they move on. If teachers and parents are on Facebook, students say, "'Well, Facebook isn't cool anymore, we're going to move to Twitter. And we're going to move to Instagram.' It's hard for us to monitor them."

Cyberbullying does happen at the Ohio Virtual Academy. But, according to the head of the school, Kristin Stewart, the school has a zero-tolerance policy. It has expelled and suspended students in the past, though not often.

The academy trains its teacher to look for signs of bullying. Stewart said she thinks bullying is caught sooner than usual "because the teachers are online with students."

Other Reasons Some Attend

Sometimes students who have been bullied take a while to regain their trust of other students, Stewart said. "But once they do, we have — especially in middle school and high school — we have blogs and Facebook where kids can go online and meet each other. They can approach getting back to school safely because they're in their homes and they're feeling safe. They can move at their own pace."

Students also choose the school for reasons other than bullying: Because they are struggling in certain subjects, because their families rely on them to work, because they have children of their own, or because they want to challenge themselves.

Hooten's two other daughters also attend the Ohio Virtual Academy. Lexie, 14, started to give herself more time for her 20-hour-a-week dance commitment. Hannah, 11, enrolled because she was missing many days of traditional school due to her asthma.

Next year, Kelsey will begin taking college courses.

Her mother said the change in her personality was almost immediate after she left public school.

"She was just happier again," she said. "You just really underestimate" the effect bullying can have. "Even though she's beautiful," the bullying got to her. "It's amazing what peers can do when they're telling you the opposite" of what's true.