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Finding a safe school is better than waiting for one

By Chikara Parks



I considered myself Campbell Park Elementary family. Not only did four of my children attend this school, but I was so actively involved in mentoring students, volunteering and attending PTA meetings that I was often mistaken for staff. So, it was a surprise to me that my daughter Tanijah was bullied as long as she was.

The bullying started early in first grade and continued to get worse until fourth. Bullying happened at PE, during recess, and in the hallway, as she transitioned between classes. It started out as name calling and teasing, but by fourth grade the bullying became physical.

The bullying peaked in fourth grade where Tanijah and her class spent considerable time with substitute teachers. Without the firm control of a full-time teacher, the classroom descended into chaos. One day while transitioning to class from recess, Tanijah was kicked by another student.

All this time I had been telling my daughter to not fight back, but to tell an adult. The adults, I promised her, would keep her safe. But they hadn't.

Now my daughter was hurting, and I felt like less of a mom. My daughter's grades were suffering, and she was losing self-confidence daily. How long can a child be bullied and still be OK?

My kids have each had great teachers at Campbell Park, so I'm not sure why they or the principals weren't able to put a stop to the bullying after several years. I recognize that students in this community come with their own set of baggage, but good teachers and a zero-tolerance policy couldn't end the bullying.

I couldn't wait any longer. My daughter needed a safe school now. Even the school leaders agreed that it might be best if Tanijah started fifth grade at a new school.

Thankfully, I qualified for the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship and enrolled Tanijah at Academy Prep of St. Petersburg. Academy Prep handles bullying issues immediately. The girls have one-on-one meetings with the head of the school and the counselor, and group meetings where the girls are required to say something nice to each other. The principal and teachers even call to discuss problems big and small. Not only do I feel like I'm finally being heard, but I also know I've found a place where Tanijah will be safe.

I think the Hope Scholarship is an awesome idea and I hope that parents take advantage of it.

The Tampa Bay Times once called Campbell Park a failure factory. My two boys still attend, and I hope the school continues to improve. I'm even working toward a degree in elementary education with the dream of becoming a public-school teacher. But I believe that if a parent feels their child isn't safe, they should have a right to enroll their child somewhere else.

Sometimes leaving is the best option, even if you feel like they are family.