I Can

An anti-bullying campaign for Tuscaloosa City Schools
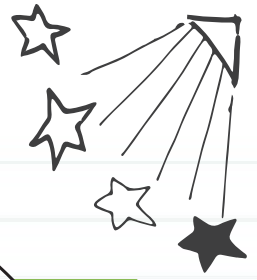
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Introduction

It all started with a stop sign. When the 2013 University of Alabama Bateman Team discovered Tuscaloosa City Schools' fledgling anti-bullying program, it saw the green octagon logo as a "go" for the perfect partnership.

Tuscaloosa City Schools implemented Harassment Awareness-Learning Together, or HALT, districtwide in August 2012. It operated on a one-year strategic plan created that summer. With a quick turnaround and the busy school year that followed, it needed marketing, research and public relations help to increase sustainability. The UA Bateman Team proposed its services, as any public relations firm would, and got to work.

With **empowering** and **engaging** messaging, the relatable "I Can" campaign taught middle school students to overcome peer group boundaries to create a unified student body and community.

Most importantly, we taught them to **stand strong**.

Kelsey

Julia

Benjamin

Haley

Jacquie

Situation Analysis

National

Each day 160,000 students across the country miss school because of issues with bullying and harassment. *A.68*

While several national bullying campaigns have been created to combat this growing issue, many programs focus on primarily negative messaging. One campaign that stands out is Rachel's Challenge. Joe Coles, a representative from Rachel's Challenge, said in an interview, "We need to teach our young kids positive habits. We can't just discipline a kid and say 'Quit bullying,' because it doesn't work in most cases." *A.68*

Nationwide programs like the "I Choose" campaign and the Pacer Center's "Teen Against Bullying" are composed of primarily dark images and subtly intimidating language. These and other campaigns are condescending to students and create an emotional distance, making the messages and goals seem out of reach of the average child. *See A.68 for details on each program.*
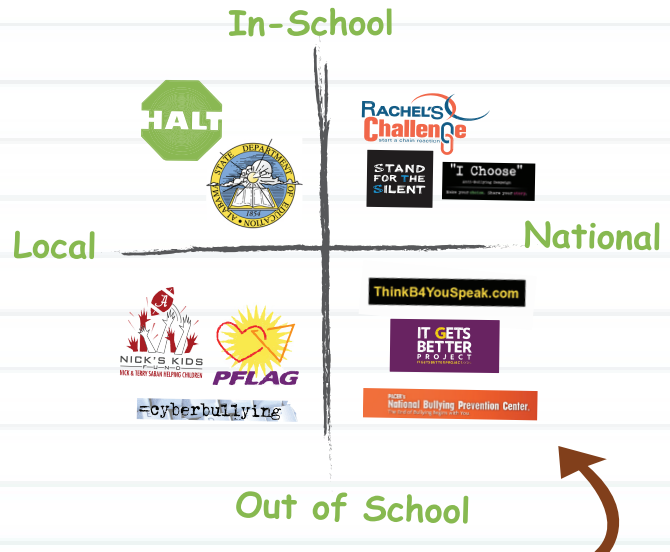
Broad national campaigns lack a personal aspect and local connection in Tuscaloosa.

UA Bateman Exsisting Campaign Research Matrix.

Local

The team interviewed experts in the field of bullying. Joe Coles explained that bullying is a repeated and intentional behavior. He told the UA Bateman Team that in order to combat bullying, we needed to **empower** students and provide positive role models. He also said that bullying most often occurs in middle schools. This information was confirmed by Dr. Kristina McDonald, a psychology professor at The University of Alabama, who stated that developmental patterns right before middle school create an increase in bullying in peer groups. *A.68*

Alabama passed the Student Harassment Prevention Act in February 2012, and studying this document gave the UA Bateman Team deeper insight into what the state was doing to fight bullying and how residents could help.

Turning to The University of Alabama's very own Center for the Prevention of Youth Behavior Problems, the team found several helpful articles and resources, including a

study by UA Professor John Lochman with insight into aggressive peer behavior, suggesting that it's highly useful to intervene with aggressive children in a group setting in order to promote positive peer interactions. A 2012 national bullying conference hosted by Gary Warner, a professor and director of research at The University of Alabama at Birmingham, revealed the gaps in Alabama legislation, despite the passage of the recent harassment act. This discovery proved to the team that the entire state had a long way to go for local anti-bullying causes.

The key audiences in any anti-bullying campaign are children and teens, their parents and school faculty. Bullying is a pervasive problem that starts early in a student's social development. Beginning as early as first grade and continuing even into college, bullying is a vast issue that encompases many ages. Parents and school administrators must be aware of the peer relationships and be able to evaluate and stop negative behavior when it happens.

Team Member Jacquie McMahon comforts one of the students

HALT

In addition to national anti-bullying campaigns, the team researched programs closer to home and found only one in-school campaign: HALT. Despite several initiatives in the past year of its district-wide implementation, the program was still fledgling and had little research in place.

During the 2011-2012 school year, Tuscaloosa City Schools (TCS) received 122 bully reports. In response, HALT started as an anti-bullying task force in April 2012, and expanded districtwide for the 2012-2013 school year. HALT used an awareness campaign, surveys, monthly events and curriculum lessons to push its positive **"Stand Strong"** message. Each child received a wrist band and signed an anti-bullying pledge; posters filled the hallways. *A.68*

The program placed a strong emphasis on professional development for all faculty and staff, including members of the transportation department, with a focus on training tactics. TCS took many steps to improve the accessibility of anti-bullying messages, but the campaign still had several flaws.

Team Member Kelsey Balzli conducting an interview

To learn more about the campaign from the inside, the team conducted an interview with Shannon Beard, the founder of HALT. Later, the team talked with a panel of HALT coordinators to address the individual needs of the schools and the overlying issues of all six of the schools.

The main issue that needed to be addressed in all of the schools was for the students to understand the difference between bullying and peer conflict and to learn strategies to reduce the incidences of bullying.

Jane Coleman,
Southview
Middle School
HALT
coordinator

Tuscaloosa City Schools distributed 100 surveys to faculty and 4,600 to students at all six of the Tuscaloosa City Middle Schools. These surveys suggested that the majority of students had seen bullying in their school, while some faculty had seen bullying occur daily. The students also mentioned that they had felt no change in how safe they felt at school since the HALT program started. They reported that bullying occurred most frequently in hallways, cafeterias and gymnasiums. *A.94*

HALT's main **"Stand Strong"** message was affirmative to students standing up against bullying, but the posters originally created for HALT featured a somber-looking student holding up his hand in a stop position. These dark and intimidating images counteracted the **empowering** tagline of **"Stand Strong"** and created an emotional distance between the students and the message, much like the national campaigns the team studied.

HALT and TCS took the new program and ran with it in August 2011. By December, every student in Tuscaloosa City Schools knew about HALT and had taken a pledge to **stand strong** against bullying. This dedication to the program meant that the message was widely disseminated throughout the students, but it also made the students pay less attention to HALT as the campaign lost momentum in the hectic fall term.

Finally, while HALT did a good job of educating students about how to report bullying, the key messages did not communicate the difference between bullying and peer conflict. As a result, reports of bullying skyrocketed throughout TCS schools following incidents that did not fall under the district-wide definition of bullying. However, students were not taught proactive ways to reduce incidents of bullying.

Problem Statement :
The Tuscaloosa City Schools' HALT program increased the reporting of bullying but did little to reduce incidences and had no plan for long-term engagement sustainability or evaluation.

Challenges and Opportunities

Obstacle: Current anti-bullying campaigns, both nationally and locally, are out of touch with the audience because they tend to lower their intelligence level to appeal to children. The team's research found that even children ages 10-14 want to be treated like mature individuals.

'We can' raise the bar of anti-bullying campaigns to show children that anti-bullying messaging can be "cool."

Obstacle: Though our local client's program is a relatively new initiative, there is already an established brand identity. HALT's messaging can have confusing interpretations, relying on the logo of a stop sign in the color green, which usually implies 'go.'
'We can' build on the existing visual identity with complementary designs that push the boundaries of the existing campaign.

Obstacle: HALT's messaging uses negative reinforcement. Research revealed that this is ineffective in reaching the audience. It is more beneficial to promote positive messaging.
'We can' adjust the message to one of **empowerment** while maintaining HALT's core values and strategies, focusing on activities that each individual student can do to encourage positive behavior and combat bullying. Based on both primary and secondary research insights, the team found a need for affirmative communication, so the campaign's key messages focused on **empowerment.**

In order to create more positive peer relationships in schools, we had to start with positive concepts.

Campaign Overview

The phrase "I Can" from the current HALT pledge against bullying was repurposed into a proactive center for the campaign's communication. The simple, **empowering** statements used on posters, such as "I can invite _____ to sit with me" and "I can compliment _____'s clothes," reminded students that small acts of kindness can make big changes in the classroom.

To really drive the meaning behind the message home, the team used the full phrase, **"I Can Stand Strong,"** to remind kids that it only takes one voice to speak up and make a change. By using positive, relatable images and verbiage, the team told the kids of Tuscaloosa that they **"can"** stop bullying in their schools.

As a result of extensive research and the current environment in Tuscaloosa, the UA Bateman Team initiated the new, complementary campaign to re-energize the HALT program.
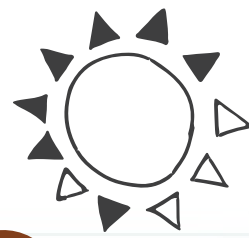
Key Publics

Middle school students: Research suggests that middle school-aged children are very susceptible to bullying and aggressive social behaviors. The change in their classroom environment from elementary to middle school creates an imbalance in social dominance and peer groups that leads to a higher occurrence of bullying in this age group. Seventy-nine percent of middle school children polled said that they would rather have a boost in social status than follow school rules. *A.15* By focusing on middle school students, "I Can" targeted the highest incidents of school bullying.

Parents: Parents need to know the signs of bullying and the appropriate actions to take to stop it. "I Can" materials flooded high-traffic, family-friendly areas.

YMCA: By modifying the campaign to reach younger audiences, the team instilled "I Can" concepts in children that can provide a basis of conceptual sustainability.

UA students: While teachers and parents are key influencers, these students need relatable idols to look up to. The team saw the opportunity of reaching out to college students as the most logical solution to a sustainable partnership.

Community: The team focused on educating the Tuscaloosa community through posters and media coverage to generate widespread support of the HALT program, specifically the "I Can" campaign. A stronger relationship with the community is one key to future sustainability.

Communication Plan

Goal: Enhance existing HALT campaign, increase visibility of HALT message and ensure sustainability of the campaign to address issue of bullying in Tuscaloosa City Schools.

Objective 1: Engage 75 percent of Tuscaloosa City Schools' middle school students in anti-bullying activities by February 28, 2013.

Strategy 1: Plan and implement an **empowering** campaign to appeal and relate to middle school students.

Tactic 1: Design and distribute branded posters in each school. *A.10*

Tactic 2: Design and distribute branded stickers to students in each school. *A.12*

Tactic 3: Design and distribute a pledge banner for students to sign and hang in each school. *A.12*

Tactic 4: Create **engaging** activities that teach students how to combat bullying in schools. *A.30*

Tactic 5: Work with HALT coordinators to incorporate campaign events into the curriculum.
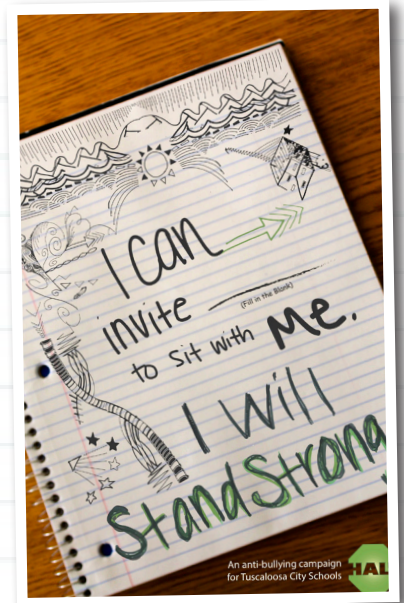
Objective 2: Encourage 50 percent of TCS middle school students to be proactive and stand strong against bullying in their schools by February 28, 2013.

Strategy 1: Use activities to inform students of the short- and long-term effects of bullying while encouraging them to interact with their peer groups in positive ways.
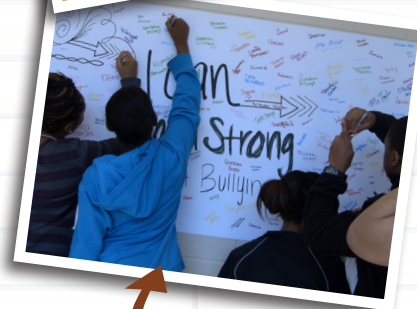
Tactic 1: Implement an "I Care" week in the schools that will give students an opportunity to write kind messages to their fellow students. *A.30*

Tactic 2: Host a "Mix-N-Munch" lunch time in each school where students will be given assigned seats and an opportunity to meet new friends and learn more about fellow classmates. *A.30*

Tactic 3: Give a group of students a scenario and have them perform a skit involving anti-bullying, and explain how it can be distinguished from peer conflict. *A.30*

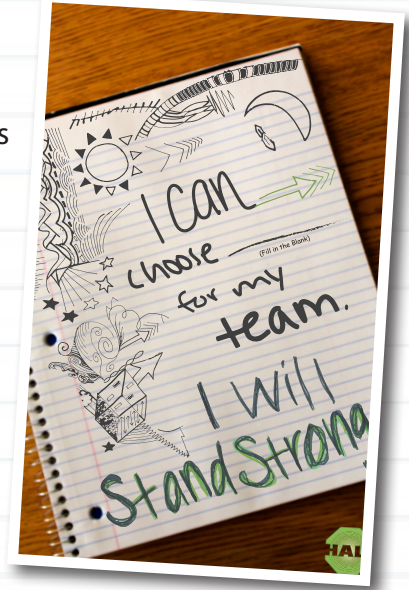Tactic 4: Use team-building and engaging games to foster more positive social interactions in the classroom. *A.30*

Objective 3: Create awareness in 400 parents or guardians of middle school-aged children about the short- and long-term effects of bullying and how to identify it by February 28, 2013.

Strategy 1: Provide digital educational materials about bullying and related issues for TCS middle school parents.

Tactic 1: Create a digital parent packet with a detailed description of the campaign, events and links to more resources. *A.21*

Tactic 2: Write five informative blogs about the effects of youth bullying, how to identify it and how to prevent it. *A.13*

Tactic 3: Secure placement of the team's resources on the Tuscaloosa City Schools' Facebook page and website for greater reach and impact. *A.40*

Rock Quarry Middle School Game Day

Southview Banner Signing

Eastwood Mix-N-Munch

BLOG
PREVIEWS

Live Longer, Stand Stronger *Publish Date: Feb. 6 Read More Here!*

Each day 160,000 students nationwide stay home from school because they are afraid of being bullied. School should be a safe place for your children to learn and socialize with their friends. Many parents have expressed concerns about how bullying will affect their child and what signs they should look for to see if their child is okay. When it comes to bullying...

15%
The percentage of st... who report that they... school because they... scared of bullying in...

The Social Switch: *Publish Date: Feb. 13 Read More Here!*
Elementary vs. Middle School Bullying

Any parent can find it difficult to see their little ones make the daunting leap from elementary to middle school. These changes are tough and can be made even more treacherous by peer behaviors at school. While bullying is a prevalent issue in many elementary schools, there is a large contrast between elementary school teasing and the personal attacks...

71
The percentage of st... who report that bully... ongoing problem.

Cyberbullying: *Publish Date: Feb. 20 Read More Here!*
The New Threat on the Block

Facebook. Cellphones. Twitter. The Internet. These innovative and new tools of communication surround today's generation. It allows for people to quickly contact friends, family and acquaintances all around the world, however, it also allows people to channel negativity and unwanted aggression toward others. This behavior on this new...

61%
The percentage of st... who believe that sch... shootings occur beca... student is a victim of... violence at home and... school.

Victim or Bully: *Publish Date: Feb. 26 Read More Here!*
How Can You Tell?

As a parent of a TCS student, you may have noticed the HALT activities listed online, the posters in your child's school, and the new "I Can" materials in the hallways. You've begun to understand how to report bullying, as well as its negative effects on students' emotional and mental wellbeing. But how do you know if your child is being bullied, or...

9 out of 10 students... to 8th grade have re... that they have been... some point in their li...

Take Action *Publish Date: Feb. 28 Read More Here!*

All across Alabama, people are stepping up and taking action against bullying in our state. Despite the passage of The Alabama Student Harassment Prevention Act in 2009, the state legislation is deficient in a few key areas. For instance, Alabama is one of two states that omits the term "bullying" altogether. The law allows only...

Sources:
bullyingstatistics.org and
makebeatsnotbeatdowns.o...

pg. 2

Strategy 2: Utilize community outlets to reach local parents.

Tactic 1: Hang posters in after-school programs and stores that are heavily trafficked by parents and families. *A.11*

Tactic 2: Involve local media, such as TV stations, radio programs and print media, in campaign and event coverage. *A.41*

Tactic 3: Enlist government officials to promote anti-bullying awareness throughout the city of Tuscaloosa and the state of Alabama by collaborating with Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox to name February 25, 2013, **"Stand Strong Day."** *A.37*

Bateman members and TCS administrator Vicky Brown with Mayor Walt Maddox at Stand Strong Day proclamation signing

Objective 4: Engage at least two partner organizations outside the Tuscaloosa City Schools to test the viability of a long-term partnership to sustain the initiative beyond February 2013.

Strategy 1: Reach out to university organizations that may be interested in continuing the campaign.

Tactic 1: Collaborate with members of the Teahan award-winning public relations firm, Capstone Agency, to assist with HALT marketing and research activities after the competition ends. *A.65*

Tactic 2: Contact members of on-campus organizations to enlist volunteers to help with campaign activities.
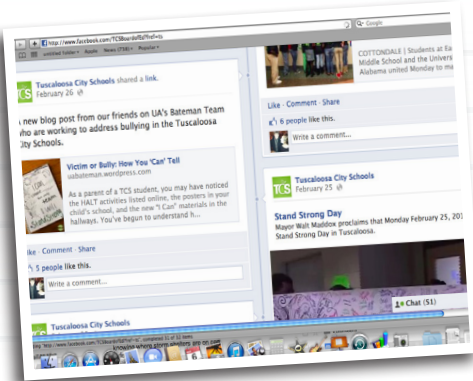
YMCA presentation and game day

Strategy 2: Develop plan to sustain the campaign in future years.

Tactic 1: Train campaign leaders from the university to organize future events and volunteer groups to continue the campaign messaging.
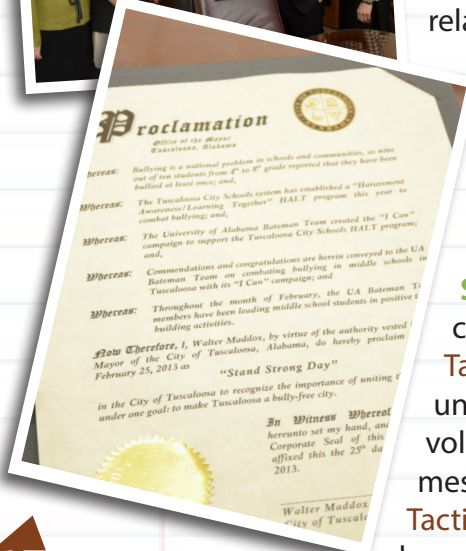
Tactic 2: Provide campaign print materials to be used, distributed and edited to fit any future campaign needs.

Tactic 3: Share materials with PRSSA and Capstone Agency for sustained follow-up with TCS and YMCA clients.

Tactic 4: Encourage **"Stand Strong Day"** to continue as an annual event in Tuscaloosa schools.

February 25 Stand Strong Day proclamation

Strategy 3: Create one after-school program to reinforce messaging delivered in TCS schools.
Tactic 1: Meet with Tuscaloosa YMCA coordinators to maintain the relationship with the after-school program established by the 2012 UA Bateman Team's "It's Your Move" anti-obesity project.
Tactic 2: Bring the campaign's print materials (posters, stickers and banner) into the YMCA youth facilities. *A.35*
Tactic 3: Create an **empowering** and interactive presentation to engage the children and teach them the effects of youth bullying in schools. *A.25*
Tactic 4: Play "Bully" and other games that promote team bonding to create a sense of community with the children. *A.35*
Tactic 5: Have the children sign their names and add their own personalities to the banner.

Campaign Evaluation

After four months of planning, 28 days of implementation and countless hours of hard work, "I Can" developed into a far-reaching campaign with the potential for a long-term commitment.

"I like the I Can posters. They tell students what they CAN do to help, not just a vague message about leadership."
-6th grade student, Eastwood Middle School

"I Can" reached more than 1,485,921 people through various media outlets, garnering more than $5173.90 in media value. Parents who didn't see the news coverage reported noticing the posters placed in six key areas of high traffic by parents and/or families. *A.60*

Through the TCS surveys and unifying activities with every middle school student, the campaign impacted 2,261 students. As a result, 66 percent of students felt **empowered** to help others and spread kindness. The student surveys reported the amount of bullying in schools either decreased or remained the same. The faculty member surveys reported that students are somewhat or very likely to report bullying after the campaign. The students' definition of bullying transitioned from "someone getting janked" to "bullying is constant and has an inbalanced power." Elementary and high school students expressed the desire for the university students to bring the campaign into the rest of the schools.

"Getting students talking about bullying and getting them to bond together is huge."
-Jane Coleman, HALT Counselor

The consensus of students revealed that signing the "I Can" banner and having college students come into school to complete activities with them were their favorite parts of the campaign.

Results

Objective 1: Engage 75 percent of Tuscaloosa City Schools' middle school students in anti-bullying activities by February 28, 2013.
EXCEEDED: The "I Can" campaign reached all 2,261 TCS middle school students. The UA Bateman Team created activities, visited schools and became positive role models for the students for the entire month of February, spending an average of **4.1 hours every school day** at TCS middle schools.

Objective 2: Encourage 50 percent of TCS middle school students to be proactive and stand strong against bullying in their schools by February 28, 2013.
EXCEEDED: The post-evaluation research revealed that 66 percent of students would be willing to help bullying victims after the "I Can" campaign.

272 views
on the parent blog

Objective 3: Create awareness in 400 parents or guardians of middle school-aged children about the short- and long-term effects of bullying and how to identify it.
EXCEEDED: The "I Can" campaign engaged more than 200 parents in the Tuscaloosa area with the parent blog and newsletter alone. A reach of more than 1,000,000 people through media coverage provided additional messaging awareness.

9 radio stations

Objective 4: Engage at least two partner organizations outside the Tuscaloosa City Schools to test the viability of a long-term partnership to sustain the initiative beyond February 2013.
EXCEEDED: "I Can" engaged the YMCA after-school program and 60 university students in volunteer activities and sustainability practices.

Conclusion

The sound of a classroom full of students reciting the pledge to combat bullying was enough to give any bystander goosebumps. At the YMCA, echoes of the students announcing "I will **stand strong**!" proved the success of the campaign without a single evaluation survey.

The HALT pledge reads, "I can help change things. I can be a leader." The **empowering** messages promoted by the UA Bateman Team went far beyond a poster or a sticker. They illustrated the bright futures of each student touched by the campaign.

"I Can" was for the students too scared to go to school. "I Can" was for the students too afraid to report bullying. "I Can" was so much more than a competition entry.

This campaign gave victims a chance to be included. To be complimented. To be **engaged** in anti-bullying activities. "I Can" gave students a reason to go to school again.

In our world, no bullies are allowed.