

Iowa Anti-Bullying Legislation

~ By: Barbara Brunkan & Jill Yates, Research, Development and Evaluation Division



Ask adults whether bullying is a problem, and you are bound to get a variety of answers. On one side of the fence, we hear rationalizations for bullying such as, "It happened to me when I was growing up, and I turned out okay," "It's just part of growing up," "It's just kids having fun," and "It's no big deal." On the other side, we hear the harsh reality of how bullying can truly affect children and adolescents. "I hate going to school because of what goes on there," "I think about suicide all the time because of the way I get treated," or, in the words of Eric Harris – one of the Columbine shooters- "This is what you get for the way you treated us." William Voors (2003)

As educators, we have come to understand the profound seriousness of the problem of bullying and harassment for our schools. No longer is it possible to dismiss these behaviors as harmless school year rituals or rites of passage. Rather, recent events and new data from Area Nine schools and schools across Iowa have demonstrated conclusively that bullying and harassment pose a real and serious threat to the safety of our schools, and to the lives of children and staff. The state of Iowa is committed to providing all students with a safe and civil school environment in which all members of the school community are treated with dignity and respect. With the passage of recent legislation (280.28 Code of Iowa), each school district and each accredited non-public school must adopt on or before September 1, 2007 an anti-bullying and harassment policy.

Harassing and bullying behavior can seriously disrupt the ability of school employees to maintain safe and civil environments and the ability of students to learn and succeed. Research has shown that the consequences of being bullied may include:

- interference with student engagement and learning in school
- increased likelihood of depression, loneliness, anxiety, low self-esteem or suicide ideation
- fear of going to school, using the restroom or riding on the school bus
- interference with the ability to participate or benefit from services, activities or privileges

Research also indicates that students who exhibit bullying behavior are more likely to:

- be involved in fights on or off school property
- be injured in a fight
- vandalize or steal property
- use substances
- be truant from school or drop out of school
- carry a weapon

Bullying also has an impact on students who witness incidents of bullying:

- bullying creates a climate of fear and disrespect
- has a negative impact on student learning
- students believe that adults in the environment either do not see, ignore or even condone incidents of bullying and harassment

continued

Iowa Anti-Bullying Legislation, continued from page 1

Iowa's anti-bullying/harassment legislation mandates that each public school district and accredited non-public school create a policy that includes: a) a statement declaring bullying and harassment to be against school policy, b) definitions of bullying and harassment consistent with Iowa legislation, c) a description of prevention measures, methods of reporting and investigation, d) consequences for infractions and appropriate remedial action, e) a procedure for reporting an act of harassment or bullying, f) a procedure for prompt investigation of complaints, and g) a procedure for the publication of the policy. A sample policy and guidance for policy development is provided for schools on the Iowa Department of Education website at www.iowa.gov/educate/content/view/942/1106.

The Iowa legislation defines bullying/harassment as any electronic, written, verbal or physical act or conduct toward a student which is based on any actual or perceived trait or characteristic of the student and which creates an objectively hostile school environment. Recognizing that protection from bullying and harassment is a matter of civil rights, protection is offered to students regardless of: age, color, creed, national origin, race, marital status, sex, family status, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical attributes, physical or mental ability, disability, ancestry, political party preference or socio-economic status.

Schools are also required to provide training on anti-harassment and anti-bullying policies for school staff, volunteers and students to provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to reduce incidents and integrate anti-harassment into the comprehensive school improvement plan and relevant curricula. In addition, schools are required to provide age-appropriate materials and a list of community and web-based resources to parents and inclusion in the student handbook. Finally, collaboration with community resources to provide voluntary parent education sessions is encouraged.

A large number of schools and districts served by Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency have adopted and implemented nationally recognized, research-based violence and bullying prevention programs and curricula. These include: Aggressors, Victims and Bystanders (curriculum), Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (comprehensive program) and Second Step (curriculum). Schools have also used supplemental materials such as: Quit It!, On Target to Stop Bullying, The Bully Free Classroom and Owning Up. These programs and curricula have been successfully integrated into current school based initiatives to improve climate, culture and character education.

Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency supports the efforts of schools by providing nationally certified Olweus Bullying Prevention Program trainers who conduct professional development, consultation and assistance with training for support staff, parents and volunteers. Trainers for the Olweus Program are: Barbara Brunkan, Dan Jens, Jean Simpson, Cindy Swanson, and Jill Yates. For further information about the program, please contact Barbara Brunkan, Olweus Program Leader, bbrunkan@aea9.k12.ia.us or call 563-344-6563.

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person: the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman or child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.” Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962)

