Chasing the Bullies Away

IN APRIL, Colorado news sources recognized the sixth anniversary of the Columbine High School shootings that left 15 dead and sounded a wake-up call that struck fear in the hearts of parents who had thought that affluent, suburban schools were safe places. The incident engraved pictures in everyone’s mind of typical-looking kids doing horrendous, unspeakable things. It caused many in the community to ask “why” and drove a few former students, who had never before divulged their personal experiences, to write letters to the editor saying that they understood how being bullied in school could push one to the breaking point.

In its 2003 report, School Survey on Crime and Safety, the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) found that, during the 1999-2000 school year, 29% of schools reported having more difficulty with student bullying than with any other single discipline problem. A similar 2004 NCES report, Indicators of School Crime and Safety, found that, in 2003, students’ grade levels were inversely related to the likelihood that they would be bullied, with 14% of sixth-graders, 7% of ninth-graders, and 2% of 12th-graders reporting being bullied at school. Overall, 7% of students between the ages of 12 and 18 reported that they had been bullied at school in the last six months, up from 5% in 1999.

In 2002, a U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education analysis of school shootings, The Final Report: Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States, found that many perpetrators of school violence reported being bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.

Contrary to popular belief, research indicates that bullies frequently have very high self-esteem, while their victims tend to have lower self-esteem, be physically weaker than their tormentors, and lack social self-defense skills. Although bullying is frequently thought of as a male activity, consisting of such overt acts as physical intimidation or the more common verbal abuse or threats, a recently recognized form of bullying that is more commonly practiced by girls is relational aggression. This often takes the form of organized shunning, whispering, spreading negative rumors, and mocking targeted students. Though it doesn’t leave physical scars, this form of bullying can cause its victims to suffer lasting psychological damage.

STATES CONFRONT THE PROBLEM

Policy analyst Jennifer Dounay of the Education Commission of the States (ECS) summarized states’ efforts to address bullying in an April 2005 ECS StateNote, “State Anti-bullying Statutes.” According to Dounay, “heightening this attention is the growing body of research on 1) the prevalence of bullying in K-12 schools, 2) the likelihood of school bullies to develop more serious socio-emotional problems with the passage of time, and 3) the impact of bullying on its victims and school climate in general.” Seventeen states and Guam reports Dounay, have enacted laws aimed at reducing or eliminating bullying in schools.

DEFINITIONS

Three states — Arkansas, New Jersey, and Oregon — require districts to establish a definition of “bullying,” notes Dounay. In 11 states, the term is defined by statute. For example, in Colorado, “bullying” is defined as “any written or verbal expression, or physical act or gesture, or a pattern thereof, that is intended to cause distress upon one or more students.” Some state policies combine the use of the terms harassment, intimidation, and bullying.

STATE-LEVEL SUPPORT

According to Dounay, a handful of state legislatures have required the state board or department of education to facilitate antibullying efforts in schools. In Arkansas, the state board must review each district’s antibullying policies and may recommend changes or improvements. Rhode Island’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, New Jersey’s state superintendent, and West Virginia’s state board are each required to develop a model policy to guide districts in approving their own policies and programs. The Connecticut Department of Education runs a competitive “safe learning” grant program that helps districts meet various goals, including eliminating bullying behaviors by students. Oklahoma’s state department is required by law to disseminate to every public school in the state a list of research-based programs appropriate for the prevention of “harassment, intimidation, and bullying of students at school.”

THE LOCAL LEVEL

Dounay reports that, in most states, local boards are required to adopt policies that prohibit bullying on school property, at school activities, etc. Some states, such as Georgia, have the option to withhold state funds from any district whose board does not adopt such a policy. Connecticut requires the policies of every local and regional board to include an intervention strategy that schools can use to deal with bullying. And in Vermont, the model school plan for student discipline that districts are encouraged to adopt includes a similar provision.

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS AND IMMUNITY

Dounay’s examination of state policies finds that some states specify that students
and school staff members must report suspected bullying to the appropriate authority. In Arkansas, for example, any school employee who has witnessed bullying or has reliable information that a pupil has been a victim of bullying must report the incident to the principal and is immune from tort liability. In Connecticut, local and regional board policies must allow students to anonymously report acts of bullying and also must require teachers and staff members who witness incidents or receive student reports of bullying to notify school administrators. No longer may a teacher discount a student complaint based only on his or her own judgment of the situation.

SANCTIONS

In Georgia, any student found to be bullying for the third time in a given school year must be assigned to an alternative school. And in Illinois, every district’s policy must include early intervention procedures that are aligned with available community-based and district resources.

PARENT RIGHTS

Local boards in Arkansas must provide notice to parents, students, school volunteers, and employees that bullying is prohibited. This notice must include what constitutes bullying and what consequences are in place for bullying behaviors. In Connecticut, local policies must allow parents to file written reports of suspected bullying and must require school administrators to investigate any such reports. In addition, when a bullying incident occurs, the school must notify the parents of both parties involved and inform them of how school staff members responded to the act. New Hampshire law requires principals to inform all parents of students involved in a bullying incident within 48 hours of the occurrence.

COMPREHENSIVE POLICIES

Douanay provides a list of recommendations for developing a comprehensive state anti-bullying policy, all of which are in place in state policies in Connecticut, New Jersey, Oregon, Vermont, and West Virginia. Vermont’s H.B. 629, for example, requires the state commissioner to update and distribute a model school plan for student discipline by January 2005. According to this law, the plan must:

- state that bullying is a form of dangerous and disrespectful behavior that will not be permitted or tolerated;
- enable parents or guardians of students to file written reports of suspected bullying;
- enable students to anonymously report acts of bullying to teachers and school administrators;
- require teachers and other school staff members who witness acts of bullying or receive student reports of bullying to notify school administrators;
- require school administrators to investigate any written reports filed and to review any anonymous reports;
- include an intervention strategy for school staff members to deal with bullying;
- include a prohibition against bullying in the student or school handbook or otherwise make students aware of the prohibition, the penalties for bullying, and the procedures for reporting incidents;
- require the school to notify the parent or guardian of a student who commits a verified act of bullying of the school’s response and of consequences that may result from further acts of bullying;
- require the school to notify the parent or guardian of a student who is a victim of bullying of actions taken to prevent further incidents; and
- require schools to collect data on the number of reported and verified incidents of bullying and to make such data available to the school commissioner and the public. On or before 15 January 2007, the commissioner must report to the state senate and house education committees on the implementation of this section of the law.

While most students outgrow bullying behavior over time, policies such as those in Vermont recognize that bullying is a broadband problem that can become a significant issue if ignored. A potential negative consequence of such policies could be that bullying is merely moved off school grounds, rather than eliminated. In states where anti-bullying policies do not yet exist, and even in some where they do, we all know that the real solution hinges on a commitment to action on the part of school staff members. And sadly, for some, it will be easier to look away.

1. “State Anti-bullying Statutes” can be downloaded at http://63.173.67.18/clearinghouse/60/41/6041.doc.