Bullying: A Nation Fed Up

Bruce Jones, Judith Rainone, Donna Elam & Walt Shaffner

When parents put their kids on the bus in the morning, they ask themselves two questions – Is my child going to be safe? Is my child going to learn? And they ask them in that order.

– Kevin Jennings, Assistant Deputy Secretary, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Department of Education

By 1994, the biggest worry that Carole Wagner, of Booneville, Arkansas, held toward her son was concern for his safety in school. Her 14-year-old son, William, was being bullied relentlessly at school for being gay. Wagner was so concerned that she picked up her family and relocated 120 miles away to Fayetteville. Unfortunately for Wagner, her family and her son, the bullying did not stop in Fayetteville. In 1996, William was brutally assaulted by other students as he left the school grounds – “They knocked him off his feet, then kicked him as he lay bleeding on the ground” (Scherr, 2009, p. 26). By 1998, Wagner had had enough and proceeded to file a complaint on behalf of her son under Title IX, the federal anti-discrimination law. With the complaint, Fayetteville became the first public school district in the nation to enter into an agreement with the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights that require it to protect all students, including gays and lesbians, from harassment. (Scherr, 2009).

Bullying describes intentionally harmful, aggressive behavior that is repetitive in nature and in which there is a power differential between the aggressor and the victim (Swearer, et al. 2010). Holmes & Brandenburgh-Ayres (1998), characterize bullying behavior as manifesting along a continuum of abusive action including name-calling, intimidation, extortion, fighting and an unprovoked and deliberate intention to hurt and/or engage in repeated negative assaults.

The most recent highly publicized bullying case involves Phoebe Prince of South Hadley, Massachusetts, who hung herself after being physically, emotionally and socially bullied by students at school and on Facebook. The latter type of bullying, through Facebook, is referred to as cyber-bullying because it involved bullying through an on-line internet-based social networking technology. As if the situation could not get worse, the bullies logged in on-line and collectively mocked her suicide. Nine students were charged with civil rights violations and other charges by the District Attorney for their direct association with the suicide and two boys have been charged with statutory rape (Gibbs, 2010).

Other tragic bullying incidents include:

An Atlanta, Georgia student, 11-year-old Jaheem Herrera, who, according to his family, committed suicide in 2009 after being bullied repeatedly in school.

In 2006, Megan Meier of O’Fallon, Missouri committed suicide by hanging herself. In the wake of her suicide it was discovered that she was a victim of an internet-based hoax that occurred through the social chat room known as MySpace.

In June 2005, a Cape Coral, Florida student, 15-year-old Jeffrey Johnston, committed suicide after enduring ongoing bullying at school.
Policy Thrusts and Reporting Venues

With increasing public demands for a federal anti-bullying law, approximately 41 states have enacted anti-bullying laws, which, at minimum, require schools districts to establish preventative policies to eradicate bullying.

As a result of the Megan Meier suicide in 2006, the Megan Meier Cyberbullying Prevention Act of 2009 was introduced as a bill in the U.S. House of Representatives. The bill sought to amend the federal criminal code to impose criminal penalties on anyone who transmits in interstate or foreign commerce a communication intended to coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause substantial emotional distress to another person, using electronic means to support severe, repeated, and hostile behavior.

As a result of the 2005 Jeffrey Johnston suicide, the Florida legislature enacted the Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up For All Students Act in 2008. The Act bans all forms of harassment of any student or employee of a public school (Hooper, 2010).

At the U.S. Department of Education, efforts are underway to include safety measures as a key component of the Common Core Standards. According to Assistant Deputy Secretary, Kevin Jennings, “In a truly safe school, you're physically safe, you're emotionally safe . . . (as it stands) parents have no reliable way of knowing how safe (as this concerns bullying) their school is for their kids” (Richardson, 2010, p. 47). The bottom-line is, if students don’t feel safe, it is difficult for them to focus on learning.

With the growth in state law and agency policy on solving the problem of bullying, school districts across the nation are developing more sophisticated ways to track, document and prosecute bullying behavior and its effects. For example, the Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida created four venues for reporting bullying: (1) An on-line reporting system, (2) A written reporting system with forms for victims and witnesses of bullying available at schools, (3) A Crime Stoppers Hotline, and (4) A method for phone-texting bullying concerns and incidents. In addition, the district on-line bullying reporting system supplies built-in email notices that are sent to key individuals. This mechanism helps drive investigations of bullying.

Continued Areas of Focus

According to Dounay (2006), a range of policy options exist with regard to state efforts to promulgate AP statewide:

- The systematic study and understanding of bullying must be incorporated in College of Education curriculum/preparation programs so that administrators, teachers and counselors are better equipped to work proactively with the problem of bullying.
- Educator practitioners will require ongoing professional development that focuses bully prevention at the school site. According to Judith Rainone, Chair of the Hillsborough Violence Prevention Committee, “It is not enough to enact anti-bullying policies – these policies must come with professional development and accountability.”
- Support systems must be established for students in school who are victims of bullying (i.e., sponsorship of anti-bullying forums, education awareness campaigns for students and school-parent/guardian discussion sessions that address bullying).
- Schools must be proactive and transparent around data on bullying and tangible strategies for ameliorating the effects of bullying.

References

Gibbs, N. (2010). Sticks and stones: When does bullying cross the line from cruel to criminal? And what can be done about it? Time, April, 64.

Bruce Jones is Director of the David C. Anchin Center, University of South Florida; Judith Rainone is Director of Administration and Chair of the Violence Prevention Committee, Hillsborough County Public Schools; Donna Elam is Associate Director of External Affairs of the David C. Anchin Center, University of South Florida; and Walt Shaffner is Director of Non-Traditional Programs, Hillsborough County Public Schools.