

Involving the Community in Addressing Bullying in Schools

We regularly get calls from community organizations (e.g., faith communities, civic organizations, etc.) who want to arrange a talk about bullying for their constituents/members. Those of us who are advocates have provided many such talks. But now that the ABR (the new NJ law) has mandated the establishment of new roles - the designated anti-bullying coordinator in the school district, and the designated anti-bullying specialist in the school - there is a new and important option: The staff in those roles should be the ones providing (or arranging for members of their mandated school safety/climate – teams) to provide such talks.

Lack of school/community relations, and not only in regard to bullying, is a common gap in the functioning of schools. In most communities in NJ, there is no ongoing meeting or communication between school staff (e.g., the district superintendent and staff, schools and their staff) and such community entities as the interfaith clergy council, the town recreation department, or the local business organizations. Community relations - ongoing - are an important source of support for anti-bullying efforts in schools. At the least, this is because parents can be reached and engaged through their involvement with these community organizations. At best, town organizations can provide many forms of concrete help and other support to school-wide school climate and anti-bullying initiatives and strategies.

Ideally, it should be a routine 'part of the job' for the safety teams, specialists and coordinators to reach out to community organizations and be engaged with them. This would include providing updates and talks about bullying and related issues. Now that there are designated staff at the district and school levels, such community organizations should routinely be receiving outreach from the school or district. There should already be robust ongoing community organization involvement in the schools, at least for the service learning aspect of the school's character education programs. But there should also be high levels of parent involvement in all aspects of school functioning, with all aspects of the community, including underserved and minority communities, represented.

In fact, in regard to bullying, either because it is only the first year of the law's implementation, or - less optimistically - because districts and schools are still not motivated enough to form such relationships, those calls do not often occur, we believe. And instead we - Coalition - get the calls. We have begun advising organizations which call to give their districts and schools the 'gift' of reaching out to them for help engaging and raising awareness about bullying. If schools and districts take on this responsibility more actively, good things will happen. At the least, there should be town-wide bullying awareness days (and related ongoing activities) taking place in every town in NJ, reflecting a collaboration between the school district, the interfaith clergy council and other town-specific civic organizations.