

Opinion: N.J. schools have moral obligation to address bullying

Published: Tuesday, November 08, 2011

Times of Trenton guest opinion column

By Stuart Green

In the recent guest opinion “New anti-bullying law has drawbacks” (Nov. 1), Richard Bozza, director of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, complains about the cost to schools (financially and in terms of time and impact on students) of the new Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights. For an anti-bullying advocate, encountering this kind of resistance to the law on the part of a high-ranking state education administrator is sad and infuriating.

Almost all bullying occurs in schools. And even bullying that occurs off of school grounds, including cyberbullying, usually occurs between students who attend the same school and either precedes or follows in-school bullying. Bullied students have typically been hurt for months, if not years. Schools have commonly not paid adequate attention to the bullied child of any age.

Many students who are not adequately engaged in school life or have few or no friends are especially at risk for being bullied. Schools commonly do not make enough effort to address students’ loneliness and isolation. When some children in a school are repeatedly targeted, other children know about it. This knowledge causes tension in all the children, greatly affecting them and interfering with their learning. A major factor in all kinds of school problems, from low academic performance to weapon-carrying to dropping out, is that schools do not adequately engage, support and protect their students.

For these reasons, and many others, addressing bullying is not a new burden schools are being asked to carry. Addressing bullying is a core part of what it means to be an educator and what good school functioning requires. On some level, all educators know this. Addressing bullying is not a matter of money. It is a moral obligation.

Every element in the new law is there because parents of bullied children and the advocacy organizations that represent a wide range of youth and families insisted it be there. There are timelines by which schools must address incidents of bullying because schools were not addressing the suffering of children quickly enough. Reporting bullying is required because schools did not disclose the bullying or what they were doing about it. In fact, the problems Mr. Bozza cites are an indication of all the ways in which schools have inadequately addressed the problem to this point — and exactly why the law is so needed. He complains that staff must be trained, including bus drivers. Why would any educational administrator not already have been training staff — teachers, of course, but also bus drivers, coaches, lunchroom aides and key volunteers — in how to prevent and address bullying? He complains that bullying-related training interferes with other training “such as how to improve as an educator.” But preventing

and addressing the most common, serious problem of children in schools is a key part of how to improve as an educator.

Mr. Bozza's complaints about paperwork and issues of defining what is and isn't bullying are an indicator that schools are still dealing with bullying legalistically and defensively, rather than honoring the spirit of the law. It is ridiculous for administrators to think they have to report every episode when a child calls another child a name. The law clearly states that for an incident to be HIB (harassment, intimidation and bullying), the behavior must substantially disrupt the orderly operation of the school, or create a hostile environment, or interfere with a student's learning or rights. No single incident of name-calling, especially between very young children (the example Mr. Bozza gives), could possibly rise to the level of being HIB. But certainly, schools should make every effort to be aware of every child's social and emotional status, especially whether he or she is being repeatedly and significantly hurt.

It's outrageous that we needed a law to encourage schools to do something so basic and important. Mr. Bozza asks that we "give school principals more autonomy" and have administrators such as himself "weigh in on what's working." Such autonomy and administrator input have so far not worked to protect our children. It is shameful that so many principals and administrators have failed in all these years to address bullying adequately. Children and their families have suffered for too long as a result.

More than in any of its details, the law is a demand by children, families and society that schools finally, meaningfully and adequately address the issue. That's why New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights is the toughest anti-bullying law in the nation. The legislators who approved it, the governor who signed it into law and the community organizations that supported it all get it. Why don't Mr. Bozza and the New Jersey Association of School Administrators?

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