

Federal Hearing: “Bully-Free Schools: How Local, State and Federal Efforts Can Help”

Hosted by the Honorable Tom Harkin, Iowa Senator

Friday June 8, 2012

Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman. I am happy to be with you on this very important occasion to talk a little bit about bullying in schools, something that I spend every day of my life thinking about and making efforts to address.

My name is Penny Bisignano and I am a consultant at the Iowa Department of Education and part of the Iowa Safe and Supportive Schools Grant Team. My area of specialization is bullying and harassment in schools. Every time I tell someone what I do, they tell me their own story of bullying. Usually they talk about something they experienced or are experiencing or about someone in their family or in a friend’s family. **Bullying is everywhere.** I take calls daily from parents whose children are suffering both physically and mentally. They tell me their kids aren’t focused on learning and academics when they fear for their physical or emotional safety at school every single day. I know they are right.

Today I will focus my five minutes on four areas.

1. The definition of bullying and the best practices for addressing it
2. What we are doing in Iowa to address bullying
3. The key components of the Iowa Anti-Bullying Anti-Harassment Law
4. Considerations for moving forward

How Is Bullying Defined?

Bullying is more complex than physical or verbal harm. It is a form of violence in schools. The Federal Government defines bullying as “unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Bullying includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group on purpose.”

Researcher, expert, and author Dr. Dan Olweus has a similar definition, one that identifies bullying as **peer abuse**. He says, "A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself."

These definitions agree on **three components of bullying**.

1. Bullying is aggressive behavior characterized by unwanted, negative actions
2. Bullying involves a pattern of behavior repeated over time
3. Bullying relies on an imbalance of power or strength

Bullying can take many forms, including derogatory speech, exclusion or isolation, physical attacks, the spreading of rumors, taking or damaging money or property, threats, and forced actions. It can be racially or sexually motivated. And, it can take place in person or via cell phones or Internet (cyber bullying).

Best Practices For Addressing Bullying

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At stopbullying.gov, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) provides ten Best Practices for bullying prevention and intervention. It is important that all ten be in place in order to effectively address bullying in schools.

1. Focus on the social environment of the school. When we address the social environment in school, we really address the climate for learning, as a climate of safety and respect promotes student success. The insecurity, lack of control, and sense that nobody cares that come with bullying make it difficult for students to focus on academics. Some bullied students may stop coming to school altogether.

2. Assess the nature and extent of bullying in each school. In order to specifically target areas for improvement, we must know what kind of bullying is occurring and the degree to which it is occurring. Data from anonymous student surveys can help inform and motivate adults to take action, help administrators and educators tailor prevention strategies, and serve as a baseline from which schools can measure their progress in reducing bullying.

Surveys provide data regarding whether and how students are bullied, whether and how they report such treatment, and if they are afraid of being bullied. They also give insight into “hot spots” for bullying and the degree to which students feel bullying is tolerated at their school. Finally, surveys identify numbers of students who engage in bullying others and who try to help students they see being bullied.

The most recent Iowa Youth Survey (2010) of 6th, 8th, and 11th graders was taken by 86% of 359 public school districts and 17% of 183 non-public schools.

Students bullied one or more times in the previous 30 days.....	50%
Students’ perceptions of whether teachers or adults tried to stop bullying	
“almost always” or “often”.....	52%
“almost never,” “once in a while,” or “sometimes”.....	48%

Data from the largest national database on bullying among U.S. students (Olweus & Limber, 2010) present additional data. It included 524,000 student surveys from 3rd -12th graders in more than 1,500 schools in 45 states.

Students involved in bullying 2-3 times a month (as one who bullied, one who was bullied, or both).....	21% girls and 25% boys
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Bullied students had reported the bullying to a teacher or other adult at school.....	33%
Student feelings when they see a student their age being bullied	
“feel sorry for”.....	83%
Student responses to bullying	
“try to help”.....	35% girls and 29% boys
“don’t help but believe I should”.....	30% girls and 22% boys

3. Obtain support from adults, including school staff and parents to address bullying prevention. Every adult has to be engaged in the work: school staff, bus drivers, nurses, school resource officers, custodians, cafeteria workers, librarians, parents and community members – especially agencies serving youth. When students know that adults take their experiences seriously and are working to stop bullying, they will move from being bystanders to being defenders of the cause.

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4. Form a leadership group that “shepherds” the work to address bullying. This group should be made of representatives from the entire school community, including parents and students. Often student advisory groups form from within the student body to focus on bullying prevention; they can provide suggestions and feedback to the leadership group.

5. Train all the adults in the school in bullying prevention. As one of the top five hot spots for bullying in school is in the classroom with the teacher present, staff training that is based on solid research specific to bullying must take place in every school. Training should not be a one-time event, like an assembly, speaker, curriculum, video, song, or public service announcement. Bullying prevention training needs to be ongoing and, again, specific to addressing bullying. Programming must be comprehensive and should become part of the way the school operates daily, part of the culture. All adults need to understand

1. The nature of bullying and its effects
2. How to respond if they observe bullying
3. How to work with others at the school to help prevent bullying from occurring

Remember bullying is not just a problem behavior, it is peer abuse that impacts the physical and mental health of students. **Stopping bullying is more than addressing discipline issues as they arise, it is about stopping harm.** Adults must take the first step in changing school climate.

6. Create and enforce very specific rules to address bullying and set expectations for students. It is not enough to rely on typical behavior codes that do not explicitly forbid bullying. School rules need to use the term “bullying” and make it clear that the school not only expects students not to bully, but expects them to be good citizens and not passive bystanders when they are aware of bullying. Providing clear rules specific to bullying makes students aware of adult expectations. Those rules must be enforced by all adults in the school setting and supported by parents and community members. Rules should be posted and included in classroom discussions and individual interventions.

7. Include a classroom component in bullying prevention programs. Setting aside time weekly or at least bi-weekly for upper grades to discuss bullying and peer relations helps to build community and contributes to the overall school climate. This discussion should not be something created and delivered to students. It gives them a key role in creating a climate in which all students to feel safe and engaged in school.

8. Increase supervision in areas where bullying is occurring. Students know where the “hot spots” or problem areas are for bullying and readily disclose those areas when asked. Bullying is known to thrive in areas where adults are not present or not vigilant, such as hallways and stairwells. Increasing supervision in those places can be very helpful in reducing instances of in-school bullying.

9. Adults must intervene consistently and appropriately. Even if adults are unsure whether they are witnessing bullying, it is important they stop the event and assure that students are safe. Students need to know that adults will respond and take their safety seriously.

Research shows adults overestimate their effectiveness in stopping bullying. When surveyed, 70% of teachers believed they intervened “almost always”, while 25% of students agreed with the same. (*Charach et al., 1995*)

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**It is important to note here that, unless there has been professional development for staff regarding what bullying is and how to intervene, these statistics will not improve.

10. Bullying prevention and intervention should continue over time. The work does not stop but needs to become a part of everyday school processes and procedures. In order to create lasting changes to the social norms of the school and create a safe and caring environment of learning for each and every student, kids and adults - including parents and community members – need to stay engaged. There is no “end date” for bullying prevention and intervention.

What We Are Doing In Iowa

Iowa has been a leader in bullying prevention and intervention since 2004, three years before the passage of the Anti-Bullying Anti-Harassment Law of 2007.

- Financed (via Department of Education) national certification in Olweus Bullying Prevention Programming for two consultants in each of the Area Education Agencies
- Commissioned and trained Olweus Bullying Prevention Program Trainers statewide to serve 20 Safe and Supportive Schools (SSS) Grant-funded schools and provide consultation and support for additional twenty-seven high schools not selected for funding
- Provide trainers with ongoing professional development, resources, and networking
- Hosted webinars focusing on bullying prevention and intervention specific to cyberbullying, best practices in bullying, and engaging the community in efforts to address bullying
- Provided initial training for nearly 400 Iowa educators in intake and investigation of reports of bullying incidents
- Formed core team of adults and students and student leader teams in SSS Grant schools to lead anti-bullying efforts, guided by Department of Education/Iowa State Extension and Outreach partnerships
- Partnered with The Iowa Pride Network and their Safe School Certification Team to audit components of the Iowa Anti-Bullying Anti-Harassment law for each of the grant funded schools and additional non-funded schools
- Contracted with Safe School Certification Team to complete 18-24 month Certification under the Safe School Certification Model ©
- Committed to facilitate the next steps for SSS Grant schools and others in further professional development around improving investigation skills for reports of bullying and harassment in schools

Finally, in the fall of 2012, the Iowa Department of Education will launch a refined bullying/harassment data collection system for Iowa schools. This system is meant to collect incident report data from all districts in the state and will provide more specific data around types of bullying occurring, locations of bullying incidents, number of students involved in bullying, whether reports are founded or unfounded, kinds of consequences applied in bullying incidents and more.

In addition to our prevention work at the Department of Education, we take phone calls on a very frequent basis from parents who feel their concerns around bullying have not been addressed. We work to **bridge the communication gap** that has developed and help schools and families to resolve some challenging situations.

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When Iowa school districts are visited as part of the state accreditation process and on all equity site visits, bullying and harassment policies are examined to assure they meet the expectations in the Anti-Bullying Anti-Harassment Law. During the visit, multiple groups are interviewed and questions regarding bullying and harassment are included in those interviews. That data is given back to all districts so they can address issues that appear and to recognize and acknowledge their successful efforts to address bullying as well.

Key Components of the Iowa Anti-Bullying Anti-Harassment Law (IA Code Section 280.28)

- Each public district and non-public school must have a policy around bullying and harassment
- Failure to adopt a policy with all the required components could subject an accredited nonpublic school or school district to a possible loss of accreditation

Expectations for inclusion in the policies are:

- Statement that bullying and harassment are against state and school policy
 - Description of expected behaviors of all parties relative to prevention, reporting, and investigation of bullying/harassment
 - Consequences and remedial actions for those who violate the policy
 - A procedure for reporting bullying/harassment
 - Identification by job title the school official responsible for ensuring the policy is implemented Identification of the person/persons responsible for receiving reports of bullying/harassment
 - Procedure for prompt investigation of complaints
 - Identification of the person(s) responsible for conducting the investigation
 - A statement that investigators will consider the totality of circumstances presented in determining whether conduct objectively constitutes harassment or bullying under this section
 - A statement of the manner in which the policy will be publicized
- The law’s definition of bullying includes electronic bullying
 - The law includes protection for 17 traits or characteristics, whether they are real or perceived in the instance of bullying, but is not limited to those seventeen (in 2007 the Iowa Legislature amended the Iowa Civil Rights Act [Iowa Code Chapter 2160] to add sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of protected statuses)
 - The school improvement advisory committee, a required committee for each accredited nonpublic school and each school district, must discuss anti-bullying efforts annually
 - One of the following four needs to be met in order to define behavior that creates an objectively hostile school environment:
 1. Places the student in reasonable fear of harm to the student’s person or property
 2. Has a substantially detrimental effect on the student’s physical or mental health
 3. Has a substantially detrimental effect on the student’s academic performance
 4. Has the effect of substantially interfering with the student’s ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or privileges provided by a school

Considerations For Moving Forward

1. All areas that support student learning need to receive the same level of priority in legislation and funding as reading, math and other academics. Since school climate has a

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significant impact on the child/student’s ability to learn, it is as important to know if a student is safe from bullying and harassment in your school as it is to know his/her achievement scores. It is as important to know a school’s safety, engagement, environment index score (e.g. from the Safe and Supportive Schools Grant) as it is to know the school’s academic achievement average score.

2. Any bullying legislation needs to have provisions for required professional development for all staff, including all adults who interact with students.

3. Legislation needs to include the expectation that schools regularly (at least yearly) administer anonymous surveys to students, parents and staff on the status of bullying and other school climate issues. Schools should be accountable for showing how survey data is used to make programming and other decisions regarding climate.

4. Assure in legislation and in funding that prevention and intervention programming is evidence-based, is specific to bullying, and encompasses the HRSA Best Practices. Bullying has become a high profile topic. It will be important to be grounded in good practices and steer schools away from those increasing resources in print and online by people that have little or no proven impact in reducing bullying. We need to expect quality, evidential strategies that truly fit with violence prevention and peer abuse. Just as they are in academic areas, our strategies for bullying prevention must be evidence based.

5. Students, families and communities must all be empowered to feel they are part of this work.

More Considerations

- In future legislation, outlining the specific, harmful effects of bullying will help to address it fully
- Require that adults report bullying (similar to the report of child abuse) when they see it or have a reason to suspect it
- Add more support for targets of bullying and families of targets
- Put more teeth in laws forbid retaliation after reporting incidents of bullying
- Reporting incidents of bullying and individual interventions around those incidents is not as effective as a systems approach
- Targets of bullying are often bullied not because they have any particular characteristic but simply because they are there

I close with this quote taken from Dr. Justin Patchin, speaking May 21, 2012 at the Minnesota Task Force on Bullying Prevention called by Governor Mark Dayton.

“We need legislation that is prescriptive, thoughtful, evidence-based, and supported with adequate resources. If legislators are serious about doing something to stop bullying, they must move beyond the rhetoric and provide appropriate resources for schools, parents, law enforcement, and other community institutions to tackle this problem. Focusing on improving the climate at school can have a significant impact on a host of problematic behaviors. If students believe that they are cared about at school, and they value those relationships with their teachers, counselors, and administrators, they will in turn refrain from engaging in behaviors that would risk damaging those relationships. That said, bullying and cyberbullying are not just school problems, they are societal problems.

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Everyone has a role and responsibility to do something, and it can start right here with us today.”

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