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Schools confront bullying Holistic approach used to tackle harrassment

By Topher Sanders
Journal Staff

We all have a bullying story to tell; either you have felt the angst of a relentless bully, you are yourself a reformed bully, or you witnessed bullying.

Studies show that between 15 and 25 percent of all U.S. students experience bullying, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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children is no laughing matter, an expert says.

In New York, more than one-third of 3,450 New York students ages 13 to 18 surveyed by Harris Interactive in 2005 said bullying, name calling and harassment is a serious problem in school, according to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

Bullying is often portrayed comically on television, in books and on movies, but harassment among

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Annabella Romano, center, and Sarah Cohn-Manik, right, members of Cayuga Heights Elementary School's Friendship Assistance Brigade, chat with Cheyenne Soule during recess Friday.

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"Until very recently, there's been a lot of dismissing, trivializing or even normalizing of bullying because some people say it's just a normal part of growing up," said James Garbarino, director of the Center for the Human Rights of Children at Loyola University in Chicago. "It is not a harmless thing and it really has a lot of traumatic potential for kids."

Garbarino, a former Cornell University professor, is the author of several books including "And Words Can Hurt Forever: How to Protect Adolescents from Bullying, Harassment, and Emotional Violence" and "Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them."

The Ithaca City School District has had to deal with bullying.

The possible effect of bullying was underscored on May 22 when Amelia Kearney, the mother of an Ithaca City School District student, said during a school board meeting that a physician and a therapist have determined her daughter suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder related to alleged harassment from other students.

Kearney alleges her daughter was repeatedly harassed, often racially, while riding the school bus home from DeWitt Middle School during the 2005-06 school year. The allegations have led to probable cause findings by the Tompkins County Human Rights Commission and the New York State Division of Human Rights. The case is scheduled for a hearing before an administrative law judge on Oct. 1 and 2.

Bullying is just one of several concerns raised by Kearney's allegations. And while the problem of bullying stretches beyond Kearney's allegations, the claims are an example of what can happen when bullying occurs.

The school district does not take bullying lightly, an official said.

"It's not a problem that is unique to Ithaca, and we all recognize that this is a problem and it severely impacts children being able to focus on learning," said Tiffany Phillips, assistant superintendent for student services.

If students are worried about being emotionally or physically safe at school their attention is not on their school work, Phillips continued.

Chronic bullies are often suffering from insecurity, and school districts shouldn't just aim to punish them, but rather should look to help them get over their insecurities so they can be a positive part of the school community, Phillips said.

"While we can deal with them in a punitive way, we have to step back and really get to the root cause of why they are bullies and give them assistance so that they

Bullying statistically

- * 39 percent of New York students surveyed reported bullying, name-calling and harassment as serious problems in school.
- * Verbal bullying is the most frequent form of bullying.
- * 19 percent of New York students surveyed reported hearing sexist remarks from school staff members, 14 percent reported hearing racist remarks from school staff members and 13 percent reported hearing homophobic remarks from staff members.
- * Students who are bullied may fear going to school, using the bathroom and riding the school bus.
- * 25 percent of teachers see nothing wrong with bullying or putdowns and consequently intervene in only 4 percent of bullying incidents.
- * 60 percent of New York students surveyed said they had been harassed or assaulted in school but did not report it.

Onthe Net

- * <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/>
- * www.safeyouth.org/scripts/teens/bullying.asp
- * www.responsiveclassroom.org/ (used in ICSD)
- * www.cfchildren.org/ (used in ICSD)

feel better about themselves and don't feel as though they have to be on the attack," she said.

The Ithaca City School District has many programs in place to help students deal with bullying. Every school in the district has at least one program that addresses student interaction.

Garbarino said he prefers programs that focus on improving the overall culture of a school more so than bullying-specific programs. Cayuga Heights Elementary School's Friendship Assistance Brigade is a program that addresses bullying but doesn't focus on it completely.

Earlier this school year, Celia Clement, a social worker at Cayuga Heights Elementary School, surveyed the school's third-, fourth- and fifth-graders to get their thoughts on how friendly their school is. Using the results of the survey, Clement helped to develop a student-run Anti-Bully Com-mittee.

"The students felt that the school could be a friendlier place and that there were more unfriendly things going at the school than they wanted," Clement said.

The program has been in development since the survey was given and this week was rolled out with third-, fourth- and fifth-grade representatives of the organization working to make the school friendly.

Among other things, the students were taught conflict management from personnel from the Community Dispute Resolution Center.

"They are going to help kids who are feeling lonely on the playground find someone to play with so nobody is feeling unhappy and they will be greeters for new kids that come to the school," Clement said.

Programs such as the Friendship Assistance Brigade are important because they teach children what is to be expected of them as they grow older, Clement continued.

"Kids want to do the right thing and they want be friendly but oftentimes other kinds of pressures come into play where they start doing things that aren't friendly," she said. "Kids' feelings can be really hurt and it can really affect them in their lives and as they grow older. It's important to teach kids that friendship, helpfulness and cooperation are all part of life and it's what we expect."

DeWitt Middle School's Circle of Courage program is also bullying-specific, but is designed to foster a healthy school community.

The Circle of Courage program is rooted in Native American tradition and focuses

on four elements: belonging, generosity, independence and mastery. Even though the program, which has been at DeWitt for about three years, doesn't target bullying specifically, it still helps with the issue, said Ron Acerra, principal of DeWitt.

"In terms of belonging, one of the things that's important is that this is everybody's school and every student needs to feel like they belong," he said.

Acerra cannot speak to the details of Kearney's allegations because impending litigation.

If a student is bullying another student they are not fostering a sense of belonging, Acerra continued.

DeWitt's students are introduced to the Circle of Courage program during the sixth grade and at the beginning of the seventh and eighth grades. Teachers receive training on the program during superintendent days, Acerra said.

The school holds quarterly awards focused on the Circle of Courage elements.

It is also important for schools to stress to students that they should not allow their peers to bully other students, Phillips said.

"We have to give kids the strength to intervene when they see their peers being bullied," she said.

Clement said the Friendship Assistance Brigade program has focused on explaining to students the difference between tattling on a student and telling an adult something they need to know.

Other programs in the district include Second Step and Responsive Classroom.

Adults play an important role in whether bullying occurs. Adults' attitudes toward bullying have a significant impact on its prevalence, Garbarino said.

Adults sometimes endorse bullying through their inaction, he continued. Sometimes adults actively display their own bias toward students or groups of people, which can further a child's desire to harass others.

In the 2005 survey of New York students, 19 percent of students reported hearing sexist remarks from school staff, 14 percent reported hearing racist remarks from staff and 13 percent reported hearing homophobic remarks from staff.

Adults can also see bullying as a common thing that all kids have to deal with as they mature, Garbarino said.

"I think that as adults we have to be very cautious about that," Phillips said. "Even as a parent you want your child to become self sufficient and you want your child to be able to stand up for themselves and have self-confidence. And sometimes kids can whine about this or whine about that and sometimes it is hard to sort through it. But because of that, we have to be very sensitive to what kids are telling us. We can't ignore it; we can't say 'deal with it' because the kids don't have the coping skills yet to be able to deal with that."

The line between bullying and innocent child interaction is not very fine, Garbarino said.

"I think it is rare that you find real confusion about the distinction between normal social exclusion and bullying," he said. "Most of the time when bullying is taken seriously there is active terrorizing, active threatening, active assault, and that's a far cry from people saying we don't want to play with you or we don't want to hang out with you."

If the harassment that sometimes occurs among children happened among adults, people would view it differently, Garbarino said.

"Threatening to shoot somebody, threatening to kill somebody, this is terrorizing," said Garbarino, speaking about Kearney's allegations against the Ithaca City School District. "One way to look at it is if an adult did it to another adult at the work place, would it be illegal? Suppose this girl was 28 and worked at a company and she went to her boss and said these things had happened. Even if her boss was a jerk he would know that if he doesn't show due diligence in protecting his employee he would get hit with a big civil rights law suit."

Garbarino admits that progress has been made in child human rights, but more progress is necessary, he said.

"We've made a lot of progress in protecting the human rights of adults in the work place, but we lag far behind when it comes to kids," Garbarino said.

Garbarino said it might do the educational system some good to remove the word "bullying" from its vernacular because it dissociates the problem from human rights.

"Children are human beings and have human rights. Ultimately that would be a good change of language," he said.

cbsanders@ithacajournal.com