

November 2007

In 2005, the Sudbury School Committee adopted an anti-bullying policy for students. This policy – like the law in a number of states -- recognizes that our schools should never tolerate bullying. Following the adoption of this policy, the Superintendent issued administrative guidelines and procedures that have evolved into our anti-bullying program. The program consists of a curriculum component through which teachers across the District provide education and opportunities for students' skill building to help them understand the dynamics of bullying and the potential damage it can cause to individuals and the learning environment. The program specifically defines "bullying" and, in the event of such misbehavior, calls for certain mandatory reporting by SPS employees so that senior Administrators can keep track of incidents to look for patterns of behavior. In theory, this will allow the Administration to track repeat offenders or identify students who may be teasing or bullying targets. Armed with this information, steps can be taken under our disciplinary policies in an effort to stop the inappropriate behavior while providing appropriate supports to the targets of such misconduct.

The significance of the bullying problem in schools nationally was recognized in May of 2002, by the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education in "The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States." Among the findings relating to targeted school violence was the following:

Bullying was not a factor in every case, and clearly not every child who is bullied in school will pose a risk for targeted violence in school. Nevertheless, in a number of the incidents of targeted school violence studied, attackers described being bullied in terms that suggested that these experiences approached torment. These attackers told of behaviors that, if they occurred in the workplace, likely would meet legal definitions of harassment and/or assault.

The prevalence of bullying found in this and other recent studies should strongly support ongoing efforts to reduce bullying in American schools. Educators can play an important role in ensuring that students are not bullied in schools and that schools not only do not permit bullying but also empower other students to let adults in the school know if students are being bullied.

As part of our ongoing oversight of District policies and initiatives, the Superintendent recently reported to the Committee on the results of our annual student survey relating to the anti-bullying program. Among other things, this survey asked students about incidents of being: (1) teased in a mean way; (2) threatened; (3) left out of things on purpose; (4) hit, kicked, pushed or hurt physically; and, (5) called hurtful names. The report to the Committee indicated that Sudbury's experience with bullying at school remained generally in line with the national statistics. According to the survey, depending on the elementary school, between 49% and 57% of SPS students reported being bullied during the school year. At Curtis, 45% of the students reported being bullied during the school year. For approximately 10% of each school's population (roughly 330 students across the District), being bullied is a daily/weekly condition. Not surprisingly, bullying is reported by students as being most prevalent on the playground, the bus and in the lunchroom. Thus, the problem indisputably remains serious and broad-based.

When asked what else they would like us to know about bullying, some of the students responded as follows:

- (1) it makes younger children cry and older children laugh (Curtis respondent);
- (2) it happens a lot and the teachers don't care or know and when they get in it they overreact (Curtis respondent);
- (3) a lot of the bullying is at the play-ground and then when people go inside they act like nothing ever happened (Haynes respondent);
- (4) The teachers talk about not bullying but don't try to help the situation (Haynes respondent);
- (5) that it is really hurtful to the person being bullied if they didn't deserve it (Loring respondent);
- (6) Can a teacher really help? (Loring respondent);
- (7) I think there should be teacher on the buses because bullying happens frequently there (Nixon respondent);
- (8) Bullying happens in the classroom when the teacher is not around, or when we have a sub (Nixon respondent);
- (9) That I'm bullied A LOT!!!!!!!!!! (Noyes respondent); and,
- (10) It's not a nice thing to do. It makes people scared (Noyes respondent).

While the hundreds of responses received covered the spectrum from the unprintable due to profanity to those who thought the SPS was simply wonderful, when viewed as a whole, the responses underscore the need for continued efforts in connection with the anti-bullying program. In short, the survey reveals that despite extensive efforts to date, significant bullying, and confusion about how best to address it, persists. These results counsel continued examination by the Committee and the Administration of the policy, the administrative procedures and their implementation.

It seems to us that our schools are a microcosm of the culture from which our students are drawn. As such, we recognize we are attempting nothing short of a cultural shift – and that these things take time. Given the devastating psychological impact of bullying on our children, however, we intend to continue pushing this initiative at all levels of our District. While, of course, the primary goal of the system is to provide an excellent education to our students, we all recognize that in order for students to learn effectively, all of them must be – and feel – safe.

With this in mind, we ask that you work with us to bring about this cultural shift to make our children safer in school. Please talk to your children about appropriate behavior while in school. Let them know what will not be tolerated. Also, let them know what they need not tolerate. Perhaps most importantly, if you suspect that your child is being bullied at the SPS, please contact their teacher or School Principal. All of the professionals involved know about the policy and what is expected of them under it, but they cannot address a problem until it is brought to their attention. Moreover, while the Committee will continue to work with the Administration to address this problem at the policy-making level, you should never hesitate to contact Superintendent Brackett's office or any member of this Committee about this type of issue.

Nothing is more important than the safety of our children.

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For the Committee