

Another Bullying Article?

Another article on bullying you might be saying. What more do I need to know? I thought things were getting better. Before you discount this as just another article on bullying I'd like to inform you about an initiative in its early stages the folks involved hope will change how we define, intervene and support victims and perpetrators of bullying in our local school systems and communities.

On May 22, Cynthia Lowen , co-writer and co-producer of the acclaimed film "Bully" will be speaking to a microcosm of our community leaders concerned about this issue and represented by students, parents, school administrators, faith based, mental health professionals and legal representatives. Our goal is to begin a collective dialogue that turns into meaningful and sustainable action that improves upon how we are currently dealing with this most challenging social problem in our schools and ultimately our communities.

The Dignity Act for all students seeks to provide the state's public elementary and secondary school students with a safe and supportive environment free from discrimination, intimidation, taunting, harassment, and bullying on school property, a school bus and/or at a school function. This is causing enormous challenges for our schools where civilized community input, action and collaboration would significantly enhance our anti-bullying efforts.

During our conference invitees will be asked to commit to ongoing efforts to implement new approaches or enhance older ones in their respective school district /communities. Family Service of Chautauqua Region as part of our community mission has accepted the role of organizing and supporting implementation of this ambitions goal. Community partners to date include The Chautauqua Region Community Foundation, Tapestry (Chautauquatapestry.org), First Presbyterian Church and the five local schools we have a current partnership with to provide onsite mental health services (Jamestown, Chautauqua Lake, Frewsburg, Clymer and Westfield). Our speaker Ms. Lowen will make us aware of what is working (and not working) in other communities and schools as well as introduce us to some innovative approaches we might incorporate into our own bullying prevention programs.

As our conference partners have begun delving into the massive amounts of data, research and various programs beginning to address bullying, several themes are beginning to consistently emerge. First, without meaningful community buy in the success of prevention programs is minimal. That being said school cultures from the top down must also set the tone by prioritizing anti-bullying efforts and setting positive examples. Second without required school wide training and sustainable follow through especially with regard to improving social and emotional learning for all students' anti-bullying efforts will remain ineffective. Third, without students and family commitment, perhaps the most effective counter to bullying, prevention efforts are doomed to fail.

Statistics documenting incidents of bullying seem to be all over the place but most agree the impact on a victim (and perpetrator) can last a lifetime. According to the American Psychological Association 40% of teachers report observing bullying once a week or more, 40%-80% experience bullying at some point in their school career with 10%-15% of these reporting being chronic victims. Bullying exacerbates emotional health problems that can manifest or make worse symptoms of mental illness. Untreated, these victims have difficulty focusing and concentrating usually negatively impacting academic success. Emotional and mental well-being correlates strongly with future success in work, relationships and reduced substance abuse.

Research is currently showing mixed results for anti-bullying programs. Some that seem to be turning the corner include our speaker's program "The Bully Project", Step to Respect and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. Effective programs such as these have most of the following characteristics.

1. They target the entire school climate rather than just specific peer interaction
2. Redesign classroom and hallways to focus on community and acceptance
3. Have at least a PBIS initiative started though this program can be less bully specific and Steps to Respect has generally better supports and strategies at all levels.
4. Have anti-bullying teams that combine educators and students.
5. Classrooms incorporate social and emotional learning.
6. Isolate perpetrators/zero tolerance for harassment and bullying with clear consequences that try not to expel students.
7. School and home partnerships
8. Not one size fits all model but must foster environment of tolerance.

The following are the characteristics of ineffective anti-bullying programs.

1. Harassment and relentless teasing are considered normal childhood behaviors.
2. Responsibility is often placed on victims to advocate for their needs and stand up for themselves indirectly blaming the victim and possibly putting them in harm's way.
3. They only focus on case by case basis rather than the whole school culture
4. Staff are not all in
5. Stunts that promote humiliations and contempt are condoned (i.e. slime the principal)

As you can see there is much for us yet to do. Family Services at the Chautauqua Region (FSCR) is dedicated to making every effort to insure we move in a positive direction on bullying in our community. As Nelson Mandela said "It always seems impossible until it is done."

- Jim McElrath, Executive Director & Director of Clinical Services