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Schools work to counter bullying

By THE DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE
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Suggestions that the suicide of a Springfield sixth-grader last week was spurred by bullying cast light on an insidious problem Valley educators say they work hard to address.

Educators in the area say bullying is a problem that has grown in recent years, especially with the advent of the Internet and the emergence of cell phones as new means of harassment. Schools are dealing with the problem in various ways, taking advantage of programs offered by the Northwestern District Attorney's office, increasing rules against new technology and offering their own in-house workshops and assemblies to educate students of the dangers of bullying.

Bullying tends to happen mostly at the middle school level, during the seventh, eighth and ninth grades, when children start to experiment with social relationships and are greatly influenced by outside factors, said Curtis Frick, the chief of the Delinquency Prevention Unit, who works with the Northwestern District Attorney's office in Northampton.

Frick's group provides assistance directly to schools that need help carrying out their anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies, particularly when students who engage in such behavior cross a line into criminality.

Schools can reach out to the DA's office for help with students age 7 to 17 who are harassing others and may be facing criminal charges.

Frick says the program allows these youths to enter a diversion program, instead of acquiring a court record.

In regard to the incident last week in Springfield, Frick said, "I don't have any possible knowledge of similar instances, but it doesn't mean it's not happening ... it's out there."

Springfield tragedy

In Springfield, Carl J. Walker-Hoover, 11, died April 6 after apparently hanging himself with an extension cord at home. His mother, Sirdeaner L. Walker, has said her son was being taunted and bullied at school. Walker-Hoover attended the New Leadership Charter School. His mother called Thursday for an inquiry into what happened.

Frick said bullying is a problem everywhere.

"Each school definitely has their social issues among their students. It doesn't matter if it's a city school - like Northampton or Easthampton - or one in the Hilltowns."

The DA's office also offers a violence-intervention program, which assists schools in preventing bullying and other specific violent incidents. The 4-year-old program trains educators, parents and students about bullying and violence. It works with children ages 7 to 18.

Smith Academy in Hatfield has used the DA's program, as well as its own workshops for middle-schoolers, according to Principal Scott Goldman.

"We have run bullying workshops at the middle school level, just in a pro-active, preventive way," Goldman said.

The principal said bullying is, without a doubt, a serious issue for this age group. "(Bullying) is fairly prevalent at the middle school age. Students can tend to be anywhere from clearly, intentionally bullying to unknowingly behaving in ways that are having that effect. It's an age where those types of programs make sense to do," he said.

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Because schools and situations are different, programs must adjust their approaches. "You cannot just plug in the x's and the y's in these situations. You try to look at each (incident) carefully so that your intervention has the desired outcome."

Goldman said bullying incidents at Smith Academy are dealt with by guidance counselors and the administration. At workshops, they emphasize communication and empathy, as well as trying to focus attention on being the victim of bullying.

Students are also coached on what to do if they become witnesses or bystanders to bullying, by explaining responsibilities to come forward.

Goldman declined to comment specifically on the incident in Springfield, but said that attention should be placed on making school a safe environment for every student. "When you think about the teenagers who end up hurting themselves, a lot of what is behind that is feeling like school is not a safe place - and it's sad."

Amherst's approach

Libby Hurley, assistant principal at the Amherst Regional Middle School, said bullying cannot be ignored.

"The incident in Springfield is truly an unfortunate circumstance. It is heart-wrenching, but just shows the vigilance that is needed in paying attention to certain cues. That's my job," Hurley said. "That's what I do. I pay attention to kids."

Amherst Middle School does not participate in outside bullying-prevention programs, but its counselors attend training on the subject and students sit for a schoolwide assembly on "Cooperation, Participation, and Respect" that targets the problem of bullying.

Like Goldman, Hurley said schools must be safe places that can confront bullying. "What is really effective is to build the case that makes the kids feel comfortable that they can talk confidentially."

To achieve this safe space, AMS has a "blue-box system" in place, said Hurley. The system allows students to anonymously drop notes into blue boxes set up in various places in the school, in case they feel the administration should know something but students don't want to be labeled a "snitch."

Cyberworld's dangers

Another complication in bullying, Hurley noted, is the problems caused by the Internet and cell phones. She said the Amherst school's handbook outlines several rules created in an attempt to cut back on these issues.

"Cell phones are not to be seen at school. If they are, they are held by an administrator, and if we have information that a student has done anything inappropriate with their cell phone, (such as taking inappropriate photos or sending harassing text messages) they are usually not allowed to leave until the pictures or the messages have been deleted," Hurley said.

Most important, Hurley notes, is paying attention to what's going on among students. "We are constantly checking the school climate ... as soon as we get any information (about bullying), we move on it right away. It is something we don't tolerate."

Gazette intern Matt Rocheleau contributed to this story.

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