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Young witnesses to bullying must be part of solution

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By TESS DOMB SADO

AMHERST — It only seems natural for students, the direct participants in bullying episodes, to be actively involved in the creation of anti-bullying policies, activities, and programs.

Yet, as schools rushed to meet the state-mandated Dec. 31 deadline to develop anti-bullying policies, there was no requirement to use student-initiated and student-focused activities to respond to bullying and to support witnesses to intervene.

This have may resulted in policies failing to reflect students' thoughts, perspectives, and needs. During my experience surveying elementary school students and interviewing high school students for "Student News," I learned that giving students the chance to share their experiences and ideas can educate and motivate them to organize around anti-bullying efforts. Students can rise to the challenge. **(At right, Tess Domb Sadof.)**

They contribute honest, thoughtful insights and offer poignant experiences that schools and school officials can learn from and apply in programs.

While surveys and interviews give students an opportunity to share their input, schools need to take the lead and support programs that value student participation.



Schools can form anti-bullying student task forces around student schedules. They can establish programs that incorporate and amplify students' meaningful and often incredible ideas about bullying.

And, student task forces need to be more than just a rubber stamp for school administrators. Student engagement shouldn't be just a box to check off.

In my view, school administrators need to focus on using students' ideas as the basis for their projects.

A great example of this was evident in the assembly students led at Hampshire Regional High School late last year.

By supporting a student-led assembly in which all students were welcome to participate in an open-mic discussion about bullying, the school succeeded in demonstrating respect for students' experiences and fostering an environment based in action rather than apathy.

When people talk about bullying, they often forget about the role of the witness as an active intervener.

After all, bullying has long been defined as an act that happens between two individuals, the bully and the victim. We establish punishments and consequences for the bullies and create support systems for the targets.

However, bullying usually also includes witnesses or bystanders who often don't know how to respond. In an effort to educate students on how to respond to bullying, elementary, middle, and high schools need to emphasize the role of the witness. As I see it, witnesses hold great influence in the real and cyber worlds.

By responding or ignoring bullying, witnesses' actions show either acceptance of the bullying or rejection of it. They hold the power in schools becoming caring and responsive communities.

Schools should lead the way in creating programs that provide witnesses with the tools and skills to effectively and successfully respond to bullying.

Some of these programs can be created by the school, and others, like MTV's "A Thin Line" program, can be supported and publicized in the school.

In addition to focusing on the consequences, legal issues, teacher training and disciplinary responses to bullying in our schools, schools should welcome and use student input to create anti-bullying policies and programs that reflect students' ideas, suggestions, and experiences about bullying prevention.

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