



Testimony of Aaron Eyler, Principal of Matawan Regional High School
Before the Joint Committee on the Public Schools
May 5, 2023

Good morning Chairwoman Jasey, Chairman Cryan and members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools. It is a privilege to speak to you today, representing my students, my school, and my profession.

As a school principal and father, I cannot state strongly enough my concern with addressing bullying in our schools, not only for my own children, but for every student who walks through the doors. Since September 2021, I have witnessed a dramatic rise in bullying incidents, behavioral issues leading to discipline, and mental health referrals. My colleagues in education report similar experiences.

What We Are Experiencing In Schools

What we are experiencing is similar to what we are seeing throughout the rest of society – difficulty interacting with others, less resilience, fewer tools to cope, and elevated levels of aggression. During their time at home, our students missed critical developmental opportunities with their peers and the chance to learn conflict resolution skills. Our students have more anxiety and, unfortunately, the mental health services we can provide in school face limitations with regards to available funding, but even more alarming, the number of trained professionals available to provide these services. I currently have a partnership with the YMCA to offer mental health counseling services to students. Due to a shortage of clinicians, the program is only able to service 7 students while another 8 are on a waiting list. The result is not just an inability to provide reactive services to those who demonstrate a need, but also, proactive services that ensure students are being placed in a position to make good decisions.

Cyber-bullying

The most significant area of increased bullying behavior is cyber-bullying, and it is far-and-away the most difficult to stop. Cyber-bullying often occurs outside school hours, crosses district lines, can be malicious with permanent scarring effects, and is often anonymous and undetectable, even when school officials are informed it is taking place. Our HIB Specialists have had to develop streamlined communications systems to work together on cyber-bullying issues that cross district lines, and this is occurring more and more frequently. Our efforts to work with the police often come up empty as the police have no more leverage than schools in forcing social media companies to share information on who set up the anonymous account that maliciously bullied a student, and in many cases, groups of students.

Even before the pandemic, our students were comfortable with, and adept at, technology. In school, we utilize technology every day as a learning tool. It is impossible to turn back the clock, but the misuse of this tool to bully others must be addressed. Our students have become comfortable living behind a wall of anonymity where their words and actions may hurt another and they are not held accountable. This past weekend alone, I was sent three screen shots of social media posts that were aggressive toward a student. I immediately had to investigate this matter to protect that student and notify the parents. As I stand here, we are still actively searching to identify the individual(s)

who are responsible- this all while not knowing whether or not the offenders attend my school or even reside within our district, county, or state.

Unfortunately, all too often, we spend valuable school hours on a wild goose chase attempting to track down an anonymous account after learning of a post which often “times out” and disappears. We are only successful in tracking down the cyber-bully a fraction of the time and that is only when we get lucky, or someone tells us who the author is.

We have even gone so far as to shut down our school’s “Bring Your Own Device” Wi-Fi network to force students to use school-issued computers to slow their access to social media during the school day. This doesn’t solve the problem by any means.

Parents are critical to our success on this issue. An overwhelming majority of parents are proactive and supportive, but the message from the state must be that every parent must police their child’s online behavior. The law has been changed to reflect this fact, but parents need to embrace their role in this area. Schools can develop and implement policies, but we cannot force parents to honor them.

The Changing Intensity of Bullying Behavior

Another observation I would like to share with this committee is the changing intensity of the bullying behavior we are seeing. There have been more acts of physical aggression in bullying behavior than I have witnessed in the past, and this should be of great concern to all of us. We are also seeing more incidents with a single student engaging in repeated incidents of bullying. Why is this? These are students who were already struggling socially, and the pandemic amplified their struggle. Developmental milestones were not reached, social skills were not developed, and schools must now work hard to address it; however, limited staff overall, and mental health staff in particular, makes this a truly Herculean task. The key takeaway is this: all students, whether acting as the bully or the victim, need access to critical mental health services so that we are taking care of every single student in the State of New Jersey.

What do schools do to address bullying behavior? Counseling, student interventions, discipline, conflict resolution sessions when appropriate, restorative justice activities, schedule modifications and more are options we consider depending upon the circumstances of each case and the needs of the students involved. If an incident involves a potential crime such as assault, law enforcement is notified, and parents of the victim make difficult decisions about pursuing criminal charges.

Oftentimes, the investigation results in the behavior being, at least temporarily, halted with appropriate discipline and interventions, but a harsh truth remains. In my role as Principal, one of the most difficult points to explain to parents is that we can use every intervention in the book to address the behavior, but in the end, no one can guarantee that the behavior will stop except the bully him or herself. This is often why Principals hear from frustrated parents and students that, “The school isn’t doing anything about it” or “You don’t care enough to stop it.” Trust me. Principals care tremendously about ending bullying, but that is one superpower that we haven’t been granted.

Conclusion

I would like to close by sharing with the Committee my hope for the future on this issue. Our school community takes the issue of bullying, and frankly, any disrespectful behavior, within our school very seriously. We have a code of conduct that governs the behaviors in our school whether a student's misconduct is legally HIB or a breach of that code of conduct warranting discipline. This is a critical point to understand.

Prepandemic, we engaged in a schoolwide project that earned us the designation as a "No Place for Hate" school. It was the engagement of students and staff together in a common, positive school climate project that set the tone for a mutually respectful school building. These efforts matter. Setting a mutually respectful tone matters. But as I would argue with all large-scale issues, no school or district can "school wide project" their way to a bully-free environment especially when, many times, the conditions for these behaviors are outside the reach of the schoolhouse gates.

I also want the Committee to understand that NJ has a strong statute in place and strong procedures to implement it. School principals train their staff every year on the procedures, the definition of HIB, methods for identifying bullying behavior, and reporting requirements. Parents are also notified of the bullying policy, procedures, and reporting options annually. We investigate EVERY allegation, whether it is anonymous, online, or delivered to me in person. We want to be certain we are helping EVERY student. When a bullying allegation is made in this state, every principal must fast-track this investigation under legally-mandated timelines. Anti-bullying specialists interview witnesses and conclude their report within 10 days, sometimes interviewing more than 15 witnesses. This means, in my case, that my specialist is losing valuable time to perform her job as a Student Assistance Coordinator in a period of high-risk behaviors among our students.

My recommendation is to focus on the provision of school-based mental health services to assist us in providing the counseling and deeper mental health services our students need and deserve.

An exploration of the cyber-bullying issue and pressures the state can place on social media companies is another area that warrants exploration. I know the Legislature is well aware of the staffing crisis in our schools, but the staffing crisis in the mental health profession is of equal concern and we appreciate your assistance in this area as well.

Although no one has a magic pill to solve the current behavioral issues we are seeing in our schools, we believe that educators, parents, mental health professionals and the support of the State Legislature can make a difference for our students.

I absolutely love my job. Every day I go to work knowing that families are entrusting me to oversee the care of 1,132 children. Overseeing bullying investigations has become a huge piece of that responsibility, and I'll continue to do everything I can to protect and help my students. More often than I'd like to think about, I'll be speaking with a group about the work we need to do to address bullying. Undoubtedly, there will be someone who will remark to me that "bullying is a fact of life and it isn't going away." My response to them is simple: neither am I.

Thank you for your consideration.