

Press Clippings 3/5/2018

---Courier News--- 3/5/18

How U-46 deals with bullying

BY MADHU KRISHNAMURTHY



Hanover Township Youth and Family Services clinical interventionist Ryan Dickinson, center, works with a group of Bartlett High School students Thursday on problem solving and planning. *Brian Hill | Staff Photographer*

Concern over school shootings has many students, parents and educators nationwide calling for stricter gun control laws, and politicians debating arming teachers.

Yet, a solution might lie in how schools deal with an age-old problem threatening students' safety -- bullying.

Methods to combat bullying have evolved from being punitive to restorative. Detention and suspension no longer are the favored approaches for dealing with students having disciplinary problems, say officials at the state's second-largest school district.

Elgin Area School District U-46, which educates more than 39,000 students, has seen a rise in bullying, threats and offenses involving drugs and weapons. Of those, bullying saw the most significant increase from 381 cases in 2015-16 to 570 last year, data show.

Experts say bullying and other behavioral issues such as delinquency, truancy and failing classes are symptoms of larger problems students might be struggling with at home, or in their relationships with peers and how they cope with the pressures of school.

To combat that, U-46 employs social workers to counsel students after each reported case of bullying. Classroom interventions and after-school activities focus on a restorative approach using resources within local communities.

"We haven't had a zero-tolerance policy for many years," said John Heiderscheidt, U-46 director of school safety and culture. "Every student is different and every situation is different. In that restorative approach, it guides us to try to repair the harm done between people involved in conflict and really work toward finding resolution."

State law now defines bullying more broadly, getting away from the old thinking that it requires repeated acts. Cyberbullying through social media is included in the definition.

Alternatives to discipline

Overall within U-46, student referrals for discipline went up slightly from 8,802 in the 2015-16 school year to 8,883 last year. Out-of-school suspensions increased from an all-time low of 874 in 2015-16 to 1,009 last year, data show.

To date, there have been 427 bullying referrals involving 454 students -- 96 of those students, or 21 percent, were repeat offenders.

Several health and social service agencies -- such as [Hanover Township Youth and Family Services](#), [Fox Valley Hands of Hope](#), [Advocate Sherman Hospital](#), and [Streamwood Behavioral Healthcare](#) -- work with U-46 to provide school-based and after-school prevention and intervention programs.

Roughly 130 students voluntarily are enrolled in Hanover Township's Alternative to Suspension Program at Bartlett, Elgin and Streamwood high schools, Canton and Tefft middle schools, both in Streamwood, Parkwood Elementary in Hanover Park, and Oakhill and Sunnydale elementary schools, both in Streamwood.

Students are referred for failing two or more classes and having five or more truanancies. The program focuses on getting students reconnected to their school, peer groups, family and community in positive ways.

"A majority of these kids obviously have been bullied and been bullies," said John Parquette, director of youth and family services.

Positive reinforcement goes a long way toward correcting such behaviors.

"It's a little different from traditional alternative programming where you are forced to go because you are misbehaving. We want to get buy-in from the kids," Parquette said.

Much of the work is done in school, but students also go on field trips to the beach, attend youth theater performances on bullying, and do service projects to develop their capacity for teamwork, leadership and giving back to their community, he added.

During the summer, the township offers a 10-week alternative program that includes cooking classes, team-building games, and arts and crafts with younger students.

"The more diverse the kids are in the groups the better the outcomes," Parquette said.

Leonardo Cushmeer, 16, a junior at Bartlett High School, said he used to get frustrated with school. Being part of the program has helped him channel that energy into helping younger students. "Whenever I'm feeling frustrated, I use my strategies I learned in group," he said. "I think before I talk now. I think and breathe more."