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BULLYING IN NYC PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Making the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) Come to Life

A Report by:



Office of

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Introduction

Bullying is a nation-wide issue – it happens in urban, suburban and rural communities alike,¹ and unfortunately, New York City is no exception. Statistics on the prevalence of bullying vary across studies, but most estimate that between 20-30% of school aged students experience bullying.

Both bullies and victims tend to experience higher levels of depression² and poorer psychosocial adjustment as measured by behavioral problems, academic achievement and relationships with classmates than students not involved in bullying.³ What is especially worrisome is that both victims and perpetrators are at higher risk for suicide than youth who are not affected by bullying.⁴

Effective July 1st, 2012, the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) takes a multi-strategy approach to reducing the prevalence of bullying and harassment in public schools. The act requires schools to, among other things, report data on bullying incidents to the State Education Department (SED), to incorporate curriculum on civility and diversity, to revise codes of conduct in order to promote bully-free environments, and to appoint a Dignity Act Coordinator (DAC) to be responsible for handling bullying-related incidents.

With the start of the 2012-2013 school year upon us, it is critical that measures are taken to ensure that the ultimate goals of the Dignity for All Students Act – to protect students from bullying and to ensure a safe learning environment for students – are realized.

A Public Forum

On August 1st, 2012, the Office of Public Advocate hosted a community forum to discuss bullying and harassment in NYC public schools and to identify barriers to the successful implementation of the Dignity for All Students Act. The Office heard from audience members and panelists who identified alarming disconnections between the mandates of DASA and the Department of Education's plans to implement these mandates. This white paper will examine the key issues brought to light during the forum, and will offer recommendations on what the DOE, individual schools and community members can do to ensure that bullying and harassment in public schools declines dramatically over the next few years.

Bullying Statistics

- A 2009 survey of New York City youth in all five boroughs found that 26% of students had experienced bias-based harassment in their schools.⁵
- In 2010, a Muslim student in Staten Island endured physical assaults and harassment for nearly a year before the bullies were arrested and charged with hate crimes.⁶
- A 2007 survey conducted by the Sikh Coalition found that nearly 78% percent of male Sikh students in Queens had been targets of bullying.⁷
- A 2008 study published in the School Psychology Review found that LGBT students were three times more likely than non-LGBT students to feel unsafe at school, and that 90% of LGBT teens had been verbally or physically harassed or assaulted in the past year.⁸
- A 2007 report released by the National Crime Prevention Council found that over 40% of teenagers aged 13 to 17 experienced some form of cyber bullying in the last year.⁹

The community forum was co-sponsored by Advocates for Children, United Federation of Teachers, Gay Men's Health Crisis, Council of School Supervisors & Administrators, Citywide Council on Special Education, Brooklyn Community Pride Center, State Senator Tom Duane, Assemblyman Micah Kellner, Council Member Daniel Dromm, Council Member Jimmy Van Brammer, Council Member Robert Jackson, District Leader Brad Hoylman, Jim Owles Liberal Democratic Club, Lambda Independent Democrats, Parent to Parent of NYS/Metro Office, Resources for Children with Special Needs, Sinergia Inc., Stonewall Democratic Club of NYC and Yetta Kurland from the Kurland Group.

“We have to ask: ‘What can we do for the victim and the bully?’ Because they both need help.”

–Roderick Palton

Panelists included Lakisha Brooks, a parent of children in NYC public schools, Brad Hoylman, a parent and district leader, Johanna Miller, Assistant Advocacy Director at the NYCLU, Luz Minaya, a middle school teacher, Roderick Palton, the Principal at PS 140K in Brooklyn, and Vanessa Portillo, the Youth Development Director at a public middle school. The Department of Education was invited to participate a week before the event but declined the offer.

Main Concerns

Forum participants and panelists identified several main concerns surrounding DOE's implementation of DASA:

1. Vague plans for parent engagement
2. Stricter anti-bullying policies may lead to increased rates of student suspensions
3. Unclear criteria for Dignity Act Coordinator training
4. No streamlined process to assist schools in identifying and responding to patterns of bullying

Findings and Recommendations

1. Vague goals for parent engagement

The panelists and the audience participants were particularly alarmed that parents had not yet been adequately informed about the mandates of DASA and the impact it will have on their children. Several parents attending the forum were unaware that the legislation even existed. If the Department of Education is determined to have a significant impact on reducing levels of bullying in schools, then they must initiate a concerted and sustained effort to engage parents of both the perpetrators and victims of bullying.

There are many anti bullying resources¹⁰ available for parents in NYC, however, time-constrained parents may be unable to search for these resources and may remain unaware that they exist. The DOE needs to formulate a long-term plan for the dissemination of

“DASA is not based on a criminal model, but rather intervention and prevention. We have to be vigilant that it does not stray from this.”

–Brad Hoylman

resources and vital information for parents such as:

- ✓ What to do if their child is being bullied
- ✓ How to recognize the signs that their child is being bullied
- ✓ How to respond to bullying in their community
- ✓ How to prevent cyber bullying
- ✓ Risk factors for child and adolescent suicide attempts

Recommendation:

In order for these goals to be accomplished, the DOE should assist schools in hosting yearly workshops on bullying prevention and education. Such workshops would foster community engagement and support discussions between school leaders, teachers and parents. Since bullying and youth violence occurs within a multi-faceted social ecological environment – crossing individual, classroom, family and community levels – tackling the problem across multiple levels is the best approach to prevention.¹¹

2. Stricter anti-bullying policies may lead to increased rates of student suspensions

The NYSED has provided guidelines for bullying-related discipline, including an outline of restorative approaches,¹² but there remains much concern that stricter anti-bullying policies might lead to increased rates of student suspensions and arrests. Suspensions and arrests should not be the first intervention. It is imperative that the DOE take steps to ensure that DASA does not lead to increased rates of suspensions of students who may have the greatest need for support in schools. This can be done through staff training in restorative discipline methods, data analysis and long-term monitoring.

“Last year, we know that a minimum of 800 students were suspended for bullying and harassment in schools before DASA even took effect— One of my biggest concerns with DASA is that we are going to be pushing kids out of school who need adult allies in school.”

–Johanna Miller

Recommendations:

- ✓ All school staff responsible for student conflict resolution – including the principal, the dean, guidance counselors and social workers – should be trained in restorative discipline methods. Restorative discipline considers punitive measures to be a last resort, and instead take into account the needs of the victim and the offender, while seeking to rebuild the harm done to the community.¹³
- ✓ Data on bullying incidents should be examined in each school once every semester to make sure that numbers of suspensions are not increasing as a result of stricter anti-bullying policies. The DOE should investigate all schools that report increases in suspensions to see whether appropriate disciplinary policies and methods are in place.

3. Criteria for Dignity Act Coordinator training

Forum participants were unsettled by the ambiguity of the training requirements for Dignity Act Coordinators. As DASA requirements currently mandate, one employee from each school will need to be trained in order to become a Dignity Act Coordinator. It is unclear, however, what exactly this training entails.

Recommendation:

The DOE must elaborate on the specific training requirements so the public can have assurance that Coordinators are adequately prepared to handle what could be a daunting task at many schools. At the minimum, the DOE should provide information on:

- ✓ What topics will be covered in the training
- ✓ What skills and knowledge (e.g., conflict resolution, reporting processes, disciplinary methods, etc.) the DAC should have

Conclusions

Although the Dignity for All Students Act is well-intentioned, and represents a step in the right direction, it is clear that much work remains to be done. The Office of Public Advocate and its community partners will continue to monitor this issue in the coming year and will follow up on the Department of Education's initiative to implement the mandates of DASA. No child deserves to go to school with the fear of being bullied. With the start of the school year upon us, it is critical that the DOE, policymakers, and concerned citizens take steps to ensure that the Dignity for All Students Act comes to life.

The Office of the Public Advocate will have a follow-up panel discussion in January 2013 to ensure that the Department of Education is taking these recommendations into account.

“The resources are out there, but parents and teachers need to be informed on what the process is.”

–Luz Minaya

End Notes

¹ Research conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics found that bullying occurred at least once a week in 27 percent of city schools, compared with 21 percent of rural schools and 20 percent of suburban schools in the 2009/2010 school year. The report can be accessed at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012002.pdf>.

² Seals, D., & Young, J. (2003). Bullying and victimization: Prevalence and relationship to gender, grade level, ethnicity, self-esteem, and depression. *Adolescence*, 38(152), 735-47.

³ Nansel, T. R., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R. S., Ruan, W. J., Simons-Morton, B., Scheidt, P. (2001). Bullying behaviors among US youth: Prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment. *JAMA*, 285(16), 2094-2100.

⁴ Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2010). Bullying, cyberbullying, and suicide. *Archives of Suicide Research*, 14(3), 206-221.

⁵ <http://www.aaldef.org/Bias-based-Harassment-in-NYC-Public-Schools.pdf>

⁶ http://articles.nydailynews.com/2010-10-13/news/27077950_1_teacher-gay-slur-muslim-youth

⁷ http://www.sikhcoalition.org/documents/pdf/hatred_in_the_hallways.pdf

⁸ Espelage, D. L., & Swearer, S. M. (2008). Addressing research gaps in the intersection between homophobia and bullying. *School Psychology Review*, 37(2), 155-159.

⁹ <http://www.ncpc.org/resources/files/pdf/bullying/Teens%20and%20Cyberbullying%20Research%20Study.pdf>

¹⁰ Some examples of resources available for parents and educators include the federal website www.stopbullying.gov, which offers fact sheets on bullying, links for curriculum for teachers, as well as animated 'webisodes' that teach children how to respond to bullying. The parent support line on 311 is an avenue where parents can file complaints against schools if they do not handle bullying incidents appropriately. The Respect for All email address (respectforall@nyc.gov) is available for parents and students to report bullying incidents.

¹¹ http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/chap1.pdf

¹² <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/dignityact/rgsection5.html>

¹³ <http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/documents/workshop03C-ClassroomManagement.pdf>

¹⁴ http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/vadir/2012/Summary_of_Violent_Disruptive_Incidents_Form_with_Code_of_Conduct_2011-12.pdf

¹⁵ <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/vadir/vadir-reporting.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/vadir/2011/PD-criteria.pdf>

¹⁷ http://www.nyclu.org/pdfs/criminalizing_the_classroom_report.pdf