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Protecting Kids

School district offers second anti-bullying forum in 12 months

by E. Assata Wright Oct 24, 2010

Less than a year after hosting a comprehensive forum on what has become known as cyberbullying, the local schools have started a broader initiative to address the problem.

In an assembly held on Friday, Oct. 22, the Secaucus school system launched a new anti-bullying program that will continue throughout the 2010-2011 school year and will include age-appropriate programs for students throughout the district.

The program, held in the Arthur F. Couch Performing Arts Center (PAC), included videos, information from legal experts, and personal testimonies from adults who were either harassed as children or who have seen the impact bullying has had on victims' lives.

Grade schools and colleges throughout the nation have hosted similar anti-bullying programs in the wake of Tyler Clementi's suicide on Sept. 22. The 18 year-old Rutgers University student took his own life after his roommate and a friend secretly shot footage of him having sex then streamed the video footage online.

“Early intervention by a friend, classmate or teacher, can save someone’s life.” – Cynthia Randina

Evidence suggests Clementi may have complained online about other similar alleged incidents. Rutgers officials and law enforcement are now investigating whether the alleged harassment went unreported.

“The critical concept that we hope to communicate to students is that, in many instances, they are the first line of defense in identifying bullying and its victims, and they need to alert counselors and teachers to intervene,” Secaucus Schools Superintendent Cynthia Randina said in a written statement to the Reporter. “Early intervention by a friend, classmate or teacher, can save someone’s life.”

Tougher stance

As recently as 2008-2009 the Secaucus High School yearbook still included a designated “class bully,” a reference that was meant to be humorous. Randina and the Board of Trustees were not amused, however, and had the “bully’s” page redacted. The district has taken a much tougher stance towards bullies since then.

Last November, the school system offered a presentation, “Hazards of Electronic Medium,” which addressed cyberbullying, texting, sexting, social networking sites, and online safety for young people. That forum, also held in the PAC, was attended by students in the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades and was led by two staffers from the U.S. Secret Service.

The forum was followed up the next month with an in-service day for teachers at which they were briefed

on the ramifications of bullying and the district's anti-harassment policy. The district's most recent anti-harassment policy was created in April 2008 and specifically addresses harassment and bullying, both in-person and online.

The policy states: "Harassment," 'intimidation,' or 'bullying' means any gesture, written, verbal, or physical act, or any electronic communication, that takes place on school property, at any school-sponsored function, or on a school bus."

The district has now launched a full-scale anti-bullying campaign that a Board of Education spokesman said will continue throughout the school year and throughout the entire system.

The Town Council has also designated November as anti-bullying month in Secaucus.

An 'abuse of power'

According to Stuart Green, MSW, MA, founder of the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Coalition who spoke to the Reporter last fall, bullying, like all forms of harassment, is really about an abuse of power.

"People who harass or bully usually have some power over their victims," he commented. "They might have more authority, more seniority, more stature in their community – and they abuse that power by harassing someone who lacks that power."

Victims, he said, often come from a group that is in the minority. Among New Jersey schools these days Green said he sees many immigrant and gay/lesbian children being bullied, whereas years ago it may have been African-American kids. Also, bullying is more common in middle schools than in elementary and high schools.

A majority of teens, 71 percent, have social networking profiles through sites such as Facebook, and nearly half, 47 percent, have profiles that can be viewed by any member of the public. Eight percent of teens have even posted their cell phone numbers on the internet.

Because teens are sharing so much personal information online, they risk exposing themselves to harassment – a fact that is evident in the local schools.

"Ninety-nine percent of any of our problems in this school are related to bullying on the internet from Facebook. Any discipline problems that I had to deal with [since the beginning of the school year], all came from Facebook," said Dr. Robert Berckes, principal of Secaucus High. "It doesn't even come from who said something in the hall, or who were touched someone. It all has to do with who said what about whom on Facebook last week, last night, and they bring it to school. And when they bring it to school, then I have to get involved and tell them this is where it stops. Schools should be a safe haven, not a place where anyone should be intimidated or where anyone feels threatened or they can't be here to get an education. So that's what I'm trying to emphasize."