

Schools Turn Anti-Bullying Bill into Action

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After the deaths of two Pioneer Valley students, months of debate, and emotional appeals, bullying has been outlawed in Massachusetts. But schools have only months to turn law into action.

In the Hampden-Wilbraham school district, the fight against school bullying has already begun.

Marty O'Shea, Superintendent, Hampden - Wilbraham School District, says: "People would be surprised to know that most school districts have a fairly strong foundation to work off of, you know, we're not going to building bullying prevention programs from ground zero."

Lifeskills training is a program for teachers to reduce violence in schools, granted to the district through the Safe Schools/ Healthy Students program.

Gina Kahn, Director Safe Schools Healthy Students Grant, says: "I think we're on the right track with some programs that we've implemented already that have to do with creating positive classroom environments."

But now, that track needs to be laid even further, to comply with new bullying regulations that need to be in place by the fall.

Marty O'Shea, Superintendent, Hampden - Wilbraham School District, says: "I cant really recall a time that something has come out of the state house or governor's office that required such a quick turnaround."

Lawmakers will release guidelines for schools by the end of June. But, to help with the push, officials at Hampden - Wilbraham and several other districts will be heading to the classroom themselves - at Westfield state.

Kathy Wicks, Assistant Dir., Center for Teacher Education and Research, Westfield State, says: "We want to make sure that we frame the issue in a way that makes it clear this is a solveable problem."

Westfield State had already been planning the two day "Schools as Bully-Proof Zones" conference for June before the bullying bill was put into law.

Pat Gardner, Director of Center for Teacher Education and Research, Westfield State, says: "What we're doing is we're setting up a workshop format, a round robin format. And at the end of every session they'll have 15 - 20 minutes of strategic planning."

Featured speakers will include Sirdeaner Walker, who's son Carl took his own life last year after being targeted by bullies.

But the focus here won't just be on those standing in front of the classroom. Research is showing stopping the bullying problem won't pick up speed, until the students get involved.

Elizabeth Stassinis, Associate Professor of Criminal Justice, Westfield State, says: "The students, and the peers, and the bystanders are really going to be key. So getting the children to stop other children from bullying is really going to be the thing that I think turns this around."

Turning it around, ultimately the goal for the efforts already underway at Pioneer Valley schools, for the comprehensive, 16-page legislation targeting bullying and cyber-bullying, and for concerned citizens, worried about our youth.

Pat Gardner, Director of Center for Teacher Education and Research, Westfield State, says: "If we save one child, or if we save one family the anguish that Phoebe Prince or Sirdeaner Walker have gone through, then we'll feel very positive about what we've done."