

What's Happening

I N T H E U S A ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

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Schools all around the United States have policies to protect students from bullying. Almost every state has a law against it too. Bullies traditionally always harassed their victims in person, but these days they also use technology to do it. Now New Jersey has a new law that protects students from bullies, whether at school or not.

Bullies usually have a bad self-image. They try to make themselves feel better by making someone else feel bad. Most often they choose their targets because of how they look. They may attack them because of their body shape, haircut or clothes. They also may use race, religion or, especially as students get older, sexual orientation as an excuse for their cruelty. Students with physical handicaps sometimes become targets too.

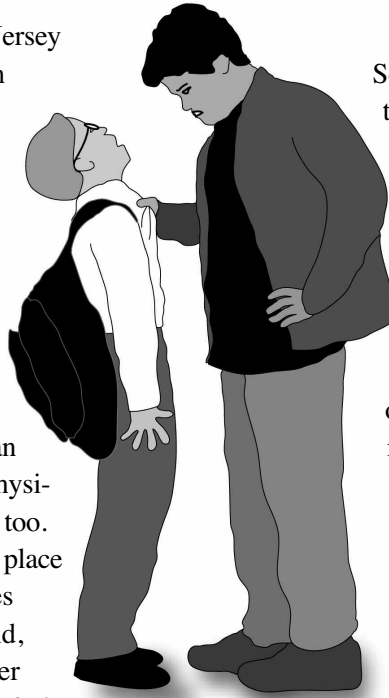
Bullying at school usually takes place where it is hard for adults to see. Bullies approach their victims on the playground, in hallways, cafeterias, bathrooms, locker rooms, and at bus stops. Their actions include things like name-calling, threats, shoving and hitting.

The process of bullying another student always includes an imbalance of power. Often bullies are larger physically than their targets. In addition, they make sure that other students are present for support and approval. The victims are outnumbered and feel intimidated, and they see no way of defending themselves.

Technology has given bullies another way to harass victims. They no longer just confront them in person. They also use cell phones and computers to text, send e-mail messages, and post things on Internet sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. They remain hidden from view, but ridicule their victims in front of countless others who see their messages and postings. This form of bullying is called cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying has grown along with young people's use of technology. The Kaiser Family Foundation reports that teens spend an average of more than 53 hours per week on computers, cellphones, iPods and video games. The Pew Research Center reports that

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almost three-quarters of teens use social networking sites on the Internet. A Nielsen report from 2010 found that teens exchange an average of 3,339 texts per month.

New Jersey's law, the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, took effect on September 1. It requires more of schools than any law in the country. Each school must appoint an anti-bullying specialist. All employees must receive training to recognize bullying, and they must report any behavior that they suspect might be bullying. Within 24 hours the school must begin investigating every incident, even if it took place off campus or in cyberspace. Then it must share its results with the parents of both the bully and the victim.

Many schools teach students how to react to bullies, but hotlines and Web sites offer help too. MTV, for example, has a project called "A Thin Line." It reminds young people that they have a responsibility to act if they see someone else getting bullied. The project also encourages all young people to end unhealthy relationships. It emphasizes that people can disconnect electronic devices, and that phone companies will assist them in blocking calls and text messages. Finally, it recommends that young people save threatening messages as evidence for when they report the bullying to the school or the police.

Other U.S. states are taking action too. Nevada's new anti-bullying law went into effect in July, and the governor named the first week of October a "Week of Respect." Washington now requires each school district to prohibit the harassment, intimidation or bullying of students. A new law in New York will take effect next year. Including New Jersey, now eight states have expanded their laws to include cyberbullying.

The new laws are sending clear messages. They notify bullies that more people than ever are watching their behavior. They also assure victims that their schools are on their side. Finally, they reinforce the simple belief that every student has the right to feel safe at school.

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Schools all around the U.S. should protect students from bullying. Almost every state has a law against it too. In the past bullies always harassed their victims in person, but these days they also use technology. Now New Jersey has a new law that protects students from bullies, whether at school or not.

Bullies usually have a bad self-image. They try to make themselves feel better by making someone else feel bad. Most often they choose their targets because of how they look. They also may attack them because of their race, religion or physical handicaps. As students get older, sexual orientation becomes an excuse for their cruelty.

At school bullying usually takes place where adults do not see it. Bullies approach their victims on the playground, in hallways, cafeterias, bathrooms, locker rooms, and at bus stops. Their actions include things like name-calling, threats, shoving and hitting.

Bullying always includes an imbalance of power. Often bullies are bigger than their targets. In addition, they make sure that other students are present for support. The victims are outnumbered, and they see no way to defend themselves.

Technology gives bullies another way to harass victims. They use cell phones and computers to text and send e-mail messages. They also put things on Internet sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. They remain hidden from view, but many others see those messages. This is called cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying has grown along with young people's use of technology. Teens spend just more than 53 hours per week on computers, cellphones, iPods and video games. Almost

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three-quarters of teens use social networking sites on the Internet. A report from 2010 found that teens exchange about 3,339 texts per month.

New Jersey requires more of schools than any other state. Each school must have an anti-bullying specialist, and all employees must get training to recognize bullying. They must report any behavior that might be bullying. Within 24 hours the school must begin investigating it, even if it took place off campus or in cyberspace. Then the school must share its results with the parents of both the bully and the victim.

Schools teach students how to react to bullies, but hotlines and Web sites help too. MTV, for example, has a project called "A Thin Line." It tells young people that they have a responsibility to help victims. It also reminds them that they

can turn off phones, and that phone companies will help them block calls and texts. Finally, it recommends that people save threatening messages. They will be proof for when they report the bullying to the school or the police.

Other states are taking action too. Nevada named the first week of October a "Week of Respect." Washington now requires each school district to prohibit the harassment or bullying of students. A new law in New York will take effect next year. Including New Jersey, laws in eight states now include cyberbullying.

The new laws are sending clear messages. They tell bullies that more people than ever are watching their behavior. They also assure victims that their schools are on their side. Finally, they say clearly that every student has the right to feel safe at school.

Background Information

New Jersey defines bullying, in part, as any gesture, written, verbal or physical, or electronic communication, that creates a hostile educational environment “by interfering with a student’s education or by severely or pervasively causing physical or emotional harm to the student.”

Thousands of school employees in New Jersey attended training sessions on the new law during the summer. Training was not just for teachers and administrators, but also for substitute teachers, classroom aides, coaches, custodians and cafeteria workers.

Schools in New Jersey must complete their investigations within 10 school days.

In the first weeks of the school year, New Jersey’s largest high school handled 10–15 complaints daily. Three incidents resulted in punishment to bullies.

Finding reliable statistics on bullying is hard. At the minimum, though, about one-quarter of all students say that they have been the victims of online bullying at least once. Research gives a clear picture of the negative effect of any form of bullying on young people though. It takes place over a long period of time, so the victims often just withdraw from friends, family and activities. They close themselves off emotionally, lose interest in school and become depressed.

The school district in East Hanover, New Jersey is partnering with the organization Crime Stoppers. Students can anonymously call or text in to report a bullying incident.

Researchers have studied the reasons that victims remain silent rather than report bullying. Eighty percent of teen victims of cyberbullying do not tell their parents because the parents do not understand technology. They fear that their parents will overreact, make the situation worse, or take away cellphones and shut down Facebook pages.

Cyberbullying is worse among middle school students than among elementary and high schools students. Experts say that grade schoolers are more focused on making friends and adjusting to school. High schoolers have a stronger sense of self, better defense mechanisms, and are beginning to understand that the problem lies with the bully rather than themselves.

People call the proper use of electronic media “netiquette.” MTV’s “A Thin Line” says that the first step is for people not to say anything online that they would not say to a person’s face.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- Describe some ways in which the victims of bullying respond.

Comprehension:

- What does New Jersey’s new law require schools to do?

Beyond the Text:

- How can you tell the difference between bullying and teasing, or bullying and an argument?
- If a student knows that someone is being bullied, what are some things that he/she can do to help stop it?
- Describe what your school does about bullying.

Vocabulary (*advanced article only)

Article-specific: bully; to harass; self-image; orientation; cruelty; handicap; intimidated*; to ridicule*; social networking

High-use: policy*; traditionally*; technology; process*; imbalance; to confront*; to exchange; to require; to appoint*; to suspect*; to investigate; to react; project; to emphasize*; evidence*; to expand*; to assure; to reinforce*

Sources

Atlanta Journal and Constitution October 10, 2011

The Record (Bergen County, NJ) October 10, 2011

Buffalo News October 9, 2011

School Library Journal October 1, 2011

WHYY Radio “Radio Times” September 14, 2011

Time.com September 6, 2011

New York Times August 30, 2011

Calgary Herald August 18, 2011

www.athinline.org

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English-Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development

2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies

2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension

Writing Strategies and Applications

Listening and Speaking

History-Social Science

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