
Anti-bullying curriculum unveiled

By Jennette Barnes

Globe Correspondent / March 20, 2011

BRIDGEWATER — Dozens of high-school educators from around the state gathered at Bridgewater State University last week to be the first to receive a new curriculum designed to help reduce cyberbullying and teach students how to make smarter choices about posting personal information online.

State law requires school districts to create antibullying policies and train their students, but until now, no research-based high-school curriculum dealing with Internet bullying has been widely used in Massachusetts, according to Elizabeth Englander, a Bridgewater State psychology professor and the lead author of the program.

Englander's curriculum offers lessons for each grade designed to stand alone so schools can include them in health, social studies, or other classes without taking all the time from a single course.

Beginning in ninth grade, students will learn about the pitfalls of posting private information on social networking sites, sexting, how social pressure influences their behavior online, methods for reporting abuse, and more.

Subsequent years delve into more detail about photos, cyberbullying vs. free speech, cellphone applications, and criminalization of online behavior.

In addition to bullying, the program covers phishing and other online scams, and it includes online videos for students to watch.

Englander said small disputes between students used to dissipate after school, but today those disputes often migrate to the Internet.

Students may start texting their friends to seek social support, but when more friends get involved online, a situation can spiral out of control.

"The difficulty is that it escalates it," she said.

Long brushed aside as a rite of passage, bullying drew close scrutiny in Massachusetts over the last two years after family and authorities linked the suicides of two Western Massachusetts youths to torment by peers.

And in New Jersey last year, the power of the Internet became starkly clear when a Rutgers University freshman killed himself following the secret streaming of video showing his intimate encounter with another man.

Many communities in Massachusetts have sought ways to get a handle on the problem.

Boston created a bullying tipline, and Governor Deval Patrick signed the antibullying law this past May.

Sarah "Sally" Marples, a high school librarian in Marshfield, attended Englander's Tuesday curriculum seminar looking for answers to what she views as a troubling problem.

Several years ago, middle-school students created a false Facebook page for a teacher and posted distasteful comments made to look like they came from the teacher, she said.

"The teacher felt very, very violated and was concerned about his reputation as a professional," she said.

"They do that to their peers, too. It's very frustrating."

Marshfield worked with Englander to write an antibullying policy, and it took effect in 2006.

Derrek Shulman, regional director for the New England office of the Anti-Defamation League, welcomed the new curriculum.

"The destructive impact of bullying and cyberbullying can't be taken seriously enough, and from what I understand about this curriculum, it's a step in the right direction," he said.

The Anti-Defamation League advocated for the antibullying law, which Shulman called the strongest in the nation.

Though scrutiny has risen, bullying warranted action long ago, said Christopher Overtree, director of the Psychological Services Center at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

"It's been urgent since as long as I can remember, and it became most obvious at the time of the Columbine High School shootings," he said.

Overtree, who worked with New England College to create graduate programs in school-climate leadership, said schools and parents must move away from the "kids will be kids" mentality and acknowledge the true dangers of bullying.

Englander developed the curriculum through Bridgewater State's Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, which she directs.

She used her earlier research on what freshmen know about the Internet to identify areas where high-school students need more information.

Her first measure of the curriculum's effectiveness will use data from a pilot program now underway.

About 130 people from 63 schools or school districts around the state attended the seminar Tuesday, Englander said.

Among those represented from communities south of Boston were public school systems in Abington, Braintree, Brockton, Canton, Cohasset, Duxbury, Foxborough, Hingham, Marshfield, Quincy, Rockland, Norwood, Sharon, Stoughton, and Weymouth. Also represented were the B.B. Russell Alternative School (part of Brockton Public Schools), North Quincy High School, the North River Collaborative, the Old Rochester Regional School District, the Silver Lake Regional School District, and South Shore Charter Public School.

Educators can request a free copy of the curriculum at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center website, www.marccenter.org.

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