

June 4, 2012

Schools prepare for anti-bully legislation

Anti-harassment law goes into effect July 1

*By Chris Valdez
Poughkeepsie Journal*

As students start to enjoy their summer vacation, local school and law enforcement officials are gearing up to implement the Dignity for All Students Act.

The act, which was signed into law Sept. 13, 2010, and will take effect July 1, aims to curtail bullying by prohibiting activities that create a hostile environment at public schools and school-sponsored events, the state Department of Education said.

As an amendment of the state education law, the legislation expands the concepts of tolerance, respect and dignity to include an awareness and sensitivity for everyone, the Education Department said.

"I think it calls attention to an issue that certainly is a real problem for some children," said Raymond Bandlow, superintendent of schools in the Beacon City School District.

According to the Education Department, 75 percent of students report that classmates at their school are called names, made fun of or bullied with at least some regularity. The scope of the harassment includes race, weight, national origin, ethnicity, religion, religious practices, disabilities, sexual orientation, gender identity and sex, among other elements that make people unique.

The law requires each school district to:

- Establish anti-harassment and discrimination policies.
- Create school training programs in harassment and discrimination.
- Regulate one employee in every school as the Dignity Act coordinator and instruct this employee in the provision of the proposed rule and thoroughly train him or her in methods to respond to human relations.
- Raise staff sensitivity and awareness as well as enable staff to respond to harassment.
- Develop nondiscrimination instruction and counseling methods.
- Adjust the curriculum from every grade to include a course in civility, citizenship and character education.
- Collect and report data regarding material incidents of discrimination and harassment.

"It highlights the responsibility of the adults to do all we can to ... prevent bullying," Bandlow said of the legislation. "It highlights the importance of schools taking steps to create a positive climate."

The responsibility to regulate these guidelines falls on the shoulders of the districts, without any financial assistance.

Bandlow expects to designate the principal of each school to be the coordinator, which he said shouldn't be a large adjustment because school officials already cover many of the required duties.

Beacon schools plan to host assemblies and programs to reinforce positive behaviors, resolve differences, explain how painful bullying can be, and create an atmosphere of respect and understanding for others.

Bandlow said the school is still working to determine the expense of adhering to the new principles.

The most important element, Bandlow said, is to prevent the disruptive actions by addressing misbehaviors

“It’s always an obligation to ensure the safety of our children,” he said.

As the countdown to July continues, school districts around the state are working diligently to revise their codes of conduct to be consistent with the legal developments and reviewing how to report data.

Bernard A. Krooks, founding partner of the law firm Littman Krooks LLP, said by collecting data the state could quantify the impact on bullying.

Krooks, who has offices in Fishkill, said by determining the scope of the problem, policymakers are more able to increase funding and amend future laws to include punishment or monetary damages for repeat offenders and schools that don’t take action.

“We are hopeful with this law that by collecting the data, that could be used to put some more teeth in the next law,” said Krooks, who works in special advocacy education and law. “The goal here from a legal perspective is to give students the opportunity to have a safe and supportive environment without intimidation.”

Many police agencies are also working to reduce bullying. Beacon Police Chief Doug Solomon said his department would communicate with the school district throughout the summer. He said he wants the city’s detectives to have a strong presence in the school.

“That’s one of the things I want as chief is to have my officers more involved in the school district,” he said. “It seems like a natural fit to implement more police youth involvement.”

Detective Don Williams has been a guest instructor in the forensics and criminal justice classes and Detective Jennifer Piacente has also worked with juveniles in the city.

Solomon said he hopes the new law allows police to interact with the community and build better relationships.

“Any vehicle by which officers can be involved with the youth is something I support,” said Solomon, who has been chief for three months. “Moving forward, a police officer needs to be more cognizant of how the youth is viewing them and adjust around that.”

Michael Buchanan is doing his part to give hope to the victims of harassment. Inspired by an overweight child in Cincinnati who said his classmates tortured him, Buchanan and Diane Lang wrote “The Fatboy Chronicles,” which was transformed into a movie with the same name in 2010.

Buchanan, a retired mathematics teacher, said there’s a disconnect between what adults perceive as reality and what many students suffer through.

“When you are teaching, you kind of have control of your little world. You know bullying exists, but bullies know where they can hide to do their dirty work,” said Buchanan, 56, of Atlanta. “Today, the bully has 24-hour access to their victim.”

Buchanan said the Dignity for All Students Act acknowledges the problem and now the communities can get the children, school officials and parents involved and take part ownership of the dilemma.

“You can pass all the laws you want,” he said. “But until the people at the school buy into it with their hearts, all they’re doing is checking stuff off.”