

BULLYING ... We're Kickin' It!

By: Susan Heckler

New Jersey has been very proactive in the pursuit of ending bullying in our schools. In 2002, the original anti-bullying law N.J.S.A.18A:37-13 was passed. This was a first giant step in the right direction. Unfortunately, it was not sufficient as noted by suicides of bullied children and young adults. The New Jersey Legislature passed the "Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act" November 22, 2010, with practically unanimous support in both houses. Governor Chris Christie signed the legislation as P.L. 2010, Chapter 122 (P.L. 2010, c.122) and the new provisions took full effect in the 2011-12 school year.

New Jersey Education Association supported the complete bill but wanted to fortify the legislation by pushing for amendments that would have required suitable funding for training and programs in each district. NJEA maintained that school personnel who are necessary to assist as "anti-bullying specialists" should be trained and certified. Those recommendations did not find their way into the ultimate version of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights.

The law defines harassment, intimidation or bullying as "any gesture, any written, verbal or physical act, or any electronic communication, whether it be a single incident or series of incidents, that is reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic... that takes place on school property, at any school-sponsored function, on a school bus, or off school grounds ... that substantially disrupts or interferes with the orderly operation of the school or the rights of other students, and that a reasonable person should know, under the circumstances, will have the effect of physically or emotionally harming a student or damaging a student's property, or placing a student in reasonable fear of physical or emotional harm to his person or damage his property."

The Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights provides detailed procedures and timelines for reporting incidents of bullying. All school employees and contracted service providers are required to report such incidents. Public school teachers will be required to complete at least two hours of instruction on harassment, intimidation, or bullying prevention in each professional development period. Candidates for teacher certification will be required to complete programs on bullying. Administrators and Board of Education members will have programs on harassment, intimidation, and bullying added to their

training requirements. Under the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, principals are required to appoint one of their staff members as the school's anti-bullying specialist. The law specifies that the principal must appoint the currently employed guidance counselor, school psychologist, or another similarly trained individual, to fill this role. If there is no such individual in the school, the principal must appoint another already-employed individual in the school.

We now have the framework for adult intervention for bullying by the schools. The next gap to fill will be to teach the parents and our youth about the seriousness of this problem and to promote awareness and prevention.

Each of us has either participated in, witnessed, or been on the receiving end of negative behavior. In many cases, these roles can overlap. Someone who has been bullied often times becomes a bully. There are plenty of children who are bullied by parents and grow up mocking this behavior. The bully can be a parent, sibling, neighbor, classmate or a total stranger.

A wonderful gap-closing effort is being made by a new organization in our area, BULLYING...We're Kickin' It. This is a 501c3 (not-for-profit) national organization headquartered in Freehold, NJ. Kickin' It provides free literature, programs and resources to schools across the country. The fledgling organization piloted programs for 2 years with school-days off workshops, summer/winter camps and was an after-school drop-off center for the students of Adelphia Grammar School in Howell.

The purpose of Kickin' It is to create anti-bullying and leadership training directly for the youth themselves, teaching the kids the right and wrong of situations and allow them to stop the behavior without peer pressure. Having them take responsibility of their own actions makes them aware of how their actions impact the children around them.

With the success of the piloted programs, Kickin' It has now relocated to Freehold, creating the Kickin' It Kids Anti-bullying & Leadership Center on Route 9, which is the first of its kind, embracing youth from early childhood. At the center, Kickin' It continues its after school programs, summer/winter camps, school-days off workshops and the student-positive parties every Friday night. Now Kickin' It

has just expanded into a day care and preschool, with a unique character-building curriculum.

The Kickin' It Kids Day Care and Pre-School Programs are led by teachers who must complete the programs anti-bullying certificate course, which meets the requirements of the NJ State Anti-bullying Laws and is NJEA endorsed. Kickin' It is also offering their five-hour course for educators of all grade levels, as they host an Anti-bullying Conference at the Kickin' It Center in February.

Developed with the organization's Director of School Programs, who is a former NJ high school principal, that course is also incorporated into the Kickin' It child care programs that involves a strong academic and core character building curriculum providing:

- Foundations of good character; teaching student's character qualities and socially acceptable behaviors they will need for life-long success.
- How to develop compassion, kindness and respect for oneself and others, emphasizing responsibility of one's own actions.
- Strategies that help students improve their coping skills and social behaviors; to utilize throughout their school, social and life journey.

Kickin' It's Code of Conduct is effectively communicated to all students, re-enforcing etiquette, manners and respectful social behaviors; providing programs to build and balance students emotionally and socially, so they can excel academically.

Kickin' It has received support from many celebrities who join in the fight to stop bullying. Athletes, actors, musicians, beauty queens and puppy dogs are joining forces to help grab the attention of children of all ages. Kickin' It is only able to continue this fight to knockout bullying because of the immense amount of support from national and local supporters such as: Ferrero Rocher, Shoprite, Everything Natural Too, Hands On Salon, Klafter & Mason, Korda Foundation, The Home Depot of Howell, Freehold NJ PBA, Action Martial Arts Magazine, Confections of Rock\$tar, Captivating Coral, Games 2U of Mth, Northeast Oil, to name a few, including some elected officials.

For more information on this wonderful organization and important cause, visit www.werekickinit.org



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