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District readies its 'zero tolerance' bullying policy

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by Amanda Harnocz

Reporter

Tallmadge -- With the school year rapidly approaching, Superintendent Jeff Ferguson said the district will implement the same bullying/harassment policy as the one that was used last year.

"We changed the policy after the 2007-08 school year to a 'unique' plan developed for this district and modeled after the state's policy," Ferguson said. "The state law changed in 2007 and we followed that as a model to develop our current policy."

Four Tallmadge students, who were juveniles at the time, were convicted of delinquency charges after being accused of assaulting a fellow football team member in a hazing incident which took place on school grounds in August 2007.

Ferguson said the incident was not why the bullying policy was changed. The district wanted to stay up-to-date with state laws on the issue, he said.

Last school year, while the new policy was in place, there were 28 reports of bullying or harassment districtwide, he said.

"Fourteen of them were confirmed and handled in a way in which we felt was appropriate through our guidelines," he said. The other 14 cases, while they weren't bullying cases, were still corrected and handled by administrators, he said.

"Every single time something was reported, we followed up with an investigation," Ferguson said. "We take the accusations very seriously, but some reports aren't deemed as bullying after an investigation takes place."

Ferguson said with 2,700 students in the district, the goal is to see "zero reports districtwide."

A focus group made up of residents, parents, administrators and students created the new policy, he said.

Ferguson said the differences in the new policy from the former are that the definition of bullying is spelled out more clearly, and specifics like electronic harassment through e-mail, online content and text messages was added. Copies of the policy are in the student handbooks distributed yearly, and there are also copies in every school building.

"We want kids to feel safe and good everyday ... and if they don't, we want to fix that through corrective education and an appropriate punishment," he said.

To evaluate how the new policy was working, Ferguson said an outside expert was brought in to analyze the culture of how students act at lunch, in the halls and in class during the 2008-09 school year.

The expert, who was paid for through a Summit County Educational Service Center grant, then reported back to administrators and teachers on how to handle certain situations, like students gathering in hallways that may create an intimidating atmosphere.

If a student, parent, teacher, coach or administrator notices any form of bullying taking place, a report is made to an administrator of the respective school and an investigation by the school's administrators is always done, Ferguson said. If bullying is found to be happening, the situation is then handled by the building administrator (principal).

Ferguson noted throughout the process, all information is handled confidentially, following the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, and parents of the alleged aggressor and victim are notified.

Punishment ranges from cutting recess all the way up to expulsion, said Ferguson, adding the police are notified of any criminal acts and behaviors as well.

Ferguson said no cases resulted in expulsion last year, but some resulted in out-of-school suspensions.

To be proactive about bullying, Ferguson said each school building has its own programs, like the high school's Clique Busters, to prevent it.

Clique Busters is also paid for by the county grant and it allows students to volunteer, attend monthly meetings and suggest ideas for bullying prevention measures in all of the district's schools.

Any type of bullying at any school function should be reported, he stressed.

"If any parent or student has any doubts or questions about bullying, especially with the school year starting soon, they should contact their building administrator or me," Ferguson said.

E-mail: aharnocz@recordpub.com

Phone: 330-686-3911