

DASA to bring major changes in 2012

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By **MICHAEL PETRO**

New York is cracking down on bullying in public schools and the state will be requiring its districts to do the same.

While most districts have stepped up their anti-bullying efforts in recent years by putting stricter policies in place, the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) will ensure they include specific regulations to prevent and deal with all forms of harassment in public schools.

No longer will it be acceptable to shrug off incidents by saying "boys will be boys" and "girls can be mean."

Set to be enacted next July, DASA will amend New York education law to prohibit harassment based on real or perceived race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practice, disability, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. It also will prohibit discrimination based on those characteristics.

Though bullying isn't actually mentioned in the legislation - which was signed into law in June 2010 by former Gov. David Paterson - that's exactly what is intended to be minimized, according to Traci Lopardi. She's an attorney with Harris Beach PLLC who specializes in education law.

"The most important thing is that this behavior in schools is no longer going to be considered a rite of passage. It's not going to be tolerated anymore," said Lopardi, whose firm represents more than 100 school districts statewide. "It will no longer be acceptable to say, 'It happened to me and I got through it, so ...' No district wants to see bullying happen, and now this law strictly prohibits it."

DASA is all about prevention first, then putting into place certain measures to effectively deal with problems as they arise, she added.

Although some districts have gotten a head start with anti-bullying initiatives, the legislation will force them to go back to review, amend and update policies in their codes of conduct, Lopardi said.

Once policies are changed to be in compliance with the legislation, they must be enforced or districts could face liability.

In addition to developing policies that help create an environment free of discrimination and harassment, attorney Arthur Ackerhalt cited another important piece of the legislation: Schools must develop guidelines in student counseling methods, including having at least one staff member from each school trained to deal with such issues.

A partner in Goldstein, Ackerhalt & Pletcher LLP, he said that in all grades, a sensitivity course on civility must be developed and taught. Sensitivity must also be raised for all school employees, from administrators and teachers to lunch monitors and school bus drivers, he said.

"Bullying has always been out there and been a problem," Ackerhalt said. "I'm just glad that the state is taking action rather than just reacting to individual cases. We're really trying to address the problem as a whole globally."

While districts are waiting on additional details such as program components and funding, Lopardi said schools have enough information to begin the process.

"They should not be waiting until March to start getting going," she said.

At West Seneca Central, representatives of the middle and high schools say there is a feeling of preparedness for what lies ahead. The district has been using a proactive approach by giving staff and faculty the know-how and students the means to curb the problem.

Reports of bullying continue across the nation but districts such as West Seneca are trying to be more equipped to deal with the issue.

"Since Columbine and some other major events that resulted from bullying, schools have done a far better job with this piece," said Brian Graham, principal of West Seneca West Middle School. "I know our district has programs that are very unique and effective. We think we're already doing a great job. The new challenge will be adapting them to these new regulations."

From the first day of the school year at West Seneca East High School, the expectations of administrators and teachers are clearly expressed to students. To promote anti-bullying initiatives, students are also informed about the resources and support staff available.

"The legislation calls for the necessity of this type of programming. We've had leaders that already realized its importance," said East principal Jon Cervoni. "I think a lot of schools have already realized its importance. We have been fortunate in West Seneca to have had the foresight."

The middle school promotes its Take Action Against Bullying and Harassment program, which incorporates school counselors, psychologists, social workers and the resource officer to guide students in making proper choices. Graham also requires all seventh-graders to participate in ACTION - the Appreciate, Communicate, Trust, Intervene, Owning and Notify program. In eighth grade, students also have an opportunity to be school role models as part of Take Action teams.

According to Cervoni, making an effort to partner with middle schools leads to high school students having a better understanding of acceptable behavior at school and elsewhere, as well as encouraging them to step in and report when bullying occurs.

"The legislation calls for us to come together and see if we have the components necessary intact, and we feel we have many of these policies already in place," Cervoni said. "We're not scared of this; it will just give us an added focus."

West Seneca and Orchard Park Central are among a group of districts that are well-connected with the Character Council of Western New York, which promotes and reinforces positive behavior in youth programs. As part of the council's anti-bullying seminar in October, Orchard Park representatives will present a prevention program called Olweus. It will be instituted in the district this fall.

Kim Cirillo, assistant principal, Orchard Park Middle School, lauds it as a program that has received the most results in school districts across the country. She said it's truly a way of life that connects the classroom, individuals and communities.

"It's not a curriculum and it's not something that will just go away; it's embedded in our culture. There will always be continuous improvements made in the program," she said. "The legislation is taking steps to cure the situation at a level higher than what schools have done in the past. Our goal has always been to be ahead of the curve."

Amber Chandler, who serves on the board of directors for the Character Council and is chair of the upcoming anti-bullying conference, said the fall seminar, which is open to all districts, was the result of overwhelming community feedback.

"The momentum has been building both locally and nationally to take a more collaborative approach to combating bullying for a while," she said.

It just happened that the state's legislation has made this an even more prevalent topic at this time.

"This was a unique convergence of ideas coming together," Chandler continued. "DASA is really starting to get legs in the media and schools are talking about how they're going to approach it."

Michael Petro is a West Seneca freelance writer.