Data on Bullying Remains Scant, as City Touts Its Efforts

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March 8 to 12 is Respect for All Week in the New York City public schools, a chance to intensify efforts around increasing respect for diversity in this incredibly diverse student population. The city, after a concerted effort by advocates, instituted the Respect for All program to combat bullying and has hailed it as a success. But critics say the system has not collected enough data to show whether the campaign has really managed to reduce what almost everyone agrees is a prevalent problem in the city schools.

In September 2008, the chancellor issued anti-bullying regulation A-832 , which set up a procedure for filing, investigating and resolving "complaints of student-to-student bias-based harassment, intimidation, and/or bullying." The announcement, made with much fanfare , came after years of delays and the administration's adamant refusal to implement the Dignity in All Schools Act enacted by the City Council over the mayor's veto.

The administration continued to trumpet its achievements a year later. On the eve of the mayoral election in October, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, schools Chancellor Joel Klein and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn held a press conference hailing the "added mandated reporting and investigating guidelines" for the program. In a release, Bloomberg said, "We have set an example nationally in our efforts to combat intolerance and reduce bullying in our schools."

Dearth of Data

Critics, though, charge that the program was slow to get off the ground and that data simply does not exist to back up the administration's claims of success. Bloomberg likes to say that everything he does -- particularly when it comes to the schools -- is data-driven. However, when the anti-harassment program launched, the department did not collect any baseline data on the extent to which bullying was a problem. Since then qualitative data is not being collected on the impact of the regulation, and the numbers that do exist has been called into question.

The department did not issue a report on the results of the first year of the program, and even the second year of the regulation began in September 2009 without an analysis of the data on it.

Finally, in January 2010, the department released a brief "audit of bias-related harassment incidents" that reporting a total of 6,207 "bias-related incidents" in the 2008-09 school year among a total of 130,827 infractions of the Discipline Code. Of the bias-related incidents, gender accounted for 55 percent; race/color for 21 percent; gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation for 13 percent; ethnicity/national origin for 6 percent; religion/creed for 3 percent; and disability for 2 percent. The audit did not find out the extent to which students knew about and understood their rights under the new regulation.

In releasing the audit findings, Klein said in a statement that the "new data provides unprecedented information in helping us track and respond to bias-related incidents, and to prevent similar incidents from recurring." The release said the department this year charged principals with "creating rigorous anti-bullying plans" and that they will be held accountable for them in a school’s quarterly review.

Assuming the audit's figures are accurate, in a system of 1.1 million students and 1,600 schools, there were a little more than 6,000 bias-related infractions reported by about one half of 1 percent of students or an average of less than four per school.

This could be cause for great celebration. But the small number of students reporting bias harassment under the chancellor's regulation does not remotely approach the number of students who say in surveys that they are being victimized. As my colleague Ann Northrop, who spent four years in the schools in the late 1980s and early 1990s conducting trainings on gay and AIDS issues, said, "There are more like 6,000 incidents a minute."

The Department of Education's own Learning Environment Survey for 2006-07 found that 76 percent of city students in grades 6 through 12 reported seeing other students "threaten or bully other students at school" with 50 percent observing it "some of the time" and 29 percent more "all of the time."

Prevention and Detection

The program and the regulations include a number of measures aimed both at reducing bullying and ensuring that what bullying does exist is reported and addressed.

All students are supposed to have received a brochure about the program, many staff are supposed to have been trained on it, and a sign is supposed to be posted in every school on how to make a report.

Last June, the Department of Education reported that "two full days of training have been provided to approximately 1,800 teachers, counselors, and parent coordinators in schools serving students in grades six and above." Officials told Gotham Gazette they hope to have at least one staff member trained in every school by the next school year.

The data being collected around the Respect for All program does not try to determine how, or if, it has affected the level of harassment. In addition, critics charge the administration has not met all the requirements. In June 2009, at the end of the school year, advocates for the regulation complained that the department had fallen woefully short in terms of educating students about their rights to file a complain and that children still experienced high levels of bias-based harassment.

A coalition of groups, led by the Sikh Coalition, the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families , and the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund , issued its own study and devastating report, "Bias-Based Harassment in the New York City Public Schools: A Report Card on the Department of Education's Implementation of Chancellor's Regulation A-832." It gave grades ranging from C to F to the department on implementation of eight aspects of the regulation. The groups found that 54 percent of students were not aware of the regulation and 80 percent received no training on it. More than three quarters -- 76 percent -- were unaware that they could report harassment to an e-mail address. (They can, and here it is: RespectforAll@schools.nyc.gov .)

Of students who did report harassment, 41 percent signed a statement that they were supposed to write and sign under the regulation, and 66 percent did not have their parents notified as required. What's more, 84 percent who of them did not get a written report from school officials on the results of the investigation as required.

Only 10 percent of cases involving bias-related harassment get "appropriate follow-up investigation and action," according to Sonny Singh, community organizer with the Sikh Coalition and a leader in the campaign to stop bullying in the schools, particularly of Sikh students who are often taunted for wearing their distinctive Patka head covering. "That means 90 percent of the time a student told a school official they have been harassed or bullied because of their race, sexual orientation, religion, etc. the school did not follow up the way it was supposed to," he said.

The coalition has criticized the data release in January as lacking "geographic specificity" at least by district. (The department has said it would consider this.) In addition, the coalition wants regular reporting mandated and is calling for "specific information about the discipline and intervention methods used in each case of harassment." It also wants a specific prohibition on bullying by teachers and other school staff, something school officials say is covered under other regulations.

Pauline Park, leader of the New York Association for Gender Rights Advocacy , told the Gay City News that she faulted the program "for a lack of quality control."

The Department's Efforts

Elayna Konstan, chief executive officer of the department's Office of School and Youth Development, and Connie Cuttle, director of professional development, sat down with me to explain and defend the anti-bullying program. Konstan said "reporting is getting better" and that "amazing work" is going on in the schools around Respect for All.

Cuttle said that with the additional training and outreach, "kids are going to be more forthcoming we hope." She notes that middle school students in particular "are often embarrassed to say that they have a problem" with being bullied.

Since the majority of the incidents are based on gender, the department is testing a program, "Shifting Boundaries," in 50 schools. It aims to help young people understand what kind of language is appropriate in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship and, school officials insisted, in a same-sex relationship though they would not share the curriculum, with me to show me how. The department also conducts a Relationship Abuse Prevention Program in 61 schools and a Safe Date program in 150 schools.

The Department of Education's partners in implementing Respect for All remain enthusiastic. Mark Weiss, education director of Operation Respect , said, "We are seeing deeper work being done in the schools as a result of the trainings." Eliza Bayard, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network praised the department for "recognizing the importance of data to the on-going project of providing safe and effective learning environments."

In addition to the anti-bullying initiative, the Department of Education encourages students who are aware of imminent violence -- particularly but not limited to gun violence -- to anonymously call a national hotline, 1-866-SPEAKUP, to report it. Speak Up is run by a violence prevention program called PAX. Jamie McShane of Quinn's office said that PAX will pilot a training program in 15 schools where principals have requested it to help young people understand that "snitching" in these situations is the right thing to do and can be done without fear of reprisal.

A Stubborn Problem

No one knows how many students bear the brunt of repetitive bullying. At an April 2008 lobby

day for a state anti-bullying initiative, a high school student named Anthony talked about the ubiquity of bullying. He said bullying lead to drop out "every day" for fear of bullying. A student he knew took his life due to bullying. (You can see the video here .)

The regulation of September 2008 and Respect for All surely have some impact, but the Department of Education has not provided any data on what effect they have on school atmosphere, other than raw statistics on reports of incidents. And it can be difficult to assess even those figures. If those numbers go up this school year, it might not mean that bias-related harassment is worse, but perhaps that students are more willing to make complaints. That would represent a kind of success in that it might indicate that more students are aware of their rights. But all that will remain speculation unless the department begins to track the kinds of issues that advocates have.

Meanwhile the city's main tool in fighting bullying might well be that the public school system is so vast that those with the worst problems can be moved elsewhere in it. That is not the case in the upstate Mohawk Central School District where the http://www.nyclu.org New York Civil Liberties Union is settling a suit on behalf of a 14-year old student named Jacob. Over two years, according to a release from the group, Jacob "endured escalating harassment for his sexual orientation and for not conforming to masculine stereotypes. He suffered near-constant verbal assault, his personal property has been defaced and broken, and he was regularly pushed and had things thrown at him." He was also thrown down school stairs by another student and threatened with a knife by another. The boy's affidavit in the case is a harrowing read.

Because the district failed to investigate the incidents or discipline the perpetrators, the Civil Liberties Union sued in federal court and were joined by no less than the United States Department of Justice citing Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The Department of Education has a Harvey Milk High School with a special mission toward gay and transgendered youth where it can place a student such as Jacob. That school, though, only has about 100 students. Most students facing harassment for reasons relating to sexual orientation attend mainstream schools where it is far from safe to be out or known as gay or transgender.

Thomas Krever, executive director of the Hetrick-Martin Institute for lesbian, gay, bisexual and

transgender youth, which is home to the Harvey Milk School, said a year and half after the institution of the chancellor's regulation in the schools, his agency's clients in mainstream schools "aren't feeling the effect yet." But he added, "Anything systemic is not going to be fixed overnight."

Krever hopes that Respect for All Week will heighten attention to the regulation and the problem of bullying, calling it a "good attempt" by the Department of Education for "creating safer environments."

Marisa Ragonese, director of Generation Q for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people in Queens, believes more needs to be done. She wrote in an e-mail, "While I always applaud any effort to make our schools a bit safer, the chancellor's new regs, like the old ones, seem to be responding to this desire to appease a (gay, immigrant) special interest portion of the general population, and then continue with the real business of schooling." But, she went on, "homophobia and lack of respect for humanity is a big problem and needs to be approached as a public health issue." Addressing it, is "an integral component to our educational system, not an add-on or after thought."

Andy Humm, a former member of the City Commission on Human Rights, has been in charge of the civil rights topic page since its inception in 2001. He is co-host of the weekly "Gay USA" on Manhattan Neighborhood Network (34 on Time-Warner; 107 on RCN) on Thursdays at 11 PM.