



October 13, 2009

Editorial: No room for bullies in Oshkosh

There is nothing more terrifying for a school child of any age than a bully.

Every school has bullies. Their victims are belittled, intimidated, harassed and fear for their safety, robbed of the full benefit of the education experience. And as if physical confrontations aren't bad enough, there is growing concern about cyber bullies who use the Internet and text messaging to take the torment to a new level.

Fortunately, the Oshkosh school district is taking steps to intervene. The district has established an anti-bully policy and is using anti-bullying curriculum in the counseling department. Now it will add another tool when it adopts a new curriculum that was unveiled last week. All Wisconsin elementary and middle schools have received the anti-bullying curriculum for free, with the \$15,000 cost picked up by WEA Trust, a nonprofit group health insurer that covers many state school employees. Shelly Muza, the director of curriculum and instruction for Oshkosh schools, says the curriculum is endorsed by the Department of Public Instruction and is an update of the current curriculum, "Sticks and Stones". Currently 250 of the state's 426 school districts use the curriculum that was released in 2007. The new curriculum includes sections on how to deal with bullying over the Internet and through other technology like text messages. It is targeted either to students in grades 3-5 or 6-8.

Oshkosh is taking additional steps to deal with bullying in middle and high schools. According to a survey conducted this year by the state Department of Public Instruction, 22.5 percent of high school students said they had been bullied at school within the past 12 months.

To address the problem beyond the curriculum, the school district is partnering with Affinity Health System this spring to put on a series of presentations to middle and high school students about cyber bullying. The presentations will be made by the Department of Justice expert on Internet crimes, Eric Szatkowski. Additionally, he will hold sessions for parents to help them recognize warning signs that identify victims as well as bullies. Muza said parental involvement is important because often the parents of both the bully and victim are unaware of the torment that is being inflicted.

Oshkosh's proactive approach is gratifying since Wisconsin is one of only six states that do not have a law specifically outlawing bullying. Legislation is being proposed this session by Sen. John Leham, D-Racine that would require schools to either follow state anti-bullying guidelines or come up with their own.

While the proposed legislation is well meaning given the fact that almost 40 percent of the districts do not use the anti-bullying curriculum. But mandating it represents an intrusion into local control. A better solution would be for the DPI to encourage schools to examine the Oshkosh model and adopt it locally.

The Final Thought: Oshkosh schools have been aggressive in dealing with bullies.
