

1 in 4 Michigan students faces bullying in schools, report says



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More than half of Michigan students in a recent survey said bullying is a serious problem in their schools, according to a new report from Wayne State University.

"Bullying can end lives," said John Austin, state Board of Education president at a press conference Monday morning in Ann Arbor. "It's an issue we've been dealing with for a long time."

But now, said Jun Sung Hong, an assistant professor at Wayne State's School of Social Work, school officials and parents are taking bullying more seriously than ever.

On Monday, Oct. 26 at Zion Lutheran Church in Ann Arbor, Hong presented the findings of Wayne State's research on bullying among students. The report is in partnership with Michigan's Children, School Community Health Alliance of Michigan and the Southeast Michigan Women of the Evangelical Church of America.

Researchers from WSU in July surveyed 206 students age 13 through 19 on bullying in their schools. About 90 percent of the students were at the Evangelical Church of America Youth Gathering in Detroit.

While half of students said bullying is a problem, 81 percent said schools should worry about bullying, according to the report.

Nearly a quarter of students said the bullying was after school. The most common locations for bullying in school were in the classroom and hallway. About 6 percent of students reported online bullying.

Additionally, a quarter of high school students in Michigan reported being bullied on school property during the past year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Systems report.

Programs to reduce bullying must allow for diversity among a student body and focus on social emotional learning, he said.

Austin said adults have often brushed off bullying with the sentiment "kids will be kids."

But, he said, societies can evolve and learn.

"Tolerance of bullying is carried on by adults who don't necessarily believe we can create a culture that does not allow bullying," Austin said. "If you act purposefully, it can be done. The first step is believing it can be done."

Open-door policies and peer support

Two students who were severely bullied shared their experiences and gave suggestions for reducing bullying in schools.

Brittney Barros, a 17-year-old Lincoln High School senior, said she was bullied in middle school to the point where she considered suicide.

Students called her a "frizzy-haired, bucktooth troll" and put a "kick-me" sign on her back, she said. Another time, someone emptied the contents of her locker into the trash.

Although Brittney said she went to the principal for help, she was only able to add her name to a list and waited for someone to get back to her. She wrote her name on the list five times, but no one contacted her.

It wasn't until a high school student who spotted her crying in the hallway and demanded someone help her that Brittney was able to get the support she needed.

"She was my hero," Brittney said.

Now, Brittney recommends Michigan schools have assemblies about bullying and offer mentor programs for students.

Treating everyone with kindness and encouraging students to take action against bullying will help, she said.

Sophomore Deborah Fagan, 15, said she was bullied at a boarding school she attended before coming to Rudolph Steiner High School in Ann Arbor.

She said the verbal abuse she experienced was mostly about her being "too white for black kids and too black for white kids."

A peer made a fake twitter account in her name and tweeted things Deborah said she would never say. Despite open-door policies, she said, adults in the school didn't help or listen.

To deal with the bullying, Deborah said she developed a tough exterior and shut herself off from the world.

"I didn't trust anyone," she said. "I ate ramen in my room by myself."

Eventually, Deborah moved to Rudolph Steiner High School, which she said does not tolerate bullying.

True open-door policies and adults who listen are key to reducing abuse and bullying, she said.

"You can really help by giving youth opportunity to speak in a safe place without judgment," she said.

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