

Corey: Too many Michigan kids are bullied

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(Photo: Clarence Tabb Jr. / The Detroit News)

The new Wayne State University report into the fear and victimization that too many Michigan schoolchildren face every year from bullying must serve as a call to action and some shifts in thinking about solutions for policymakers around the state.

Researchers surveyed attitudes of adolescents from across the state and found half said bullying is a problem in their school — with one in four saying they experienced it themselves. The report provides dramatic evidence that state legislative efforts adopted in 2011 requiring districts to implement model anti-bullying policies and practices didn't go far enough. Current requirements, reporting initiatives and public awareness efforts are great first steps, but committing to the application and resource support for solutions that have and will work is what needs to come next.

Not tolerating bullying means that we need to address the needs of the people who are the victims of that behavior, and it also means that we need to address the needs of the people who are doing the bullying, preferably before that behavior escalates into something that is harming others. We know that many students who face traumatic experiences in their lives – the fear of being bullied and harassed among them, as well as those who exhibit harmful behaviors toward others – are focused on survival and not focused on their educational achievement. Yet, the solutions are not hidden to us.

It's clear the answer lies in providing trauma-informed practices that help identify and refer traumatized students for needed services and improve school climates. Bullying and other problems can be averted by integrating student and family services throughout a child's educational career, making sure that behavioral health needs are met for both students and parents, that social and emotional skill building takes place through the years, and that help is available to kids when they need it and accessible where they can get it.

At the report's release last week, State Board of Education President John Austin called the results of the study unacceptable, adding the state Legislature's policy efforts have clearly been too weak and inadequate to be effective. In Michigan, the response to bullying is primarily funded and supported at the community level, through local, federal or philanthropic resource with limited state investment. Michigan's Children would like to help change that.

Starting early is always key, but disinvestment in evidence-based programs over the last several decades has limited options. The Child Care Expulsion Project worked with children and families when inappropriate behaviors appeared early on — in a child's preschool years. The project employed early childhood mental health professionals who consulted with parents and child care providers. It provided interventions, parent and provider coaching, and counseling and referrals to other professional services. This comprehensive strategy got results.

Federal funding supporting positive behavior supports in a handful of local systems around the state are proving to improve school climate and lessen incidents of bullying and other discipline issues. Federal resources also support the Department of Education's more recent work in 22 of Michigan's lowest performing schools. By focusing solely on improving a school's climate, these programs have implemented teacher training in mental health issues, adopted restorative justice programs, engaged students and parents in the work, and focused on addressing specific student issues. Not surprisingly, academic achievement is rising along with consistent attendance and fewer disciplinary incidences.

Michele Corey is the vice president for Programs for Michigan's Children.

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