

Schools Must Adopt Trauma-Informed Practices, New Policies to Prevent and Avert Bullying

Oct. 26, 2015 –Brittney Barros, now 17, recalls the year she spent with a foster family after being homeless when she was confronted by repeated acts of bullying at a school west of Detroit.

A 7th grader and new to the school at the time, Brittney said she contemplated suicide because of ongoing harassment over her appearance from other students. Three other students who were bullied had succeeded one year, she said.

Sophomore Deborah Fagan, 15, experienced hurtful bullying at a boarding school when someone created a fake Twitter account and made fake comments in her name. It left her feeling isolated and she shut herself off from her surroundings. No one – not even an adult -- came to her aid.

Both teens offered their perspective on Monday, Oct. 26 at a news conference in Ann Arbor in which Wayne State University researchers unveiled surprising results of a student survey of bullying experiences in Michigan schools.

The report, "[Adolescents' Reporting of Bullying and Peer Victimization In School](#)," was released by Wayne State School of Social Work and supported by Michigan's Children and the School-Community Health Alliance of Michigan. The survey found that one in four students reported being bullied on school property within the last 12 months. The report further spotlighted the need for stronger policies and integrated services to assist terrorized students like Brittany and Fagan. More than half the students surveyed agreed bullying is a problem in their school.

"We can't let what happened to these girls happen to other kids," said Michigan's Children President & CEO Matt Gillard, adding kids can't learn if they live in fear of daily harassment in school.

Looking at Solutions to Bullying and School Trauma

"This is a call to action and a time to focus on solutions," Gillard said. And we must provide the emotional, social and academic support they all need to be motivated to attend school and stay in school."

Despite policies prohibiting bullying in Michigan schools stemming from legislation adopted in 2011, Michigan State Board of Education President John Austin called Michigan one of the worst states for cyberbullying and bullying on school property. The Board has asked schools to put model anti-bullying policies in place, but the WSU researchers found that there hasn't been universal application of evidence-based models to this point.

"Doing better is both an education and economic imperative for Michigan," Austin said. "Not only do we have to help kids thrive in school getting the education they need for success in life, Michigan must send a clear message as a state that all children are welcomed and supported here: gay or straight; black, white or brown; nerd or jock -- our great diversity is our greatest strength."

Gillard said Michigan's Children supports new investments in school-based, trauma-informed practices to help improve school climates for Michigan's 1.55 million schoolchildren. Providing students with supports through integrated school services, such as access to mental health services, prevention and intervention services, and

programs that focus on social skills development, empowerment and leadership training are also critical to helping them deal with conflicts at schools. Unless these measures are taken, too many children will fail to achieve the academic success they need to move onto post-secondary and career programs. The state's own recently announced goal to achieve success as a top 10 education state in the next 10 years is at stake, Gillard added.

Michigan's Children will continue to monitor and make policy recommendations in state budgets to ensure help is forthcoming.

Meanwhile, there are important pilot programs that show promise for eradicating bullying and improving school climates.

Working through a U.S. Department of Education grant, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) studied the impact of improving school climates in 22 of the state's lowest achieving high schools. The goal of the five-year study was to learn whether creating a more welcoming, positive environment – and changing nothing else, not even the curriculum – would affect how children learn. The findings were startling, said MDE mental health consultant Lauren Kazez, who shared broad findings at the news conference in Ann Arbor this week.

“We found that when you do make people feel they are valued and that people want to be there it does improve academic outcomes,” said Kazez.

The program provided for teacher training in mental health issues, restorative justice (focusing on needs of victims and offenders), engaging students and parents in the mission, and focusing on specific student issues. The department has not yet released the full results of the study.

A Student Finds a New Life

Such changes would be welcomed, Brittany says. Today, she is a youth motivational speaker for the Michigan Youth Opportunity Initiative and works for Ozone House, an Ann Arbor-based, support agency for youth who are homeless and in crisis. She is part of their Speak Out group.

“I want to be an inspiration, a role model for other kids to help them get through the tough times,” Brittney said.

She has a scholarship to attend Eastern Michigan University, where she plans to study social work and music therapy.

“**Awareness is the first step**” to eradicating bullying, she said. But more needs to be done through youth discussion groups and programs that teach kids that bullying is wrong.

The Wayne State report cites the need to recognize, prevent and reduce bullying and harassment in schools as a fundamental right of all children. The researchers say the most effective approaches are comprehensive, taking in community-wide, school-wide, class-wide and individual components. Their study also found that prevention and intervention programs must incorporate various forms of prejudice (racism, sexism, and homophobia) which are associated with bullying. Additionally, programs must be high-quality, evidence-based and focus on providing students with life and social skills rather than just knowledge about bullying.

“We encourage schools to provide integrated services for kids and their families, and positive behavior supports that effectively change the school climate,” Gillard said. “These efforts are needed to support all kids at risk of being bullied and becoming a bully.”

Michigan's Children is the only statewide independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children from cradle to career and their families, with a specific focus on the needs of children, youth and families with the most challenges in their lives – children of color, children from low-income families, and children served by the foster and juvenile justice systems.