

MASCA Statement Massachusetts Bullying Commission Hearings

The Massachusetts School Counselors Association has as one of its primary missions, "To advance the profession of counseling in order to maximize the educational/academic, career, and personal-social growth of each individual." To that end, the MA Model was developed to actively engage counselors as effective educators promoting skills that help students learn to interact positively with their peers.

MASCA has continued its efforts to partner with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and be part of the process of developing and implementing the anti-bullying law. MASCA representatives have the opportunity to provide input into some of the legislative requirements such as the Draft Model Plan, and we believe that we will play a crucial role in talking about the practicalities of implementing the legislation in our schools. During the fall, MASCA presented two workshops for counselors wishing to learn more about the legislation and their role, and a number of our colleagues across the state have been asked to take charge of local professional development for staff and presentations for parents.

Counselors play a unique role in schools. Teachers must concentrate on academics and the principal must keep order among hundreds of students. The counselor though, has the opportunity to see the total child and his/her family. Because of the relationships counselors have with their students and their families, they are well-positioned to be a child's primary advocate. This is what professional school counselors are trained to do and what makes them invaluable to any anti-bullying effort.

At this point in time, the law and its implementation have begun. Anti-bullying plans have been submitted and training has started. Although we don't have data to share yet, we have a couple of minor suggestions. The first deals with Section 5d (ix) "a provision that a student who knowingly makes a false accusation of bullying or retaliation shall be subject to disciplinary action." Our concern here is that there is not mandatory notification of parents in this situation. If, for example, the false information causes the principal to notify the parents of the alleged victim and perpetrator, and this accusation is proven to be unfounded, should not the parents of the student who made the accusation be informed as part of the required disciplinary action?

Secondly, after reading through the recommendations for professional development, we would like to suggest two additional topics. First, we believe there should be training in working with bystanders to help them better understand how their actions, or rather inactions, impact bullying situations.

Additionally, we'd recommend training in what, for lack of a better name, we'll call "dealing with difficult parents." Unfortunately, some bullies have parents who are bullies themselves, and while educators know how to handle a wide variety of people, a little brush up on strategies for working with adult bullies could prove helpful in keeping volatile situations from escalating.

Lastly, there may need to be clarification on the notification process for students who are 18-21 or who are legally emancipated.

MASCA recognizes the enormity of the bullying problem, and we applaud what has already been done. However, all of us assembled today have to commit to continued cooperation. Bullying will not go away because we have passed a law. Rather, there must be a whole hearted effort to change the climate and culture of schools so that all students are safe, valued and able to learn.