

Massachusetts: Collaborating for Safe Schools

A partnership initiative combats harassment, bullying, and hate crimes in schools

By Richard W. Cole

In June 2005, Massachusetts Attorney General Tom Reilly launched a new strategy to provide school districts statewide with practical help in promoting educational equity and making them safe from harassment, bullying, and hate crimes.

The Safe Schools Initiative (SSI), as the new strategy is called, is a collaborative effort among Reilly's office and more than 60 experts and organizations representing education, law enforcement, health, academia, civil rights, victim assistance, and prevention. Through the SSI, the attorney general and his partners are developing practical policies, training programs, and

mandatory reporting by staff members whenever and however they become aware of potential violations.

In addition, the sample policy provides step-by-step guidance for investigating and resolving complaints or reports of prohibited conduct. It also establishes formal and informal complaint resolution procedures and provides disciplinary and corrective action options for substantiated complaints.

Launching a pilot project

Part of the initiative is a pilot project to develop and field test tools and strategies for fostering safe schools and transforming culture and climate. Three school districts

range of information about each pilot district's policies and programs and its schools, students, staff, parents, and community;

2. evaluating the experiences, attitudes, observations, and perceptions of each district's seventh and 10th graders and its entire staff through surveys developed for this project;

3. making school site observations;

4. holding focus group discussions about school climate and culture with representative groups of administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents, and community leaders; and

5. interviewing key district, school, and community leaders.

Developing action plans

In the second phase of the pilot project, begun in June, the expert teams and districts are developing detailed, data-driven, districtwide, and school-based action plans. Each district is in the process of adopting a civil rights policy and modifying, as necessary, its reporting, complaint response, record-keeping, and investigatory protocols. The districts are designating or expanding the role of a district equity coordinator with broad authority over policy compliance.

The districts are also adopting new incident-tracking forms to help them identify patterns and trends, repeat offenders, and problem sites and to ensure consistently applied discipline by, for example, identifying racial, ethnic, or gender disparities in discipline imposed under the policy.

The action plans may include conducting a wide range of training for administrators, staff, students, and parents; implementing new policy management and oversight systems; adopting new prevention-based strategies and prevention programs and curricula; and increasing community resources and support to achieve each district's goals.

At the end of the 2006-07 school year, the attorney general's staff and the other partners will work with each district to evaluate the progress made in the pilot project and will provide schools throughout the state with strategies, protocols, and programs that have been developed to combat harassment, bullying, and hate crimes.

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The sample policy provides step-by-step guidance for investigating and resolving

strategies to help schools promote safety and cultivate climates that welcome the rich diversity of their communities.

The SSI responds to increasing concerns about hate, harassment and bullying, and school cultures that may discourage students from standing up against fellow students who victimize their classmates and deter them from reporting even the most serious forms of harassment and bullying.

Crafting civil rights policy

As an important first step, the attorney general's staff drafted a sample civil rights policy in consultation with the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, and the state department of education, along with other key education stakeholders and civil rights experts.

The sample policy sets forth rights and responsibilities of school community members when harassment, discrimination, retaliation, repeated bullying behavior, or hate crimes occur. For example, it requires

were selected from 20 that applied to receive intensive on-site technical assistance and training for the 2005-06 and 2006-07 school years. Although distinct geographically, demographically, and in size, the three districts face school safety and civil rights challenges similar to those in many urban, suburban, and rural school districts.

The attorney general's civil rights and child protection staff lead multidisciplinary teams in each pilot district. The teams include seven to nine experts in educational equity, conflict resolution, juvenile justice, civil rights, federal and state anti-harassment laws, child psychology, antibullying strategies, community relations, victim assistance, and prevention.

The first phase of the pilot project, completed in May 2006, involved working with district leadership teams of about 10 to 15 administrators and staff to identify strengths, challenges, technical assistance, and training needs. This needs assessment phase included:

1. collecting and analyzing a broad