
Editorial: The safe schools mindset

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Two years after enactment of the state's anti-bullying law, dozens Valley educators showed their wisdom last week by acknowledging this problem takes daily effort. Massachusetts cannot legislate its way to safer schools.

It takes ongoing personal attention. The Safe School Summit that convened Wednesday at Smith College provided public school administrators, teachers and counselors with new ways to ensure that hostile environments do not push students into survival mode and inhibit learning.

The Northwestern district attorney's office, which sponsored the summit, helped provide more than 120 participants with ideas to combat bullying and other problems of school climate.

Not surprisingly, many of approaches involve showing students their behavior will be noticed and they will be held to account.

Educators can improve school relations by embodying a spirit of respect. One of the first ways to communicate that is to make everyone feel acknowledged and valued. As Charles Hopkins of the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School in South Hadley noted, teachers should greet arriving students, look them in the eye and shake their hands. Those silent gestures help enlist students in a compact. This unspoken agreement says, in effect, that everyone is in school for a common purpose, has the right to be who they are and must consider what's best for the community.

Of course, finding peace and acceptance among people of different backgrounds, genders, races, classes, ethnicities, sexual orientations and all the things that distinguish people can be tough.

When teachers and administrators aren't looking, students may act in ways that alienate their peers. The movement to fight school bullying, which arose after the suicide of South Hadley High School student Phoebe Prince, needs to be refueled regularly.

That's why the DA's summit holds value, especially coming three months into the school year, when patterns have been established, days are growing short and dark and bad social practices may have taken root. At the event, local educators described ideas that can spur anti-bullying efforts. Experts say students must provide a large measure of the solution by taking steps to fight homophobia and other kinds of bias.

To get the message through to young people, nothing is better than hearing their peers show an intolerance for intolerance. At Amherst Regional High School, students pursue the goal of safe schools by working, person by person, to lower barriers that can divide students. That can be advanced as simply as having older students don "ask me" stickers that encourage younger students to make friends with older mentors.

One expert noted that it takes time and resources to make headway against bullying. But progress can be made even without new money by collecting ideas and putting them into play.

It costs nothing to listen to one another and respect each other's ideas — simple, human acts that make it hard to objectify and demean others.