

School staff says bullying not tolerated in Bourne

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BOURNE —

Administrators, principals, teachers, program advisers and department heads all reassured a wary school committee last week that they do not put up with student bullies and that harassment, threats and complaints that come their way are quickly and thoroughly investigated.

The school committee sought timely reassurance in the wake of the death of a South Hadley teen by suicide following her being bullied. The 15-year-old girl's death has prompted a renewed push to enact anti-bullying legislation in Massachusetts.

The review before the school committee lasted 30 minutes, and the bottom line was that the school board - given the caution, vigilance and awareness in place - might not excessively worry about a South Hadley replay in Bourne.

High school seeks outside help

Bourne High School Principal Ron McCarthy said he is inviting a U.S. Secret Service agent to BHS "to instruct staff and help us on what to look for with bullying."

BHS Athletic Director Jessica Sullivan said issues such as bullying are reviewed by all coaches before the start of each athletic season.

Bourne Middle School Headmaster Mary Childress was forthright. She said there is bullying in her school and all of it, including cyber-bullying, is investigated. All sides of the complaint are explored, she said, and it sometimes takes days to sort out stories and finger-pointing. Often, she said, cell phones are confiscated. Some are retrieved by parents, she said; some are not.

With exploding technology, bullying has become more than hallway intimidation and schoolyard shoving matches. "Kids can be horrible with each other online," Childress said. "Truly horrible."

Childress urges parents to not send text messages to their kids during the school day.

Lavoie invited BHS theater teacher Mary Murphy to comment on bullying within her sphere. Murphy told the committee there was no bullying among drama students.

Staffer Jane Norton briefed the school board on **PeaceBuilders**, a violence-prevention program carried out at Bournedale and Peebles Elementary Schools where Principals Jean Holland and Debra Howard, respectively, assured the school committee that the effort was viable.

Bourne has policy in place

School committee chairman Richard Lavoie said the topic of how the system deals with student harassment, bullying, online intimidate and threats was added to the agenda in the aftermath of the horrific South Hadley death.

Assistant Superintendent Joyce Harrington accented the point that the Bourne system has been working on bullying and how to prevent it for years.

No administrators or school board members discussed penalties being applied to bullies or whether committee policy is effective giving the expanding range of new media and communications available to young people in school; and the evolving lingo that accompanies it.

The school committee policy on the issue was written in 2005. It says bullying “may constitute child abuse under Massachusetts law” and that the school system will comply with prescribed law in reporting suspected cases of child abuse.

“Any employee or member of the school community found to have engaged in bullying shall be subject to the following consequences, including but not limited to, a warning, an in-school suspension or out of school suspension, or expulsion for students, or a warning, suspension or termination of employment for staff,” the policy notes. “Counseling or legal action may be pursued depending on the facts of the incident.”