

Wareham schools tackle bullying.

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WAREHAM — After last year's tragic suicide of 15-year-old high school student Phoebe Prince in South Hadley due to bullying, Wareham is doing its part to help prevent bullying in schools. Thanks to an educational presentation for parents presented by the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, Wareham educators are hoping parents and students alike will find ways to help solve the problem of bullying and cyberbullying, both before and after it starts.

Prince, an exchange student from Ireland, was harassed and taunted by her classmates. A car full of students followed Prince home January of last year and threw a can at her while yelling insults. Prince committed suicide by hanging herself in her family's apartment, leaving her body to be found by her 12-year old sister. After her death, the students who had bullied her posted rude comments, jokes and insults on a Facebook memorial page that had been created. Because of this incident, many states, including Massachusetts, began to enact stricter anti-bullying state legislation.

Before Prince committed suicide, her mother had talked to school officials about the harassment, and students and faculty members were aware of it, as well. This stresses the importance of administrators and teachers being aware of schools' anti-bullying measures and also knowing how to discipline such issues. Wareham School Superintendent Dr. Barry Rabinovitch said that along with this presentation, all of the staff at Wareham schools will undergo training at the end of the school year on the issue of bullying.

Rabinovitch says that in Wareham, and in many other schools, children are often picked on because they are different, whether it has to do with their height, wearing glasses or not being as popular and some of their peers. Rabinovitch said the Wareham school system has tried for many years to counteract this by having what they termed a social and emotional learning component. This starts at the elementary level in something called "open circle," which teaches social skills to children and includes simple things like saying, "excuse me," or learning how to tell someone if they are being cruel or insensitive.

There is a program in the middle school called "Community of Caring," in which the school posts messages around about caring and being respectful for others. The Wareham Alternative School has adopted a similar program called "PeaceBuilders," in which educators work with children about expressing their feelings in a kind way instead of acting out towards others while also recognizing where their anger comes from.

But because of all the attention to bullying lately in light of the rash of recent teen suicides from bullying this past year, Rabinovitch wants it to be clear that the schools take bullying seriously and will handle it with disciplinary action. The town even rewrote its bullying plan, which they submitted to the state and were scheduled to unveil during this week's School Committee meeting (after the Courier went to press.)

Another issue the school will tackle is "cyberbullying." The phrase has been prominent in the news, but some parents who aren't as computer savvy as their children may not be familiar with it or know how to stop it. Cyberbullying is harassment online, where students can hide behind anonymity, and where private issues can be made public due to social networking websites such as Facebook and Youtube.

"Over the last couple years, technology has really taken off," Rabinovitch said. "We used to need huge computers just to do what we can do on a phone now. There are benefits, but thanks to texting and Facebook, what used to be a dirty look in the lunchroom has now turned into somebody posting it publicly on a Facebook 'wall.'"

He pointed out that due to the public nature of this bullying, other students can easily join in.

"With anonymity, people go too far, and it's hurtful," he said.

This meeting coincides with the town's "Increase the Peace" rally Feb. 18, and Rabinovitch said both events are equally as important.

"Things are similar with adults and students in this community," he said. "Both adults and children witness things, and they can take a stand to help prevent it. One of the trainings for students will focus on what to do if you see someone being unkind to somebody and how to cope with the responsibility of telling somebody that what they are doing is wrong, versus ignoring it and just letting it happen. The same principle applies for violence prevention with adults in Wareham. If community members see something that isn't right on the street, what should they do with the responsibility of picking up the phone and calling police?"

Rabinovitch noted that parents are children's first teachers, and that what parents do speaks louder than what they say.

"Maybe parents turn off the television once in a while and read a book with their child or do some homework together," he said. "I know many parents do these things, but not all are able to. Life is difficult, and some people work two jobs just to try and keep bread on the table. But supervision and knowing where your children are can be just as important, as is not giving in."

The seminar will be held in the Wareham Middle School auditorium at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 15. It is sponsored by the Wareham Middle School PTA and Student Services.

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