

Culture and Climate Task Force Report

December 21, 2012

Introduction

The Greendale School District aims to partner with the community to provide all students and staff with a positive educational experience. For a majority of students, this goal is being accomplished. That said, the District recognizes that harassment and bullying do take place in and outside of school. Accordingly, the District convened the Climate and Culture Task Force to examine issues related to harassment in our schools and community. The Task Force included community members, parents, students and staff. The mission of the Task Force was to review the policies and procedures already in place to address school climate and culture, to consider appropriate responses to problematic behavior, and to propose strategies to change the behavior.

This report serves as the culmination of the work of the Task Force. It has identified three areas of focus: a parent and community education program, a student-led culture and climate program, and a staff development program. With a focus on strengthening programming and strategies in these three areas, the Task Force members believe that the Greendale Schools and community can successfully meet the needs of all students and staff.

The outline below reflects the Task Force's three areas of focus. Please note, however, that the outline contains suggestions and examples, as opposed to mandates, for administrators, staff, students, and the community. The Task Force recognizes that not all of the suggestions may be appropriate for all of the schools in the District, as issues in the elementary schools may differ from issues in the high school. Indeed, the issues may vary even among the three elementary schools. Thus, the Task Force offers these examples and suggestions with the understanding that staff and parents of each school will work together to decide how to implement them.

Furthermore, the Task Force believes that addressing climate and culture goes beyond just the students. It is crucial for the adults of our community to model appropriate behavior at all times, as well as promote civil behavior in our community. That belief forms the basis for the suggestion that the District provide parents and community members with opportunities to receive information and education concerning school climate and culture.

I. Parent and Community Education

This first component of the recommendations has two parts: communication and education. First, the Task Force was presented with a great deal of information, including the students' concerns about bullying and harassment, the policies and procedures already in place to address bullying and harassment, and the legal limitations imposed on schools in terms of communicating how bullying and harassment are addressed in individual situations. It recommends that information be communicated to parents as well as to the broader community.

Second, the Task Force discussed the need to provide more opportunities for parents and community members to receive education as to what constitutes bullying and harassment, how one should respond when he or she witnesses bullying or harassment, and how to model appropriate behavior for kids.

A. Parent and Community Communication

The Task Force recommends that schools communicate these topics and others related to bullying and harassment to parents and to the broader Greendale community.

1. Bullying and Harassment Reported by Students

Based on information from students, bullying and harassment does take place. According to the students, these behaviors happen most often in places where there is little or no adult supervision (on busses, or online, for example), and the most commonly reported behaviors are mean-spirited gossip and exclusion.

2. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

FERPA is a federal act that protects students' privacy rights. FERPA requires that schools obtain written permission from a parent in order to release any of their children's educational records. Educational records go beyond student grades; they also include records of student discipline. Thus, FERPA prevents the District from providing parents and other community members specific information about how bullying, harassment, or other behavioral issues are addressed in individual situations.

3. School Policies and Procedures Already in Place

The District has a number of policies and procedures in place to address and prevent bullying and harassment. Indeed, when administrators from the elementary, middle, and high schools presented information about the policies and procedures already in place at each level, the presentation was almost ninety minutes long. Because the Task Force members believe that not all parents and community members are aware of the nature or extent of the existing procedures, they recommend that each school share its policies and procedures with parents and the community.

4. Anonymous Portal

The High School and Middle School have implemented a Safer Schools online reporting system that allows a student, parent or community member to report harassment or illegal activity to the school administration. The reporting person may also choose to remain anonymous.

B. Parent and Community Education

The Task Force also recommends that the District work with outside professionals in the field to offer opportunities for parents and community members to learn more about

modeling of appropriate behavior for students as well as appropriate responses if someone witnesses bullying or harassment.

1. Modeling appropriate behavior for students – bullying behavior is a learned behavior.

Adults set an example for our students. Thus, it is important for parents and other community members to understand how to model appropriate behavior. This modeling includes displaying appropriate behavior at school, at sporting events, and online as well as refraining from discussing adult concerns with students. The Task Force believes that it would be helpful to provide opportunities for adults in the community to learn and reflect on the example they are setting.

2. Appropriate Behavior for Adults When They Witness Bullying or Harassment of Kids

Because standing by silently while witnessing harassment or bullying and failing to report such behavior are actions that suggest consent to the behavior, people need opportunities to learn appropriate ways to respond to harassment or bullying, whether they witness those behaviors in person or online.

3. Internet Etiquette

Given that much of the bullying and harassment that students have reported has occurred online, it is important for parents to understand the kind of behavior that students engage in online and how to talk to students about appropriate online behavior. Thus, the Task Force recommends that the schools provide opportunities for parents to learn how to encourage respectful and responsible digital citizenship beginning in elementary school.

4. Other Resources

The Task Force recognizes that other resources exist that parents may find helpful. The following are three examples: (1) The Children’s Hospital ACT Now curriculum; (2) the federal government’s initiative found at www.stopbullying.gov; and (3) the confidential services provided by the District’s Student and Family Assistance Program (SFAP).

II. Student-led Culture and Climate Program

The Task Force recommends that the District strengthen its student-led culture and climate programs. Based in large part on input from its student members, the Task Force believes that for culture and climate education to be effective in the schools, it must be student-driven to the maximum extent possible. It is widely believed that the most effective way to learn information is to teach it to others. Thus, if student leaders are responsible for teaching their

peers what constitutes bullying or harassment and what responses are appropriate when witnessing those behaviors, for example, then the student leaders are more likely to internalize that information. Moreover, students are often more receptive to receiving information from their peers, meaning that not only will those students in a “teaching” role internalize the information, but those in the “learning” role are also more likely to respond positively to that information.

Though the Task Force members believe that the specific programming should be determined with input from the students, they explored three possible components that could be added to existing character education programs; those components are described in more detail below. The Task Force recommends that Community Action teams, composed of students (HS), parents, community members, and school staff consider implementing these or similar programs.

A. Student Leadership Program

For student-driven character education to function effectively, the Task Force believes that students from a broad cross-section of the student body should be selected to serve as student leaders. Those leaders could play a variety of roles within the school, such as identifying and changing negative traditions in the schools, helping to educate their peers concerning proper Internet etiquette, and teaching peers possible ways to respond if they witness bullying or harassment.

One example of this sort of program is the Agents of Change program at Wisconsin Lutheran High School. The program involves a large number of students (100 of the 750 at the high school). Students are interviewed, and those selected (a cross-section of the entire student body) undergo extensive training about creating a positive climate in their schools; students then work together to improve their school culture.

B. Restorative Justice Program

The goal of a student-led restorative justice group would be to help change problematic behavior. The restorative justice program would not replace, but would work in conjunction with, the disciplinary system in place. In a restorative justice process, students who engage in problematic behaviors would be expected to meet with the people affected by that behavior, including those who were the targets of the behavior and anyone who witnessed the behavior, and to discuss the behavior and its impact on others. The discussion would be facilitated by students who had been trained both in how to facilitate such discussions and in the confidentiality required when doing so. The student facilitators would lead the group in a discussion. The goals of that discussion would be that the student who behaved inappropriately would take responsibility for that behavior, would understand the impact of the behavior on others, and therefore would not engage in the behavior again.

For more information about restorative justice, please see Marquette University Restorative Justice Initiative: <http://law.marquette.edu/rji/>

C. Improvisation Groups

Groups like Comedy Sportz or Cornerstone Productions often work with K-12 students to help them create educational role plays. The purpose of the educational role plays would be for peers to teach peers about issues they deem important or relevant. The Theatre program at GHS or any in the community could be utilized to convey character education information and modeling to students. Some Greendale faculty or staff might be interested in working with students in this way as well.

Website links:

Comedy Sportz: http://www.comedysportzmilwaukee.com/main_page.html

Cornerstone Productions: <http://www.cornerstoneproductionsllc.com/index.html>

Though the three specific examples above are most often implemented at the high school level, the Task Force recommends that each school develop a student-led initiative, focusing on a positive school culture that best fits the needs of the particular school. In addition to these examples, many resources to foster positive school cultures are available for school-based Partners for Community Action to review and consider.

III. Staff Development

The final area of focus that the Task Force recommends is continuing staff development on the issues of school culture and climate. The Task Force has specifically identified two areas of development that it recommends to the District.

A. Staff will be trained to understand and help facilitate any new student-led culture and climate programs.

First, the Task Force recommends that administrators and faculty receive training about any of the student-led initiatives that the schools adopt. If, for example, one or more schools implement a program like Agents of Change, administrators and faculty will have to be involved in selecting and training the student leaders. Similarly, if one or more schools implement a restorative justice program, administrators and staff will have to select the students who will facilitate discussions and help to train those students. Administrators and staff will also have to decide when restorative justice is appropriate, and when more traditional, administrative action is appropriate.

- B. Staff will continue to receive training on recognizing the signs of bullying and harassing behavior, and also on how to respond appropriately.

Staff must also continue to receive training on the proper responses and procedures in order to maintain a positive climate in the schools and to respond to inappropriate behavior. The Task Force recommends that the training continue and that it include a common understanding of bullying behavior and other forms of aggression, information on how to intervene effectively with students who have been bullied, students who maltreat others, and students who watch it happen.

Conclusion

In summary, the Climate and Culture Task Force, comprised of students, parents, community members and school staff, determined that, while there are processes in place to prevent and address problematic student behavior, incidences of bullying and harassment do occur. By focusing efforts on the three components addressed in this document – parent and community education, staff development and student-led culture and climate programs – Greendale Schools will make strides toward the goal of providing a positive school experience for all students.