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A school scourge: South Hadley parents, graduates speak out on bullying problem

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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Thursday, January 28, 2010

SOUTH HADLEY - The public spoke Wednesday night with a passion.

Hundreds of people attended the School Committee meeting to applaud the opinions of South Hadley High School graduates, students and parents, accuse administrators and parents of enabling the bullying they've seen and heard about, and acknowledge that the problem and solution belong to the community.

Stories unfolded of students being pushed in the hallways, kicked in the knees, punched in the chest, slammed to the floor and written on with marker. Parents blamed school monitors and parents who have raised "monsters" for "not doing their jobs." Several speakers noted they have kept their children away from South Hadley schools because of their own horrific experiences.

"I was a middle class kid, I was not athletic, I was not the smartest kid on the block and I got punished for it," said Matthew Bail, a 1995 graduate of South Hadley High School.

Now a Belchertown resident, Bail said he watched his best friend get beaten up because bullies said he was gay. They broke his friend's arm and busted Bail's ribs, he said.

"I graduated in '95; that happened in '92," he said. "Where are we now?"



JERREY ROBERTS

Larry Bay, standing at microphone, speaks Wednesday during a public comment segment of a South Hadley School Committee meeting at South Hadley High School. Bay said his son was bullied at school. Others, in line behind him wait their turn to speak. About 200 people attended.



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Resident Luke Gelinis discussed the disorderly conduct of the "Sixth Man" group at basketball games and the bad reputation it has given South Hadley.

"Its sole purpose is to sing about coaches and opponents to intimidate them," Gelinis said.

His voice grew louder as he declared that the problems often start with parents.

"There is a select group of kids who do feel they're entitled, whether it's through influence or affluence ... they are the untouchable ones," Gelinis said.

Returning to the district Wednesday was national bullying expert Barbara Coloroso, who delivered a full-day workshop on bullying prevention and intervention in September, which only 35 parents and community members attended. Wednesday's crowd was at least six times that size.

While bullying is an issue across school districts throughout the world, state Rep. John Scibak said, "the difference between South Hadley and other communities is this community had a tragedy here."

The tragedy Scibak was referring to is the death of Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old freshman who was fairly new to South Hadley when she committed suicide two weeks ago. Her classmates reported she was bullied in school, outside of school and online, and school hasn't been the same since she died Jan. 14.

"I have trouble focusing on school work with all the media attention," said Emily McClintock, vice president of the senior class. "As a student dealing with this every single day, all we want is for the bullies to be held accountable for what they did."

Parents posed questions regarding conduct policy and where the bullying "buck stops." Government officials advocated for bills that seek to prohibit and punish school bullies. And the school community raised concerns about good children getting a bad reputation in the national media.

"If you're inside the schools I think you'll get a very different picture than what is being painted in this meeting here tonight," said Gus Sayer, superintendent.

Inside South Hadley High School Wednesday, Coloroso taught students that bullying is when someone gets pleasure from someone else's pain, that bystanders are a part of the problem, and that consequences can include "bullicide" - when victims of bullying kill themselves because they can't take it anymore. She informed parents Wednesday night that bullying starts at age 5 and peaks between ages 11 and 15. Conflict resolution is not the solution to bullying, she said; in fact, it often makes the problem worse. Physical bullying is the least common, she noted, and is almost always accompanied by verbal bullying.

"Verbal bullying is the way you make another human being an 'it,'" Coloroso said.

Coloroso said she is concerned that children are taught humor at the expense of someone else in the media and in life. Parent behavior at ball games also sets examples for students, she said.

A bullying task force will brainstorm solutions to bullying issues Feb. 23 at the high school.

Catherine Baum can be reached at cbaum@gazettenet.com.

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Comments

Thu, 01/28/2010 - 17:30 — Liz

Parents need to be accountable

It does start at home, but that is not where the solution should start. Schools have to identify bullying and punish the bullier and their parents. The bully should have to stay out of school until he/she and the parents attend appropriate workshops/therapy.

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Thu, 01/28/2010 - 16:50 — knowitall

How about the person being bullied ?

It does start at home ! Teach your kid to fight back ! Punch ! Kick in the face ! defend themselves !!! My son was getting bullied and I told him ! You play football you crybaby ! Do something about it ! The next time the kid slapped him im the head and all the other kids on the bus laughed he went over and picked the kid up and slamed him on the floor of the bus ! Now the bullie wont even look at him ! Fight Back ! PC doesnt work !

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Thu, 01/28/2010 - 13:34 — Sweetie

Bullies are not inevitable

I applaud all those who spoke out - it takes courage, and will hopefully make an impression on those who were sitting in that audience, knowing that their children were guilty of doing the same thing to someone else. Sadly, I think most parents of bullies did not attend. In denial, too busy, continuing to ignore the problem. I'm sure that if they were confronted with a full accounting of their own children's acts, they would be horrified.

A task force is needed, but I am uncomfortable with the shift in focus away from the responsible parties. Bullies are not an inevitable fact of life that we must accept and deal with as a community. The problem starts at home, and that is where the primary focus should be.

I agree that the community should develop strategies to curtail bullying, but parents have the power to prevent it from happening in the first place, by instilling some basic values in their children: kindness and respect.

I hope that the task force will recognize this, and include parent education as part of their solution. I also hope that when bullying does happen, parents of bullies are held accountable. They need to be made aware of exactly what their kids are doing, realize that they have failed to prevent this malicious behavior, and take steps to stop it immediately.

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Thu, 01/28/2010 - 14:58 — dwright

exactly

the problem STARTS AT HOME and that's where the correction needs to come from too

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