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Anti-bullying group draws crowd, starts work in South Hadley

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Wednesday, February 24, 2010

SOUTH HADLEY - About 450 people, from parents and teachers to students and community members, gathered at South Hadley High School last night to begin discussing ways to promote more civil and ethical behavior among students and the community at large.

It was the first meeting of the Anti-Bullying Task Force, initiated after Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old first-year student from Ireland, committed suicide Jan. 14, reportedly after being bullied and harassed both in school and through Internet sites.

Her death and the response from the schools has brought criticism and calls for the resignations of Superintendent of Schools Gus Sayer and high school Principal Daniel Smith from some corners, but not from those attending the task force's initial meeting.

Smith's introduction in the school's auditorium was greeted with loud, sustained applause, with many standing. The display moved Smith to tears.

"I was overwhelmed," Smith said later. He had concerns before the meeting that people who are upset about the handling of discipline at the school would disrupt the meeting, Smith acknowledged.



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Petition is passed

Although people unhappy with the response from school officials didn't picket outside in the snow, many inside signed a petition calling for the immediate resignation of Superintendent Gus Sayer.

The petition faults Sayer for failing to lead, implement critical programs and necessary policies, and demonstrate accountability.

More than 1,000 signatures have been collected throughout town in 10 days, according to Susan Smith, who gathered signatures at the meeting with about a dozen parents. She noted there are more than 2,600 signatures on a similar petition on Facebook, too.

"We want change and we want somebody that's proactive," Smith said. "I'm not confident my son is going to be safe here."

The school department's response, she added, is "too little too late."

Emily Pritchard, a special education teacher at the high school, was one of many wearing stickers reading "I Support Principal Dan Smith." Some faculty members had the stickers made, she said.

"I believe he has the best interest of the student body, the faculty and the community at heart. Time and time again he shows up for us in meaningful ways," Pritchard said. "He's a fantastic principal. He connects with the students and staff," she said.

As they got down to work, Task Force participants filled out a questionnaire that asked what they hope to accomplish, if they have any resources or skills to benefit the task force and what they need from the group now.

The survey offered space for comments on the draft charge for the group: to examine and evaluate "current district/school policies, programs and procedures in order to promote civil and ethical behavior among all members of the school community."

The large group then broke into eight smaller groups to discuss issues such as school disciplinary policies, student programs, online behavior and community programs.

During a brainstorming session of the discipline policies group facilitated by David Gallagher, assistant principal of Mosier School, one mother of schoolchildren suggested forming a discipline oversight committee of students and parents to review instances of discipline, "to make sure the policies we have are being carried out."

Another suggested that a review of disciplinary actions be taken to see what has been effective and what has not, but others said the policies themselves should be reviewed by the group first.

"The policies appear weak at best," said Donna Borah, a parent who read the school's policies on its Web site. The policies do not make clear teachers' and students' responsibilities for reporting behavior issues and the consequences of certain behaviors are not clearly spelled out, she said. Specifically, text messaging is not covered at all in the student handbook, Borah said.

"It's a vehicle that they're using, at times to do harm," she said.

Some in the group said cellular telephones should not be allowed in the schools, others that the use should be limited, while still others said their children need to have cell phones in school.

One student said times have changed since parents were in school. "You guys didn't grow up with technology. You don't know what it's like," he said.

Smith said a bill is being discussed in the state Legislature that would allow schools to take action on text messages sent from or to school grounds. The proposed law "really starts to speak to the limits of freedom of speech for students, and that's going to be an interesting battle," he said..

Another woman asked if teachers are mandated to report harassment and bullying. "I think there's a certain laxity in reporting threats and harassment," she said.

Many in the group did not have a chance to speak during the 50 minutes allotted for the discussion.

"As you think about this night, think about it as a beginning," said Gallagher.

The task force will meet weekly on Monday nights.

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It starts at home...

...and continues in a century or longer tradition of "don't be a tattler" -- if nobody (students or parents) says anything to the adults in charge and if things are done out of the sight of the adults in charge, then the adults in charge are doubly frustrated in doing anything to correct the problem.

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