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School district to upgrade anti-bullying policy

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TRAVERSE CITY — Jerry Marek approached a podium in front of Traverse City's school board members to tell them he has been bullied since third grade.

The board listened as Jerry, 14, his voice clear, said the experience has made him sad, angry and unable to concentrate. At times, he added, he has been afraid to go to school.

His father, Andy Marek, said he asked if the West Middle School eighth-grader wanted to take his story public to push for tougher policies against harassment in school. Jerry agreed and wrote his own speech.

"This was a problem that didn't just affect myself or my son, but it affected a lot of people," Marek said. "This is psychologically scarring for people."

Traverse City Area Public Schools' policy against bullying is poised for an upgrade to include specific protection on the basis of sexual orientation, height, weight, marital status and genetic information. Proposed language also adds the word "stalking" to the list of banned behaviors.

Board members have seen a draft and will take it up again in April, when they expect to vote. Several students, graduates, parents and teachers addressed them this week and supported the effort, and urged stricter penalties for offenders.

If harassed, students should report the incident to their principal or another staff member, who will investigate and take disciplinary action as needed. Students can face suspension to expulsion, depending on the action.

In 2009-10, one bullying case resulted in expulsion, said Christine Davis, the district's executive director of human resources. In all, 202 incidents were reported.

Other disciplinary actions vary and are maintained at the school level, Davis said. They can include warnings and suspensions, both in and out of school. Principals can suspend students for up to 10 days based on the infraction.

An appeals process allows the student who reported an incident to challenge a ruling to the superintendent and school board.

Andy Marek, for one, is concerned the new proposal doesn't go far enough.

He wants to see more defined discipline terms, psychological support for student bullies and a section that requires staff members to respond when they see incidents of harassment.

"If you don't hold the staff responsible, it's really easy for them to turn a blind eye," Marek said. "To see it written would make it more solid."

Employee involvement is one way to prevent taunting behavior, board member Megan Crandall said, adding that students shouldn't be intimidated to approach an adult.

More than that, prevention is "promoting a community of tolerance and acceptance of others," board President Marjie Rich said.

That could extend into elementary lessons about respect, board member Erik Falconer said.

The district is trying to be more proactive, rather than reactive, by installing security cameras and holding assemblies about tolerance and respect, Davis said.

In part because of parents' concerns, board member Gary Appel asked to review guidelines for enforcing the policy prior to voting next month. Board members approve only policies, not guidelines.

Discipline can vary because each case is unique. As such, it's important to make sure rules for enforcing policy are as inclusive and stringent as possible, Appel said.



"We wanted to make sure to be absolutely clear," he said. "There is no room for intolerance at TCAPS."

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