

**HOLMDEL TOWNSHIP BOARD OF EDUCATION**  
**AD-HOC CULTURE COMMITTEE MEETING NOTES**  
**AUGUST 6, 2019 AT 4:30 PM**

Board Members Present: J. Collins, Chair | V. Flynn | Lori Ammirati  
Administrators Present: R. McGarry, Superintendent  
Meeting Location: Village School - Central Conference Room

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**PLEASE NOTE: FOR BREVITY PURPOSES ONLY ITEMS IN YELLOW WERE READ OUT AT MEETING**

The following are the notes from the August 6, 2019 meeting of the Ad Hoc Culture Committee.

- The committee watched and discussed a presentation on bullying in order to gain a common understanding of what bullying is and isn't, and the issues faced by students and schools as a result of bullying. We have spent many hours researching and trying to understand the nature of bullying in order to determine the best approaches to prevention for the District. The presentation included the following pertinent information: (I would like to provide a summary of the most pertinent points)
  1. It is well settled that there are poor short and long term outcomes for bullied kids, both socially, emotionally and educationally.
  2. An inevitable and inescapable part of being a student means being part of a group dynamic. Peer groups for students have a significant influence on their psychological and social adjustments. Obtaining and maintaining a social position and/or status within the peer group and being accepted by peers are central developmental goals during adolescence, which can make children very vulnerable to bullying and its effects. Every person has a need for a positive ego picture and is striving for it (a social product developed in interpersonal relations, and striving for inner consistence.) One's relative status has profound effects on attention, memory, and social interactions, as well as health and wellness. These effects can be particularly pernicious in children and adolescents. If we remember what it was like to be back in school, children are often concerned with whether or not they are liked, fit in, belong, popular, looking good, etc.
  3. Although one student may be the instigator, in the vast majority of cases, bullying involves the dynamic of a group of students (for instance, in a classroom or hallway), not just a dynamic between a victim and a bully. Victims and bullies are not fixed categories of children; rather roles can change based on the situation. Peer relationships are like oxygen that allows bullying to breathe and spread; peers can use these relationships as a cudgel or a weapon of shame against victims.
  4. Relationships outside the household become increasingly important as a child moves through adolescence. One way to view these relationships is through cliques, which can be defined in two ways: (1) Researchers define a clique as a grouping of persons who interact with each other more regularly and intensely than others in the same setting (a more neutral definition), and (2) the more popular definition by layper-sons is a social grouping of persons that exhibits a great deal of peer pressure on its members and is exclusive, based on superficial differences (a more negative definition). Relationships outside the household become increasingly

important as a child moves through adolescence. One way to view these relationships is through cliques, which can be defined in two ways: (1) Researchers define a clique as a grouping of persons who interact with each other more regularly and intensely than others in the same setting (a more neutral definition), and (2) the more popular definition by laypersons is a social grouping of persons that exhibits a great deal of peer pressure on its members and is exclusive, based on superficial differences (a more negative definition). Clique Members Clique members comprise fewer than half of all adolescents, and are actively a part of a single, small group of persons. They spend most, if not all, of their social interactions with these same individuals. Liaisons Liaisons are individuals who interact with some members of a clique, but not with all. Liaisons can associate with multiple separate cliques, and are generally well thought of by their peers. This type of individual comprises approximately 30% of youths. Isolates Isolates are individuals who are not involved with any clique members, and generally have few, if any, relationships with peers in their social network. Isolates may be of volunteer status, in that they actively avoid relationships, or they may be of forced status (also labeled as targets or victims), in which they are set up by others to be excluded and ridiculed.

5. The most significant part of the clinical definition of bullying and the key to understanding bullying is the concept of a power imbalance. By definition, bullied kids are victimized; and the reason a bullying event can be successful is that the aggressor makes use of the power imbalance existing at the time of the incident (or incidents). The intent is to harm the child or there is a disregard for harm. The very nature of the power imbalance is that the target was unable to defend him or herself at the time of the incident. However, power imbalances are not static, they change from situation to situation. Students can move in and out of various roles in the bullying dynamic. It is unhelpful to think of bullying is solely about a victim and a bully in isolation.
6. Contrary to popular belief, kids that bully usually DO NOT have low self esteem and they often have superior social skills.
7. Factors that may create a power dynamic are many, including a child that has greater popularity (being liked/supported by many people); a child that is more aggressive; a child that is less assertive; a child that knows how to hurt and/or humiliate a victim, manipulate or threaten another child, etc.; having a volatile temperament; being cool or perceived as cool, higher social status, physical traits such as being large, developed and attractive, ability to control whether or not another student is accepted in a group; being able to embarrass someone, knowing another person's weaknesses and being able to exploit them such as insecurities, physical characteristics; gender, spreading rumors; knowing the target can't or won't fight back, and, of course, being in a protected class of people based such as race, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Of course, there are a combination of many factors involved in any bullying dynamic.
8. The most common type of bullying are verbal, which involves name calling, and is often based on appearance, or some characteristic of a person; and the other is relational, which uses the relationship or the threat of the removal or damaging of the relationship as the means of harm. It often takes place within the context of what looks like a group of friends, but upon closer examination, a cruel pattern emerges. It can be extremely covert and sometimes the perpetrator is not known. It may involve spreading rumors, ostracism and being cruel because a child does not "fit in".
9. Cyberbullying is bullying that exists in a new and dangerous forum and can be far more devastating due to anonymity, the willingness of kids to do things online that they wouldn't do face to face, the fact that an aggressor can inflict abuse 24/7 through multiple means that include email, text messaging, and an array of social media websites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. According to statistics, as devastating as it is, it still is not as common as bullying in person. Cyberbullying may include posting something about a child's sexuality, whether true or not, sending unauthorized photos, spreading rumors, and pretending to be

someone's friend and the new and popular phrase "go kill yourself". The problem now is the difficulty of asking children to give up their phones when it is like giving up breathing - we live in a new age.

10. **There's a strong correlation between bias and bullying.** The targets of bullies are often from a group marginalized because of a certain characteristic about which others have biases or prejudices such as sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation, appearance such as being overweight, late bloomers or having acne, being different in some way, displaying a noticeably high level of anxiety, having learning or other disabilities, lonely kids/poor social skills, lack of assertiveness, emotional vulnerability and radiating fear, and true bias or hate.
11. **There are significant social and personal benefits to bullying, such as achieving social status (queens bees or cool kids), control, demonstrating to an audience (their classmates, friends, kids in the locker room) that they can dominate; getting away with it, boost in security; putting kids in their place; fun/entertainment; being center of attention; impressing others; and relieving frustration.**
12. It appears only in relatively small social groups (such as school classes or army units), the members of which see each other regularly, usually daily. Thus, the victim has no possibility to avoid his tormentors. The easy victories, and often support from other group members, encourage the bully to further aggressive activities
13. **For the District, it is important that we begin to distinguish between HIB compliance and evidence based anti-bullying practices and that we are careful about not allowing HIB law to be the sole driver of bullying prevention in the District** for many reasons including:
  - a. HIB law doesn't use the clinical definition of bullying, upon which best practices are based, including the use of power imbalance and intent to harm/disregard for harm for target, which makes things confusing for the District.
  - b. We are looking through a legal lens, which has a different purpose. We are focused on "accused", determining guilt or innocence, requiring "evidence" to "substantiate".
  - c. This means, we may not be focused on Victim's Needs and Best Practices,
  - d. HIB law includes biased based bullying, which is a great majority of cases, but may not include relational bullying that is not bias-based and any other bullying that has no basis in bias.
14. **We can be mindful of and trained to comply with HIB law, while at the same time, implement a shift in approach to Evidence Based Practices.**
15. **The most important thing for our students is that they feel safe and supported. In other words, even if a student doesn't seek help when having a problem with another student, do they know they could get the help if they wanted it?**
16. Teachers and other adults in the school spend a substantial portion of the school day interacting with students and are therefore at the forefront of the battle against bullying. They can play a critical role in providing a safe and supportive environment that promotes student learning. Educators must be able to accurately recognize behaviors and possess the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively intervene on the spot in a manageable and simple way to create a climate of respect and how they are expected to behave in school (not correcting their behaviors at home). The purpose is to correct the behavior of the particular student, but more

importantly, it will make sure that every student who heard or saw the behavior sees that an adult is intervening. But there are many challenges including possible ambivalence or unproductive attitudes about bullying prevention; lack of explicit, clear and consistent anti-bullying policies/what is expected, if they are willing participants, do they have the support of administrative or other leaders in building, effective and consistent discipline policies and attitudes of leaders, the belief that it is not their job, indifference, and the fact that it often does not happen in front of the teacher or other adult in the school.

Teachers and schools play an important part in helping students understand their roles in bullying situations. When teachers and schools address bullying consistently, students have an expectation that the role they play in bullying matters. Teachers can conduct activities to enhance student's social emotional learning and provide safe strategies for supporting their peers.<sup>2</sup> Adults in schools can also be role models, reward positive social behavior, and set the tone for healthy social relationships. By understanding the different roles they play in bullying situations, bystanders can take positive actions to address and reduce bullying.

17. Bystanders
  18. Diversity, cultural competence and anti bias training are important parts of anti bullying efforts.
  19. It is critical to give children the skills to learn to avoid, protect themselves, respond to and be resilient and smart in the face of bullying wherever possible.
  20. Counseling services or support after the fact is important.
  21. Engaging parents as allies, not adversaries, when a child is being bullied is important as well.
- We are in the process of arranging a meeting with an expert in bullying prevention, hib bullying, cultural competence, diversity and bias training at the next ad hoc meeting in September to discuss the best strategies to move forward for the District.
  - Further, we would like to explore holmdel specific information to inform future training and decisions such as HIB trends in the district, number substantiated and unsubstantiated, distinguishing characteristics or bias issue trends, and behavior of which the district is aware that may not meet the criteria for HIB, but is clearly bullying.

We would also like to collect and analyze other climate related data including suspension reports, code of conduct violations and the senior survey that spoke to code of conduct issues as perceived by exiting students.

Next meeting date is to be determined.