

DOE chips away at bullying issue

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Jan 09, 2013

StarAdvertiser.com

A multiyear initiative to reduce incidents is showing some progress, officials report

By Mary Vorsino

BULLYING INCIDENTS

Here are the numbers of bullying incidents reported in Hawaii public schools from the start of each school year at the end of July to mid-December:

	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
Bullying	439	590	541
Cyberbullying	37	94	94
Harassment	2,217	2,335	1,871
Total	2,693	3,019	2,506

Source: Hawaii Department of Education

A little over a year after the state announced a comprehensive initiative to tackle bullying in schools, Department of Education officials say they have made progress — but that there's still much more to do.

"Every student deserves and should be respected, honored and valued. We take this very seriously," DOE Deputy Superintendent Ronn Nozoe told the Board of Education on Tuesday.

He said in the first year of the multiyear effort, the DOE has improved its bullying reporting procedures, beefed up staff training and moved toward instituting an anti-bullying program in every school.

From the start of the school year July 30 to mid-December, there were 541 reported incidents of bullying, 94 cyberbullying incidents and 1,871 incidents involving harassment, according to statistics reported to the BOE.

All of those figures are down slightly compared with the same period in the 2011-12 school year. But they're up from the 2010-11 school year, the first year for which data are available.

The DOE presentation came about a month after Kealakehe High School in West Hawaii canceled school for a day after what has been described as racially motivated bullying escalated to several large fights on campus.

On Dec. 6 eight students were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct following a melee on the campus. In the wake of the fighting, at least 20 students were suspended for varying lengths of time.

The DOE has said the fighting was linked to tensions between "local, Micronesian and Marshallese cultures and lifestyles." Marshallese students, school officials said, were the target of ongoing bullying and taunts from other students prior to the fighting.

While the problems at Kealakehe High were not discussed at Tuesday's board meeting, DOE and board officials acknowledged that addressing bullying is a monumental task — and one that will take time.

"We've got lots of work to do," said BOE Chairman Don Horner.

Jenny Lee, staff attorney with the Hawai'i Appleseed Center, a legal and social advocacy nonprofit that has been looking at bullying in schools, said while she's encouraged by the improvements made so far, she would like to see concrete examples of how anti-bullying programs are being implemented in schools.

"This is a step in the right direction," Lee said. "But what didn't get mentioned is what resources the schools are getting and how that all plays out."

She said a concern she often hears is that schools are so focused on boosting scores for annual standardized tests that they have little time for anything else, including addressing the culture of a campus.

The DOE kicked off its anti-bullying initiative in October 2011 to comply with a state law that requires the department to regulate compliance with its bullying rules.

In announcing the initiative, the DOE said it would step up its data accountability, work to ensure students who are being bullied get immediate help and provide interventions to students who have been reported as bullies.

Nozoe said that in the first year of the effort, "we have laid out some infrastructure. We have a vision."

The next step, he said, will be ensuring that schools are instituting comprehensive anti-bullying programs.

He added schools initially had trouble collecting the bullying data, since bullying, harassment and cyberbullying can overlap and may be hard to define. But he said he is now "confident" in the bullying numbers and believes actions can be taken based on them.

Nozoe said he regularly sits down with complex-area superintendents and other administrators to discuss the bullying incidents, bringing attention to figures that appear abnormally high or low.

In the presentation Tuesday, the DOE "red-flagged" several complexes with what appear to be high bullying statistics.

For example, students in the Aiea-Moanalua-Radford complex make up 9 percent of state enrollment, but 12 percent of bullying incidents so far this year have occurred in the district.

Some 11 percent of reported bullying incidents occurred in the Honokaa-Kealakehe-Kohala-Konawaena complex, which has 5.8 percent of Hawaii's public school students.

While bullying incidents were reported in every corner of the state, several complexes — including Hilo-Waiakea and Nanakuli-Waianae — said they had had no incidents of cyberbullying, raising questions about reporting.

In a survey released last year, 1 in 6 Hawaii high school students said they had been bullied online or via text messages, and 20 percent reported being bullied on school property.

The same survey found nearly one-fourth of Hawaii middle-school students said they had been victims of cyberbullying, and 41 percent reported being bullied at school at least once.

Melanie Bailey, a parent advocate who has testified at the Legislature in support of more bullying prevention and monitoring at schools, said the recent incident at Kealakehe High shows that bullying is still a real concern for Hawaii schools.

"They're definitely still having problems," she said. "When you talk to kids, that's when you hear it. It's still happening."

She said she would like to see bullying statistics by school to get a better grasp of not only where the hot spots may be, but whether all schools are collecting data well.

The Star-Advertiser has requested bullying statistics by school and was initially told that the data would not be released because of privacy concerns. The DOE then said it required more time to compile the data.