



Report on Act 129 of 2012: Section 12

Establishing a Hazing, Harassment and Bullying Council

Secretary of Education's Advisory Council

Report to the House and Senate Committees on Education

May, 2015

Submitted by:

Bernice Garnett: Co-Chair

Nicole Mace: Co-Chair

Background

Act No. 129 of 2012 directed the Secretary of the Agency of Education (AOE) to establish an advisory council to “review and coordinate school and statewide activities relating to the prevention of and response to harassment, hazing and bullying.” The council is tasked with reporting on their progress annually in January to the House and Senate Education Committees. By statute, the council must include members from the Vermont Principals’ Association; the Vermont School Boards Association; the Vermont Superintendents Association; the Vermont National Education Association; the Vermont Human Rights Commission; the Vermont Independent Schools Association and other members selected by the Secretary, at least one of whom is a current secondary school student who has witnessed or experienced harassment, hazing or bullying in the school environment. The Secretary, in recruiting discretionary members, sought individuals with direct experience working on equity and civil rights issues. With respect to student members, two students from one northern school (South Burlington High School) and two students from one southern school (Mt. Anthony Union High School) were selected.

The membership of the Council is as follows:

Statutorily designated members:

Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary, Agency of Education

Ken Page, Executive Director, VT Principals’ Association

Nicole Mace, Associate Director for Legal Services, VT School Boards Association

Jeff Francis, Executive Director, VT Superintendents Association

Jeff Fannon, General Counsel, VT-NEA

Karen Richards, Human Rights Commission

Mill Moore, Executive Director, VT Independent Schools Association

Additional Secretary appointments:

Kim Brittenham, Vermont Center for Independent Living

Mike Dreiblatt, StandUpToBullying.net

Lucie Garand, Parent, Government Relations Specialist, Downs Rachlin Martin PLLC

Bernice Garnett, University of Vermont

Kathy Johnson, Independent Consultant

Dana Kaplan, Outright Vermont

Curtiss Reed, Jr., Executive Director, VT Partnerships for Fairness and Diversity

Henri Sparks, Equity Director, Burlington School District

Stephen Tavella, Safe Schools and School Climate Coordinator, AOE

Mission Statement

The Harassment, Hazing, and Bullying (HHB) Advisory Council envisions inclusive, healthy, and collaborative learning environments for all Vermont schools that are free of bullying, hazing, and harassment. We value multicultural learning environments and school communities free of prejudice and discrimination, where all students and adults feel welcome, respected, safe, and empowered to promote fairness and equality on behalf of themselves and others.

Work of the Council (2014-2015)

The HHB Council meets bi-monthly over the course of a 12-month calendar year at the Agency of Education in Barre, VT. All meetings are open to the public and meeting agendas and minutes are posted on the HHB council website: (<http://education.vermont.gov/bullying-prevention-council/meeting-dates>)

In August of 2014, two new co-chairs were appointed by Secretary Holcombe: Nicole Mace and Bernice Garnett. Tracey Tsugawa, the previous HHB chair, left her position at the Vermont Human Rights Commission and no longer resides in Vermont. An updated list of the HHB council members along with their biographies can be found on the HHB website: (<http://education.vermont.gov/bullying-prevention-council/bios>)

School Climate

The major focus of this year's HHB council has been on school climate, as a broader term to conceptualize and define hazing, harassment and bullying prevention and intervention efforts. School climate refers to the quality and character of school life and reflects four broad domains including: interpersonal relationships, physical and social emotional safety, physical environment and teaching and learning. The HHB council helped to design and populate the Agency of Education's school climate website, which includes a justification and rationale for a focus on school climate as well as plethora of resources on school climate prevention. The website also includes a short video clip of a middle school student from Winooski Middle School, interviewed by Ken Page, VPA Director, about what can be done to improve school climate. This interview was an extension of the previous year's student listening tour, completed by many HHB council members. (<http://education.vermont.gov/safe-schools/school-climate>)

The HHB council hopes to coordinate the launch of a School Climate Week as a way to increase awareness, encourage dialogue across Vermont schools, and celebrate significant accomplishments. The council is still strategizing on the most effective and efficient model to garner concentrated attention of schools for a dedicated week. Given that October is bullying prevention awareness month, the hope is to coordinate school climate week during this alignment.

Additionally, the AOE hired a school climate coordinator in November 2014, Stephen Tavella, increasing the internal capacity of the agency to promote school climate prevention and intervention related initiatives. In this role and as a member of the HHB council, Steve Tavella has been spearheading a school climate pilot assessment project designed to assess the feasibility and accessibility of standardizing a reliable and valid measure of school climate across Vermont middle and high schools. The school climate assessment pilot involves surveying participating Vermont middle and high school students, parents and educator communities across five supervisory unions, February-May of 2015. The HHB council has served as a vetting stakeholder group during the pilot assessment project.

Hazing, Harassment and Bullying School Policy Update

Lawyers from the VSBA, the AOE and VSBIT, with feedback from a few administrators, collaborated to develop a new model Hazing, Harassment and Bullying Policy for schools. One primary goal of this effort was to design parallel procedures for investigations of different kinds of incidents. Previously the policy for Bullying and the policy for Hazing and Harassment had different recommended procedures, which meant administrators had to determine what kind of incident took place before beginning the investigation. The full committee is now reviewing the proposed new policy.

Professional Development

A significant point of conversation during the HHB council meetings has focused on the lack of professional development and training opportunities for Vermont designated employees and other school stakeholders, given Tracey Tsugawa's departure. The HHB council discussed other parties that could provide professional development around this area, including VSBIT. Coordination of professional development is needed to ensure quality control and standardization of content delivery.

Ken Page, VPA, and Henri Sparks, Burlington School District Equity Director, continue to provide annual professional development around bullying, hazing and harassment prevention to school bus drivers in Vermont.

Student Voice

Traditionally, the HHB council has included formal student representation, but currently does not have a student serving in this capacity. The HHB council members and Secretary Holcombe have made efforts to connect with students about this opportunity. Additionally, there has been a lack of clear understanding on the role of the student representations to ensure that authentic student voice is institutionalized in the HHB council structure.

HHB council members, individually in their respective professional roles, actively engage youth in school climate and hazing, harassment and bullying prevention related activities. For example, Kathy Johnson (a member of the HHB council) and peer leaders from the A WORLD OF A DIFFERENCE PROGRAM® presented at the Vermont Association for Middle Level Education (VAMLE) Annual Conference on March 10, 2015. The VAMLE conference theme “Bullying II: Creating a Culture of Respect in Socially Inclusive Safe Schools” was hosted at the Davis Center at the University of Vermont and was predicated on youth-adult partnerships.

HHB Council members should systematically align individual efforts to collaboratively raise the profile of youth voice in hazing, harassment and bullying prevention.

Data

Since the inception of the HHB council, a data sub-committee has existed to review the various data sources available that shed light on hazing, harassment and bullying related issues present in Vermont K-12 schools. The data work group has reported limited data and lack of resources as two barriers to systematically understanding the complex nature of hazing, harassment and bullying in schools, e.g., including multiple informants and perspectives on the occurrence and manifestation of these behaviors. The data work group would like to review and focus on school discipline policies and practices, particularly in light of Vermont Legal Aid’s recent report “Kicked Out: Unfair and Unequal Discipline in Vermont’s Public Schools.”

Next Steps

The Council will continue to meet periodically to further their charge of reviewing and coordinating school and statewide activities related to the prevention of and response to harassment, hazing and bullying.

The Council is making no formal legislative recommendations at this time.