

In our opinion: Schools should notify parents when bullying occurs

Deseret News editorial board

Published: March 9, 2018 4:42 pm

The sad truth that 28 percent of middle school and high school students have been bullied is made more alarming when viewed in light of the 70 percent of staff members who report seeing bullying in their schools. As the tide of bullying doesn't seem to be abating, it's imperative students feel comfortable reporting harassment to the appropriate school officials and that schools notify parents of victims when bullying does occur.

According to a Yale University study, youths who are bullied in school are significantly more likely to consider suicide. Although the exact number is unclear, reports also estimate thousands of students stay home from school each day for fear of being bullied. The devastating effect bullying has on children's health is clear; still, parents, who are best positioned to support their children, are often being left in the dark about what is happening to their children at school. Schools should be required, with the victim's consent, to notify the parents and guardians of both bullies and victims about instances of harassment.

While this seems like a commonsense solution, a bill recently passed in the New York state Legislature reveals the dangerous policy gaps on this issue. This bill, Jacobe's Law, is like most bills on the topic: legislation spurred by the tragic story of a child gone too soon.

Twelve-year-old Jacobe Taras' parents were blindsided when their son committed suicide in 2015, surprised to learn he had been bullied at school but that those who were aware of the issue failed to notify them. Jacobe is not alone: According to the American Association of Suicidology, suicide rates among 10- to 14-year-olds have grown more than 50 percent over the last three decades. These children are of an age that they may not be able to fully understand what their options are for reporting bullying. It is up to schools to make sure all students are being treated with dignity and respect and to act when that is not the case.

Since 2015, Richard and Christine Taras have worked to expand New York's Dignity for All Students Act, a law requiring schools to report incidents to the New York Education Department. The Tarases are right to argue that this reporting system should extend to parents and guardians as well.

Special concern should also be given to students identifying as LGBT who are harassed or bullied at school. In many cases, students do not want their parents to be notified about their sexual orientation, and federal laws prohibit public schools from disclosing students' sexual orientations to their families. In such events, students should be consulted and give consent before their families are notified about them being bullied.

The public health crisis of suicide is finally entering the cultural lexicon as something that must be discussed openly; next, families, communities and public officials must undertake the difficult work of creating policy changes to address the problem — this is one commonsense solution that should be considered.