



December 23, 2011



Division of Educational Research and Service
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Dear State-Tribal Relations Committee member:

It has been some time since returning from the Northern Cheyenne Reservation and our meeting. The impromptu conversations between us were a wonderful opportunity for me to begin to understand the balance you have in your roles and thank you for your willingness to listen and render votes representing all voices of your constituents. I am happy to provide more specific information concerning bullying in Montana schools. Please note that Montana, South Dakota and Michigan are the only states without an anti-bullying statute and that Montana's attempt to enact such legislation failed in 2005 and 2011 legislative initiatives, SB 141 as one example.

To give you some foundation upon which my comments are grounded; I have been a public school administrator for 31 years. I have worked at both the middle school and high school level; I have worked in Lewistown and Missoula. Both of my adult children are products of Montana public schools and both graduated from UM. I have also worked in three other states as a public school administrator. For the past four years I have coordinated the Montana Safe Schools Center at the University of Montana; this assignment has allowed me to work with schools across the state. I also need to add that the opinions expressed are mine and do not represent the views of my employer, the University of Montana.

From my view, the safety of my students and my children is nonnegotiable. When parents send their children to school they transfer their responsibility to teachers and administrators. When I sent my own children to school, I expected them to be safe. As a principal, when I accepted other's children into my school, I too accepted that responsibility—including the responsibility for their physical, emotional and psychological safety. These are words that most school personnel would support as an ideal. Ideals give us targets to attain. But, what does the data say about how we are doing in our Montana schools in terms of safety?

The Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey is given to high school students, in grades 9-12, and its validity is widely accepted. This survey is administered on odd years. The 2011 results illustrate the level of violence and bullying in Montana high schools through the eyes of these students.

Here are some of the questions from the survey as well as student responses:

- **Carried a weapon on school property on at least 1 day of the last 30 days? 9.3% of Montana students said “yes.”**
- Did not attend school because you felt unsafe at school or on the way to or from school within the past 30 days? 4.2% of Montana students said “yes.”
- Threatened or injured with a weapon on school property on or more times? 7.5% of Montana students said “yes.”
- In a physical fight on school property one or more times during the past 12 months? 9.1% of Montana students said “yes.”
- **Bullied on school property within the past 12 months? 26% of Montana students said “yes.”**
- **Seriously considered attempting suicide within the past 12 months? 15.2% of Montana students said ‘yes.’**
- **Carried a weapon on at least 1 day within the last 30 days? 23.5% of Montana students said “yes.”**
- **Carried a gun on at least 1 day in the last 30 days? 9% of Montana students said “yes.”**

This survey is typically given in winter and therefore quite outside the hunting season when many of our youth carry firearms. The bolded questions and answers are statistically significant and well above the national averages. Here is a link to the survey results:

http://www.opi.mt.gov/pdf/YRBS/11/Reports/11YRBS_HSResults.pdf

This data can be broken down to give greater insight into what is occurring with our students and their schools. Girls (7%) are twice as likely to miss school out of fear as boys (4%) yet boys (15%) are more likely to be involved in physical fighting at school than girls (7%). These results illustrate that the school environment is not always physically, emotionally or psychologically healthy for our young people. Thus we should not be surprised that students leave our high schools out of fear. In addition, the results for 5 of the 7 questions above have seen an increase since 2007 in our Montana schools. Things are not getting better for our high school students; they are getting worse

The National Center for Educational Statistics conducts The National Crime Victimization Survey. They report that 28% of students report being bullied at school (2009). This report states that bullying decreases as students get older and that the greatest amount of bullying occurs in grades 6 and 7. Unfortunately, the YRBS includes grades 9-12 and therefore fails to measure the ages where the greatest conflicts occur. It is safe to believe that Montana middle-school students suffer more bullying than our high school students.

The Safe School Assessment and Resource Bank (SSARB) was created by the Institute for Education Research and Service and the Montana Safe School's Center and Sopris West coordinated its implementation, at no cost to Montana schools. This assessment is also one of the required surveys used by the Montana Behavioral Initiative (MBI). Over 70,000 students, school staff and parents have taken this survey during the past 10 years. Bullying is always one of the top 2 pressing issues listed by students in Montana schools. This survey also asks adults working in the school similar questions. The single greatest take-away is that teachers and administrators do not recognize the bullying that students both see and feel. The results from this survey indicate that teachers and administrators report 1/3 the level of bullying that students report. Based on this comparison, it is not surprising that school leadership is reluctant to react to this important issue; they simply don't see the problem that students report. Based upon the responses of the adults in their lives, students seem to feel that there is little point in reporting.

The Office of Public Instruction conducted the "My Voice" survey with all Montana Behavioral Initiative Schools this past year. Keep in mind that MBI schools have made an explicit commitment to students using the best available research at improving schooling. While each school is at a differing level of development, each school is doing their best and represents the best of our Montana schools. The survey can be contrasted with the YRBS and SSARB, parts of it are uncomfortably consistent.

- **I think bullying is a problem at my school. 42% of Montana students agree.** Consistent with national data, 50% of 6th graders think it's a problem contrasted with 34% of 12th graders. Know also there are fewer 12th graders than 6th graders because of our school drop-outs.
- **If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk. 52% of Montana students agree.** This also means that 48% of Montana students don't have a teacher with whom they can talk. This is relative consistent across 6th through 12th grade.
- **I enjoy being at school. 53% of Montana students agree.** This also means that 47% of Montana students don't enjoy being at school. This is relatively consistent across 6th through 12th grade.

As I mentioned earlier in this letter, I have had the opportunity to work in a number of schools across the state. At a faculty meeting at one of those schools, we surveyed the teachers. They said *"A lot of the bullying behavior that has been learned from adults and to some extent is accepted because there has been no clear cut definition as to what is and is not accepted."* When asked what they did about bullying, they said, *"Talk to them about it", "tell the principal or counselor", "usually talk to the bully; however, often because of my schedule as a classroom teacher there is not a chance to catch the bully."* When asked, "What would you like to see the school do to address bullying? They said, *"Learn to recognize and address the situations. Enforce consequences. Educate students and parents and staff on behaviors", create a "consistent plan", and "teach students" proper behavior."*

It is my hope that this data illustrates that bullying is a critical issue affecting all of our students. In the absence of legislation, we have seen an increase in reported school bullying and violence by students. Montana, South Dakota and Michigan are currently the only states without an anti-bullying statute. The link to this data is: <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-education-department-releases-analysis-state-bullying-laws-and-policies> Note the date this was published, since that time, Hawaii has enacted anti-bullying legislation.

The unavoidable conclusion is that without legislative support, the increasing bullying trend will continue and its corresponding consequences will grow.

As always, feel free to contact me if I can be of further help. Some additional sources of information for your consideration are:

www.stopbullying.gov

<http://doj.mt.gov/safeinyourspace/>

<http://www.olweus.org/>

Sincerely,

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