



October 29, 2019

TESTIMONY of STUART MUSZYNSKI, PRESIDENT AND CEO, VALUES-IN-ACTION  
FOUNDATION BEFORE THE STATE OF OHIO HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE IN  
SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 310

Dear Honorable Committee Members,

Just as an introduction, I represent Values-in-Action Foundation, an Ohio-based non-profit organization that specializes in character, values and anti-bullying training. Our school-based programs (called Project Love®) are now in 77 Ohio counties and all 50 states, this school year representing almost 1500 schools and 400,000 students.

Most of us are well-aware of rhetoric that has advocated treating "the other" as the enemy. But, many of us are not aware that messages and tensions within society trickle down to our children and schools. Evidence from school principals, counselors and teachers and as reported by the Southern Poverty Law Center indicate that, as incivility increases, it impacts our schools. Incivility has affected how students talk to their peers, teachers and elders.

Bullying -- a subset of incivility -- is dramatically on the rise. Here are some startling numbers:

A recent study by the non-profit YouthTruth, based on interviews with 160,000 secondary students in 27 states, cites that bullying has increased from 28% to 33% from the 2015-16 school year to the present. Forty percent of middle schoolers and 27% of high schoolers also reported being bullied. Bullying doesn't end during school: 35% of the workforce is bullied!

Higher rates of bullying were experienced at majority white schools: 36% of white students and 37% of students of color were bullied, the latter representing a 7% increase over the prior year. Bullying, racism and homophobia are inevitable partners.

In 2016, the National Crime Victimization Survey indicated that 21.8% of elementary schoolers were bullied.

In 2014, the American Psychological Association reported that "70% of middle and high school students have experienced bullying at some point". *Translation*: 38,500,000 students were bullied during their time in elementary, middle or secondary school!

A CDC study revealed that middle school students have the highest rate of bullying, at least once a week.

And, according to analyses by the U.S. Department of Education and psychologist Dr. Peter Langman, between 71% and 75% of school shooters have felt bullied, harassed or persecuted sometime prior to their incident.

Bullying is debilitating in our schools and society, not only for students, but in ongoing life. According to [psyc.com.net](http://psyc.com.net), long-term effects of bullying include chronic depression, suicidal thoughts and plans, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-destructive behavior, substance abuse, and difficulty with relationships.

Like so many dysfunctions, solutions that once rested with families, parents, churches and fraternal groups now are handled through schools. Schools have become the “public squares” of many of society’s dysfunctions and issues.

However, schools intermittently and sometimes perfunctorily deal with or intervene with bullying. According to Author Beth Rosenthal, who wrote the book “Bullying,” students reported that teachers intervened to stop bullying only 25% of the time, while teachers reported that they intervened 71% of the time.

Why is there this disparity? My experience with schools tells me that many teachers just plain do not notice bullying. And, by the time they do, the victim may have retaliated against the perpetrator, and the perpetrator is then wrongly labeled as the bully. Second, bullying may start at a benign level in the school and continue at a toxic level through social media. Just a few weeks ago, a teenager in another state took his own life, prompting Instagram to place a “restrict” feature on their platform that can block messages from potential bullies. But bullies are like water – they always find a way in!

Finally, there is the issue of teachers and administrators who don’t want to label the bully because they “come from a fine family” or they don’t want to rock the boat in the community. And there are schools that don’t want the media to know that they have a bullying problem.

When House Bill 276 was passed in 2007, there was great optimism by the then-representatives who sponsored the bill that school districts would come forward with vigorous anti-bullying and anti-harassment plans and campaigns. However, the situation has gotten worse, not better, in large part because school districts either have submitted superficial plans, not fully implemented plans or have not taken the bullying issue seriously.

I sympathize somewhat with districts because they consider state legislation without money to be “unfunded mandates.” Even in the current biennial budget, the extensive funding the state has authorized for “success and wellness” does not even encompass bullying. It should. Perhaps the state should consider backing-up its conviction with additional dollars to enable districts to take bullying seriously, pay for social-emotional training and actively deal with it.

Nonetheless, some government intervention is needed now to bring the identification of bullies from a “nice to do” to a “need to do.” And that is why Values-in-Action supports House Bill 310.

Respectfully submitted,



STUART MUSZYNSKI

President and CEO, Values-in-Action Foundation