



STUART MUSZYNSKI, PRESIDENT AND CEO, VALUES-IN-ACTION FOUNDATION
TESTIMONY IN FRONT OF THE OHIO HOUSE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY
EDUCATION COMMITTEE IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 205

Dear Chairperson Manning, Vice-Chairperson Bird, Ranking Member Robinson and Representatives,

Just as an introduction, I represent Values-in-Action Foundation, a Cleveland-based non-profit organization that specializes in character, values, kindness, anti-bullying and soft-skills training. Our programs are now in 73 Ohio counties, representing 475 schools and all 50 states, with almost 2500 schools and 400,000 students.

Each December, as part of our holiday tradition, we enjoy hearing “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer” on the radio. The song is joyful, catchy and part of our normal routine, yet most of us do not notice that the song is partly about how Rudolph was bullied. Until, that is, Santa recognized the utility of Rudolph’s red nose, restored his self-esteem, and then Rudolph “went down in history.”

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.

Hate crimes are also up in Ohio and elsewhere. According to the Anti-Defamation League, anti-Semitic acts increased 72% in Ohio in 2020. In addition to the aforementioned, racism and anti-Asian sentiment have increased.

Because of the trickle-down effect of hate, anger, resentment and overall incivility, these incidents ultimately find their way into our schools. A leading principal in our state once observed that, “Students absorb the general dysfunction of adult society like a sponge.”

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

A 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 2020. Forty percent of middle schoolers and 27% of high schoolers also reported being 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, 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 social 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, when they do, the victim may have retaliated against the perpetrator, and the perpetrator is 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. Then 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 then there are the schools that don't want the media to know that they have a bullying problem, so they kick the issue under the rug.

Which brings me to House Bill 205. For all the above reasons, government intervention is needed to bring the identification of bullies from a "nice to do" to a "need to do." Psychologists have said that children absorb the negatives of our society. No wonder that, with all the negative noise and such occurring in society today, and given the

pandemic and increased social isolation, bullying is on the rise again, in schools and outside of schools. Children are being harmed, perhaps irreparably for their entire lives.

That is why Values-in-Action Foundation supports House Bill 205. For all those who are bullied in Ohio, for the 8-year-old Cincinnati boy who in 2017 committed suicide because he could not take being bullied anymore, we all need to forge solutions. And, for the student at Bowling Green State University who recently died as a result of an alcohol-intensive hazing process, we must take action.

On another note, let me point out that funding must follow any assertive action. Ultimately, bullying can be rooted out through a culture of kindness, caring and respect that doesn't tolerate meanness and takes away the bully's audience. When bullying is prevented, it is done so by peers who step up and intervene.

Values-in-Action has just submitted a proposal for funding of our Just Be Kind program and lesson plans in all 2,963 K-8 public schools in Ohio. This evidence-based curriculum, supported by three simple words – Just Be Kind – and interactive lesson plans (which are endorsed by the Ohio Education Association) can indeed improve the culture and climate of all schools, preventing the bully from emerging because the culture prevents this from happening. As this request comes before you as part of the state budget, I hope you will be supportive.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, featuring a simple smiley face icon to the left of the name 'Stm'.

STUART MUSZYNSKI
Values-in-Action Foundation
stuartm@viafdn.org
216-650-0463 (cell)