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Bullying bills at state Legislature could help local schools

CAITLYN M. MAY Albany Democrat-Herald Mar 31, 2019

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The Oregon State Capitol in Salem.

Mark Ylen, Mid-Valley Media (File, 2015)

Suicide was the second leading cause of death for people between the ages of 10 and 24 in the state of Oregon in 2017.

That's just one in a long list of troubling statistics included in the 2019 Oregon Task Force on School Safety report released in January, which requested legislative action to address growing concerns around bullying, harassment and overall student safety in

Oregon schools.

In response, legislators have proposed measures making money available to schools that take action on these issues.

House Bill 2604 and Senate Bill 180 outline the same terms and conditions for \$6 million in grant funding for school districts that create programs aimed at stemming bullying and increasing student empowerment. To earn funding, programs would need community partners and include four components: classroom presentations, empowerment groups, school staff training and parent education. Priority, according to the bills, would be given to schools based on geographic equity and to programs that targeted middle school students.

By the numbers

The Legislature established the Oregon Task Force on School Safety in 2014 with policymakers from the governor's office, education, law enforcement and public mental health agencies. The group established SafeOregon, a tip line for students to forward concerns about bullying, planned school attacks and other worries.

From Jan. 30, 2017 to Nov. 20, 2018, the tip line logged 898 complaints in regards to bullying and harassment. Bullying was listed as the No. 1 issue, with violence, reports of attempted suicide and threats of school attacks close behind.

“These numbers are staggering and show us the value of providing students and families with a safe and easy reporting mechanism to share concerns of threats to our students and schools,” said a report from the task force.

SafeOregon complaints mirror statistics from the Oregon Healthy Teen Survey, which polls eighth- to 11th-graders from around the state. The 2017 report, the most recent available, noted that 9 percent of eighth-graders said they missed at least one day of school in the last 30 days because they were afraid for their safety. One in three eighth-graders said they had been bullied within the last 30 days. For 11th graders, it was one in five.

Life and death

Suicide rates in Oregon youths have been rising for the last four years. In 2014, 97 people between the ages of 10 and 24 died of suicide. In 2017, it was 107. According to Jill Baker, a counselor at South Albany High School, students at the school are polled each year and for the six years she's served as a counselor there, a consistent 20 to 25 percent of the student body have reported thoughts of suicide.

In fact, the task force's report said that the statewide tip line had received 250 calls regarding suicide attempts — but said that number understated the prevalence of the issue, since the report "does not consider data from other crisis-line resources so we know that the threat of suicide and self-harm numbers are much higher."

In Oregon, individuals have at least four other suicide hotlines or text lines to turn to in times of crisis including Lines for Life, Youth Line and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

Suicide, the report stated, was a greater concern for LGBTQ youth. One in four said they attempted suicide in 2017, according to the Oregon Healthy Teen Survey.

"Increasing connections to families and peers is a primary driver in preventing youth suicide," the report stated. "Another is helping youth develop a sense of belonging."

Cultivating a sense of belonging is part of the Greater Albany Public Schools plan to combat bullying and promote school safety, said Superintendent Tim Mills.

"We are always looking and encouraging students to get involved in activities," he said.

He said the school has district-wide programs like CHAMPS — a nationally available program that focuses on positive behavior — in addition to age-specific programs like Sanford Harmony, a social-emotional program, in K-5 schools.

Mills said the district focuses on a two-pronged approach: teaching empathy and then providing supports in high school.

Safe to Learn Act

The Oregon Task Force on Safe Schools is scheduled to sunset on Dec. 31. However, it has asked legislators to give it the green light to continue its work and to establish and fund the Oregon Safe to Learn Act. A bill to do that, House Bill 2327, is pending in the Legislature; a work session was held on March 25.

The bill would establish a Statewide School Safety and Prevention System within the Oregon Department of Education to focus on three specific areas: bullying and harassment, youth suicide prevention and multidisciplinary safety assessment teams. The team would start with 15 specialists to train staff and provide technical assistance to all Oregon school districts.

“This will empower schools to implement evidenced-based, multi-tier practices and coordinate services with community partners to address potential safety concerns early and intervene before they become a crisis,” the report states.

The task force requested a biennial budget of \$3.87 million for the system.

House Bill 2327 aims to establish the Statewide School Safety and Prevention System. A work session for the bill was held on March 25.

Senate Bill 180 held its last work session on Feb. 13 and was referred to the Joint Committee on Student Success along with its companion measure, House Bill 2604.

If the bills were to become law, Mills said the Albany school district would work to take advantage of them. He said the district could use the grant funds to add services at the elementary level including counselors and behavioral specialists.

“It would allow us to fund things we don’t have the budget for,” he said. “The intent, I think, is good and we’d be willing to take advantage of it. Anything that helps in this area is something we want to follow very closely.”