



The Progress Report



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Bullying: Helping School Districts To Accept Greater Responsibility

That bullying obstructs learning, destabilizes victims and endangers young lives - and that roughly 1/3 of high school students are bullied - is known all too well by most parents. Less widely known: Connecticut's 2008 statute, "An Act Concerning School Learning Environment", required every school district to develop and implement both a bullying policy and a prevention strategy, that the State Dept. of Education (SDE) develop model policies and that school personnel be trained in bullying prevention. But in 2010 the SDE Commissioner testified that much remained to be done within many school districts to comply with the new law and ensure an emotionally safe climate for all children.

Finding What Works in Districts to Reduce Bullying

That's why Connecticut Appleseed has recruited and trained a team of more than 20 pro bono attorneys from Travelers Corporation to interview officials and teachers from a representative sample of at least 13 school districts. By interviewing school administrators, principals and teachers - as well as parents and youth - our team will accelerate district

compliance with the 2008 statute. By researching and analyzing the effectiveness of bullying policies and strategies that have been adopted, we will learn why some districts are succeeding while others are having difficulty following through.

Improving a child's sense of safety and personal well-being improves their ability to concentrate and learn. When schools fail to prevent bullying, the educational impacts are significant and negative. Targets of bullying - feeling isolated, lonely and depressed - often cannot focus on their studies because they are haunted by fear. Suicides, and attempted suicides, are all too frequently reported in the media.

Gaining School District Cooperation

Despite these stark facts, bullying is a highly sensitive subject in Connecticut's public schools. While many parents feel that more responsibility should rest with the schools to protect their children, school officials are often reluctant to assume responsibilities beyond their core educational role. As a result, gaining their cooperation to discuss how they manage bullying from a school bus ride in the morning through lunchtime and extracurricular activities in the

afternoon can be very challenging. However, because of the relationships Connecticut Appleseed developed through our "Keep Kids in School" project, we were able to secure the necessary cooperation from 13 districts for this new project.

Sharing our Findings in Late 2011

The Governor's Prevention Partnership, which is dedicated to prevention issues affecting youth, is partnering with Connecticut Appleseed to draft the research interviews and train 'Travelers' volunteer attorneys. In addition, Connecticut Appleseed Board member Michael D'Agostino, who chairs Hamden's Board of Education, will distribute our findings to both his peer Board chairs and the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents. As a result of the above, we anticipate an excellent response to our report from the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE), from state legislators, and from school officials at every level throughout the state.

Keep Kids in School

Connecticut is a leader in recognizing that some school discipline can be counterproductive. The more students are repeatedly disciplined out of school for violations like insubordination and truancy, the more likely they are to remain out of school and get into trouble with the law. Shifting emphasis from out-of-school suspension/expulsion toward in-school suspension for the vast majority of disciplinary infractions is a logical strategy to reduce what has been termed "the school to prison pipeline."

Since July 1, 2010 Connecticut's public schools have been required to discipline students for typical acts of child or adolescent misbehavior (e.g., insubordination and truancy) only with in-school suspension. In advance of that deadline, Connecticut Appleseed devised an 18-month study that highlights successful "best practice" disciplinary

interventions and cost-effective in-school suspension techniques that could be brought to scale across the state's school districts.

Titled "Keep Kids in School: Improving School Discipline", our final report relies on dozens of interviews with Superintendents, Principals and Teachers within nine diverse school districts as well as 2009-10 data from the Connecticut Department of Education on a broader sample of nineteen districts. Views of youth and parents on school discipline are also contained in the final report, which is posted at www.ctappleseed.org under "What's New".

Out-of School Suspensions Declined in Advance of Deadline

Connecticut Appleseed enlisted a team of pro bono (Continued on Page 2)

Mission Statement

Our Mission is to develop solutions for the causes, rather than the symptoms, of our state's social problems. We will deploy volunteer lawyers and other professionals to achieve systemic changes through legal and legislative advocacy, negotiation, education and other initiatives.



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Keep Kids in School (Continued)

attorneys to research discipline practices in nine diverse school districts. Interviews by our team found that a highly structured in-school suspension environment can succeed better than traditional discipline at deterring misbehavior. When certified teachers and behavioral specialists rotate into in-school suspension throughout the day to oversee regular coursework, maintain the "normal" academic pace and preclude socializing, the resulting discomfort can motivate behavioral change among students.

Our team also found that, even before the law took effect, many school districts had already begun moving from dependence on out-of-school suspensions toward more structured in-school suspensions. Over a 3-year period culminating in 2009-2010, out-of-school suspension rates decreased in 18 of 19 observed districts, while in-school suspension rates increased at all 19 over the same period.

Much Work Still Remains to Improve School Discipline

On the bright side, "Keep Kids in School" identifies a number of successful forms of discipline that

seem less likely to prompt out-of-school suspension's negative outcomes. Seven of the nineteen districts used Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, which rely on positive reinforcement and clear communication of behavioral expectations along with systemic supports for all students. Much more troubling, though, was this persistent fact: Black students are roughly four times as likely, and Hispanic students were about twice as likely, to be expelled or receive an out-of-school suspension than white students.

Through Michael D'Agostino, an Appleseed Board member and chair of the Hamden Board of Education, we are working now to schedule panel discussions on school discipline with both the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education and the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents. Connecticut Appleseed has also applied for a grant to print sufficient copies of our report for every school board member, administrator and principal in the state.

Pro Bonos Helping Hartford's Homeless

With the exception of two summer months, "Hartford HELP" has provided free legal assistance each week to homeless individuals at two Hartford shelters since October, 2009. Early each Tuesday morning, teams of volunteer lawyers and law students help individuals at either the Mercy Shelter on Main Street or the House of Bread on Chestnut Street. Most requests for help relate to obtain missing identification documents, applications for social security disability, clearing up minor criminal matters that prevent a person from getting housing or applying for a job, or housing issues such as landlord/tenant, Section 8, liens/evictions and shelter placement. Another dozen or so issues are raised less frequently.

To date, HELP attorneys have assisted well over 200 people on a single consultation, advice only and/or limited representation basis, and occasionally provide referrals when more intensive legal work is needed. Typically, they address issues that are the small, finite, more readily fixable causes of homelessness. HELP clinics currently serve an average of 20 individuals each month, or roughly 5 per clinic.

But each month varies widely in terms of both participating attorneys and the number of clients assisted. In April of 2010, 9 attorneys and 2 paralegals from the Brown Rudnick law firm served 37 clients, while in a more typical month, 4 volunteer attorneys might serve half as many individuals. With volunteers attorneys presently lined up through June, we expect to be able to conduct Hartford HELP

through 2011.

Word of Mouth Builds Steadily

Hartford HELP started a little slowly, but the number of people seeking legal help each week trended steadily upward in 2010 and 2011. Connecticut Appleseed's own HELP learning curve is quite a bit steeper: we quickly learned that we had to actively engage the shelter staff's interest to inform and excite them about what lawyers could accomplish. In addition to recruiting local attorneys, Connecticut Appleseed coordinates their training, communicates with shelter management and gathers reports on the types of assistance our volunteers offer.

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Don Liu, Senior Vice President, General Counsel and Secretary for the Xerox Corporation accepts Connecticut Appleseed's Good Apple Award on March 8, 2011.



Measuring Equity Within School Districts

The national Appleseed organization's February release of "The Same Starting Line, How School Boards Can Erase the Opportunity Gap Between Poor and Middle-Class Children" was cause for celebration in Hamden's public schools. Connecticut Appleseed had looked closely at Hamden during 2010 in a comparative 5-state study on how school districts allocate their resources to provide opportunities to both poor and middle-class children. Our finding - that Hamden can be proud of its commitment to fairness - was featured in Appleseed's new report.

Policies and priorities of school boards can make a big difference in the distribution of academic success within each district. The study looked at resources such as qualified teachers, building upgrades, curriculum and funding to compare how students in schools from relatively poorer and middle-class neighborhoods are being treated. Hamden Board of Education Chairman Michael D'Agostino sits on Connecticut Appleseed's Board of Directors and volunteered the town be a part of the study.

A Diverse Town Committed to Fairness

In Hamden schools, students are 47 percent white, 33 percent black, 13 percent Hispanic and just over 6 percent Asian. The district's eight elementary schools include five which serve high-poverty neighborhoods and three which serve middle-class neighborhoods. The study included questions like "Are veteran teachers typically found at the wealthier neighborhood schools?" While about 35% of children in Hamden schools receive free or reduced-price lunch, the district makes a deliberate effort to be equitable. Superintendent Fran Rabinowitz's "All Means All" vision for the district puts equity squarely on the table. In a district as diverse as Hamden, "All Means All" is implicitly redistributive in terms of resources.

Under Fran's leadership, Hamden changed its method for choosing students for the elementary talented and gifted program to ensure a more balanced distribution that included participation in each of the eight elementary schools. The superintendent also moved elementary English

language learners back to their respective neighborhood schools, rather than perpetuating their pre-existing concentration at a single elementary school.

But How Would One Measure Intra-District Equity?

With support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, national Appleseed's report served as the basis for development of a "resource allocation measurement tool" that can be used by any district to measure basic fairness. Connecticut Appleseed will be participating in a subsequent Mott grant to test the utility of that measurement tool.

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Pro Bonos Helping Hartford's Homeless

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Gauging the Impact

It's too early to assess the degree to which HELP can reduce the Hartford's homeless population. With substantial background issues, evaluating cause and effect is difficult. To date, reports by our volunteer lawyers list referrals and benefit applications submitted rather than outcomes. But this anecdotal email is encouraging:

"I just want to say thank you on behalf of our clients and the staff at Mercy Shelter to you and the rest of the volunteer lawyers that come here to assist our clients. Today I was notified by our Homeless Outreach Case Manager Ghazi that after 10 grueling months of working with the attorneys and Mr. Ghazi, one of our clients was finally granted a pardon from the State of CT for his past criminal convictions. We are all ecstatic that our client can move on with his life. . . ."

