

June 16, 2000

Dear: Students, Parents, Teachers, Activity Advisors, Coaches, School Administrators
and Board of Education Members

This Call To Action letter is about the need to take strong action to *improve the school climate* in all of our schools. Each one of us has a role to play in improving the learning environment for all students in Connecticut and to help students understand their duty to others.

The Goal

"To contribute to the vitality of modern society, students must understand the necessity of moral, ethical and legal conduct, and strive to balance individual rights with the common good. Responsibility and integrity, citizenship and sense of community are the foundations for constructive and productive participation in a democratic society." This language, taken from Connecticut's Common Core of Learning, is central to our belief that we, as educators, are charged not only with providing sound education in multiple content areas, but also with helping students to develop positive character traits.

The Concern

Many schools within Connecticut are currently implementing effective character education and violence prevention programs and activities. Unfortunately, we continue to hear about incidents in schools where students at young ages are teasing, taunting or bullying one another. We know that early intervention with students exhibiting these behaviors can prevent future problems related to discipline, youth violence and attitudes that often result in criminal activity in later years. Inappropriate behaviors in older students include "initiation rites" and "hazing". A commonly used definition for initiation rites or hazing includes any activity that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers a person's physical or emotional health for the purpose of initiation or membership in or affiliation with any organization, regardless of the person's willingness to participate. Whatever the name or the rationale, the ultimate outcomes are harmful to our students.

The Solutions

If we are to create the safest learning environment for all young people within our state, we all have a role to play. Parents (and guardians) are a child's first and most important teachers. Teaching respect and responsibility to their child(ren) is vitally important, not only to developing a strong family unit, but also for contributing to a safe learning environment. Schools cannot do this alone. Family and parental involvement is crucial in developing a child's sense of personal responsibility to others.

All members of the school community also must identify acts of teasing, bullying and harassment and take immediate action to intervene in those situations we know to be detrimental to students and the learning environment. Each adult in a school must model the positive behaviors that we hope to instill in our students. We must send a clear and consistent message to young people that everyone has a duty to behave responsibly and respectfully toward others. These expectations are the foundations of a civilized society.

We hope, therefore, that school staff members will engage in conversations concerning these important issues and supervise areas of the school in which these behaviors often occur – in classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, playgrounds and locker rooms. And we know that involving students in the discussions about and the elimination of these behaviors is one of our most powerful sources for change. We must help adolescents understand and feel the hurt they inflict on others by joking and playing to the crowd. "It's not funny – when it hurts someone."

In addition, elementary school students should be regularly reading, writing and speaking about the aspects of good character. Middle school and high school students should be both role models for younger students and service providers to their communities. The most important step we can take is to provide these positive developmental experiences. Administering consequences for inappropriate behaviors with consistency and fairness is absolutely necessary, but not a sufficient strategy alone to achieve our goal.

A young person's interactions with others are very much driven by feelings of self-worth. School can influence a student's positive self-worth most by providing successful experiences and a caring relationship with an adult. Students who enjoy school, develop strong academic skills and know at least one adult who cares about them are far less likely to harm others.

If we focus on a message of responsibility, respect and kindness to others, we will not only create a safe learning environment for all students, but we will also make a significant contribution toward raising a generation of young people incapable of harming others or themselves.

Next Steps

The undersigned organizations commit to directly address school climate issues during the 2000-2001 year and expect that local school boards, schools, statewide organizations and student leadership groups, as appropriate, will develop the official policies, procedures and programs that will implement the spirit of this letter. Student involvement in these processes is crucial to the success of this initiative. We urge everyone to take action and to state clearly that helping others is valued and that harming others will not be tolerated.

Leadership on this issue falls to everyone who reads this letter. We have every reason to be optimistic about the ability of Connecticut's education community to address this issue.

If your district, school or school community has successfully implemented a policy, practice or program that you would like to share with other communities within the state, please submit a brief description of the initiative to Nancy Pugliese, State Department of Education, PO Box 2219-Room 227, Hartford, CT 06145-2219 and we will include it on the State Department of Education's website.

For further information and resources, please see the State Department of Education's website on or about September 1, 2000 at <http://www.state.ct.us/sde>. Throughout the summer months material will be posted as it becomes available.

Sincerely,

Theodore S. Sergi
Commissioner of Education

On behalf of:

Connecticut State Board and Department
of Education
Connecticut Association of Public
School Superintendents
Connecticut Association of Schools
Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference
Connecticut High School Coaches Association
Connecticut Association of Athletic Directors
Connecticut Association of Boards of Education
Connecticut Federation of Educational and
Professional Employees
Connecticut Federation of School
Administrators
Parent-Teacher Association of Connecticut
Connecticut Education Association