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School face tricky task of combating bullying

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As communities start to recognize that bullying is a problem that needs to be addressed, one question must be asked: Have we done enough to prevent it?

Many point to schools as being on the front line of preventing bullying. But as any teacher knows, sometimes that is not so easy.

“People have a lot of sympathy for educators today who don’t have an easy job to deal with bullies,” said Hank Nuwer, a journalist and national hazing expert. “A lot of it is underground. You can’t be with a student 24 hours a day. It isn’t like someone is going to bully in front of a teacher or administrator. It’s more of a hidden, call it sneaky, type of behavior.”

In a joint survey by the Regional Office of Education and the Northwest Herald, McHenry County educators who responded said that oftentimes parents and children do not have a clear definition of what bullying is, and more importantly, what bullying is not.

“What is one student’s harmless kidding or teasing, to the person who is getting teased may not be so benign,” Nuwer said.

Those who responded to the survey said a child’s and parent’s understanding of bullying may differ from a school’s written policies.

“I feel parents are quick to jump to the term ‘bullying’ after one incident,” one respondent wrote. “Bullying is something that happens repeatedly over time; a one-time offense should be treated as an isolated incident until it happens again.”

Another respondent said: “There is definite bullying going on in schools. However, I have students reporting anything that resembles conflict as bullying. [Eighty percent] of what is reported would not be considered bullying by its definition.”

The survey answers were anonymous.

The state’s Bullying Prevention Task Force tried to define bullying. When state legislators

expanded the state's bullying policies in 2010, lawmakers also approved creating the task force.

Peggy Thurow, principal of District 300's Algonquin Middle School, was part of the task force and charged with exploring the causes and consequences of bullying, and identifying tools and a framework to implement bullying prevention efforts in schools.

In its recommendations, the task force urged educators to engage the entire school community – parents, teachers, staff and students – in bullying prevention, and called for a unified approach.

“I think when you have a system that identifies needs and what needs look like, you are better able to offer a solution,” Thurow said.