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## Stop bullying before another child is hurt

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Vermont schools had a serious wake-up call about bullying three years ago this month when a young boy from Essex Junction took his own life after being the target of abuse.

In their search for answers in this unthinkable tragedy, Ryan Halligan's parents determined that depression, made worse by bullying, pushed their 13-year-old son to commit suicide.

The Halligan family turned their grief into action to help others. They were instrumental in the Legislature's passing of anti-bullying and suicide-prevention laws. Ryan's father, John, began speaking to Vermont school groups about bullying, and his powerful message has had a remarkable effect on his young audiences.

The work cannot stop in schools across Vermont. Despite growing awareness about bullying, parents and teachers continue to spot trouble in the hallways, on the buses, at recess and from home computers.

During this week, which has been named National Bullying Prevention Awareness Week, children and adults are being encouraged to learn more about bullying through such organizations as the national PACER (Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights) Center and the Vermont Parent Information Center, a Williston advocacy group for people with disabilities.

The PACER Web site, [www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org](http://www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org), gives concrete and practical advice to parents, teachers -- and especially to the children who are being bullied and the ones who are doing the bullying. It should be required reading.

Schools also need to take responsibility for creating a safe and welcoming environment for all children. Every school in Vermont must incorporate the requirements of Act 117, the anti-bullying law of 2004, into their school discipline plans. The rules need to be followed and enforced.

John Halligan has urged parents to monitor their schools' progress on this issue. A quick way to do that, he says, is to do a word search for "bully" in the handbook section of the schools' Web sites. If the word does not appear, Halligan says, the schools are failing in their duty.

The Vermont Department of Education offers teachers support in dealing with bullying and behavioral problems through its annual BEST (Building Effective Supports for Teaching) initiative during a weeklong training program. All teachers should take advantage of this program, which is offered every June.

The department has also helped 15 Vermont schools adopt the Olweus bullying prevention program, named after professor Dan Olweus, whose strict anti-bullying formula caught on in the United States after it was successful in Norway.

The Olweus program makes sense.

At school: Everyone becomes involved -- students, teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and others. Students take a leadership role in setting the standard of behavior. Schoolwide rules are put in place: "We do not bully others. We will help others who are bullied. We will tell an adult in school and an adult at home about bullying," according to Richard Boltax, one of the Vermont Education Department's Olweus trainers.

In the classroom: Every teacher agrees to do a lesson on bullying once a week, through reading, role-playing,

social skills and other avenues.

Individual response: An adult who sees bullying happen must jump into action and follow a school protocol that includes intervening as well as working with bystanders to ensure they do the right thing.

In the community: Bullying is not limited to schools. It can happen on the Internet from a home computer. Schools should intervene even when the bullying occurs off hours, Boltax said.

At their best, schools are places of innovation and ideas, full of energy and enthusiasm. Challenge your school, the teachers, students and administration to come up with creative and effective ways to deal with bullying -- and prevent one more child from being hurt.

SEEK HELP

This is National Bullying Prevention Awareness Week. Teachers, parents and children seeking help and advice about bullying will find a valuable resource in the nonprofit Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER Center). Go to [www.pacerkidsagainstbullying.org](http://www.pacerkidsagainstbullying.org).

To learn more about Ryan Halligan's story, go to [www.ryanpatrickhalligan.com](http://www.ryanpatrickhalligan.com).

To contact the Vermont Parent Information Center, call (802) 876-5315.