



Evidence for the Education and Skills Select Committee Inquiry into Bullying

October 2006

Introduction

- 1 □ The Advisory Centre for Education (ACE) is an independent national charity working to empower parents and carers, encourage changes in education law and policy and promote good practice in the education system for the benefit of all children, young people and families. Our vision is of a fair education system for all, which encourages parents to engage with the education system for the benefit of their children. We have a particular commitment to reach out to the marginalised and those who find themselves excluded from the system.
- 2 □ In 2005, ACE took more than 7,000 calls from parents about problems with schools. Over 11 per cent of those calls concerned bullying. On the line dedicated to referrals from Parentline Plus, calls about bullying made up nearly a third of calls.
- 3 □ ACE has evidence from such calls that if schools do not act quickly and effectively to stamp out bullying it can spiral out of control and become a triple blow for families:
 - **Strike 1** – The child suffers bullying at school.
 - **Strike 2** – The parent feels the school is not doing enough and their child is in danger so keeps their child at home. The child misses out on their education.
 - **Strike 3** – The school and the local authority (LA) continue to leave the bullying untackled and instead threaten the parent with prosecution. The family faces more stress and the child falls further behind in their schooling.
- 4 □ And there is a fourth effect: that of the worm turning, where a child retaliates against a bully and is excluded. In over 5 per cent of ACE's exclusion calls parents said that the reason for the exclusion was a response to bullying.
- 5 □ Many schools simply do not respond quickly or effectively enough to put a stop to bullying. This puts massive pressure onto entire families and can lead to huge problems. But in ACE's experience, **this issue is the most difficult for parents to get an effective response from schools.**
- 6 □ Parents have three main requirements:
 - (i) They want schools to have effective strategies in place to minimise bullying and to deal effectively with it when it occurs.
 - (ii) They want their concerns to be responded to by the school.

(iii) They want somewhere to go other than the school when the school has failed to deal with bullying, and for that source of help to be able to intervene with the school on their child's behalf to resolve the problem.

- 7 ACE notes Ofsted's findings in its 2004 report on bullying in secondary schools that schools should actively involve pupils and parents in combating bullying, and that 'effective liaison with parents is vital to tackle bullying successfully' (para. 61).
- 8 That report reveals that over two-fifths of the schools studied did not take comprehensive enough action to ensure that bullying did not re-occur. Many also had difficulties communicating with parents and ensuring that parents knew that their concerns were taken seriously.
- 9 We attach a set of recent case histories from our advice lines to illustrate the failures we have encountered.

Recommendations

- 10 The effects on children and young people, and their families, can be extremely destructive, even fatal, and can leave survivors with long-term damage to their confidence and to their attainment. ACE therefore believes that parents need an effective and speedy remedy when they have exhausted the complaints procedures of the school and local authority to no avail. We recommend:
 - a fresh look at what can be done to provide that speedy and effective remedy;
 - anti-bullying policies to be made mandatory on schools, with inspection checking on how 'live' those policies are, and use of interviews etc. specifically targeted at the experiences of individual pupils who may otherwise be overlooked in gross performance data;
 - those policies to make explicit links with special needs and anti-racism policies, disability equality schemes, and to contain anti-homophobic bullying policies;
 - the formation of an agency in each LA area to which parents and children can turn, and which can offer mediation between parent, child and the school and advise the school on training and behavioural issues.
 - LAs, in their role as champions of children and parents as envisaged by *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*, being empowered to direct schools to draw up effective anti-bullying policies and strategies where parents' complaints have shown these to be missing or ineffective.

Barriers to schools preventing or dealing with bullying

Accountability is not clear or strong enough

- 11 The formal requirements on schools to act to tackle bullying are relatively weak when compared with their accountability on truancy and exclusions, where data collection makes visible problems to governing bodies and LAs.
- 12 Small numbers of complaints may conceal acceptance of a culture of constant bullying as normal. As with looked after children, the outcomes for bullied children need to be subject to individual attention. High ratings for schools and LAs may conceal the problem. The comparatively small numbers of bullied children mean they can be invisible in the management information used by local authorities and in school performance tables.

Schools persist in lacking policies, training and awareness

- 13 ACE remains surprised by the number of calls we have that indicate the school has no anti-bullying policy, let alone one that is drawn up with pupils and reviewed each year to ensure that it is agreed by the school community as a live document informing everyone's behaviour.
- 14 ACE supports the 'core belief' of the Practitioners' Group on School Behaviour and Discipline (the Steer Committee) that
- Respect has to be given in order to be received. Parents and carers, pupils and teachers all need to operate in a culture of mutual regard.
- 15 Such a culture needs to prevail in the staff room and senior management team as well as between staff and pupils, pupil and pupil, and school and parents. Bullying, including racist¹ and homophobic bullying, is known to occur among staff as well as among pupils. Indeed, one web site claims that teachers, lecturers and employees in education are the single largest group of callers to the UK National Workplace Bullying Helpline².
- 16 ACE is also aware of the ineffectiveness of harsh punishments used instead of preventive measures, and that some bullies are in need of as much support as the pupils they victimise. Complex problems such as these call for thoughtful long-term solutions rather than firing from the hip.
- 17 ACE is extremely concerned by the plight of children in schools that are in difficulties, with demoralised staff and little capacity to protect victims.

Resistance to acknowledging the problem

- 18 Our cases below show how resistant schools can be to responding to parents' concerns, even where there is clear evidence from other professionals as well as from parent and child of how damaging the bullying is. This is why we believe parents need speedy and effective intervention on the child's behalf. At the moment where parents have tried everything to no avail all we can do is advise seeking medical support for keeping the child at home so that prosecution for non-attendance does not follow, and to seek an alternative school, which of course is no guarantee the problems will cease.

Bullying stories from callers

- 19 These are examples from a much greater number of calls, picked to exemplify how powerless parents are when faced with tackling a school which will not take action on bullying.

CASE 1

The child was out of school for five months for mental illness caused by bullying. During this time the LEA offered her 2.5 hours tuition a week at centre for children with medical needs with the aim (LEA's) of reintegration back into the same school.

The school's governors then had a meeting and decided to ban the child from the school for health and safety reasons to protect her from the other pupils. The LEA was ineffective in challenging this unlawful and inappropriate use of

¹ 'Black teachers face bullying and racism, survey finds', *The Guardian*, 8 September 2006.

² <http://www.bullyonline.org/workbully/teachers.htm>, accessed 11 September 2006.

health and safety procedures, and the parent only achieved a multi-agency meeting with the school after complaining to the Secretary of State. At that point the school agreed to a reintegration plan, but then said that it would go ahead only if the parent agreed to withdraw her bullying complaint against the school. The LEA remained ineffectual, with the director of education writing to the parent to point out the child was in danger of permanent exclusion if she returned to the school.

CASE 2

A child aged four was very unhappy at school, telling her mother that she was being teased and isolated by her peers. She frequently came home crying and did not want to go to school. Her mother believed she needed help with play skills and peer relationships as she had a language impairment. She was not stated so depended on the school to put such a programme into place. She was receiving blocks of direct speech therapy from the local NHS, but the school did not seem to be getting advice from the therapist.

The mother raised her concerns with the child's teacher, who responded a week later by saying that she had investigated and the child was 'obsessing' about these issues. The teacher did not suggest how the child, who was in her view obsessive and unhappy, might be helped.

The child was then injured in the playground to the extent of needing stitches. The head told the mother that this was not bullying because children of that age did not bully.

Throughout the SENCo was not informed or aware of these difficulties.

CASE 3

A 13-year-old with severe asthma had been bullied for two years. The school's response to the parent's complaints was to informally and unlawfully exclude the child for health and safety reasons. The mother was frequently called to the school to take her daughter home, so frequently that she could not make any arrangements to be elsewhere. The school then told the parent that they could not guarantee the child's safety at break times and asked that she be kept home altogether. The mother kept her daughter home for two weeks.

The mother supplied some education while her daughter was off school but could not match what the child would have received at school.

After speaking to ACE, the parent involved the police who attended a meeting with the bully and staff at the school. According to the parent, things got sorted because the bully was faced with the threat of prosecution. She now talks to the girl who had been doing it, who says, 'Because I wasn't stopped I just carried on.'

The daughter is now happy to go to school, but still suffers from anxiety and lacks confidence. Her mother is concerned that her education suffered during the prolonged interference from the bullying, and that she has had no compensatory education now it has stopped.

CASE 4

A Year 7 boy had been out of school for three months because his parents did not believe he was safe at school after he was physically assaulted as the culmination of a series of bullying events. Although the parents were not being pursued over the child's absence, nothing was being done by the school or local

authority to provide education otherwise than at school, to draw up a plan for safe reintegration to the same school, or to ensure transfer to a school which could ensure his health and safety. The child had a statement of special needs.

CASE 5

Another Year 7 boy was in hospital when his mother called ACE, recovering from an operation after a physical assault. The mother had made four formal complaints over repeated assaults by fellow pupils on the school bus in the two terms the child had attended the school. The child was one of only a very few Black African pupils in the school, and the only one on the bus. The school, the mother said, was 'not helpful', and refused to follow up her suggestion that racism might be a factor.

CASE 6

A Year 8 boy had been frequently assaulted, and had refused to attend school for the previous six weeks because he was afraid. He had special needs but no statement. His mother was having to leave her work to persuade him to attend school, but did not like forcing him to do so. She was doing this because of threats to prosecute her.

CASE 7

A Year 9 boy with Asperger's syndrome had been excluded for seven days for physical assault against another pupil. He was receiving no support in the school, and the parent believed that his subject teachers were not aware that he was on the autistic spectrum. The pupil said that he had hit the other pupil because of persistent teasing. His mother maintained that the other children knew that his response would be extreme because of his anxiety and were out to provoke him.

CASE 8

A Year 9 boy was refusing to attend school because he was being bullied. He had special needs, and some professionals believed he was autistic, but he had not had a diagnosis. The local authority's education welfare officer and social services called a multi-agency conference over his non-attendance at which papers were tabled which alleged the mother was agoraphobic (she had no such condition) and suggested that if she did not agree to their plan for the child he would be considered for fostering.

CASE 9

A Year 7 girl was repeatedly assaulted. The school had been classified as failing by Ofsted, and the parent blamed that for the staff's inaction on the bullying. The parent had asked repeatedly for the school's anti-bullying policy, but only obtained it after two months of asking. The school left it to the parent to contact the school after incidents which caused injuries on the school's premises. The police were now involved in an investigation over the most recent injury. Bullying and assaults were a known general problem at the school.

CASE 10

In spite of the GP's advice to stay home after frequent extreme attacks (one of which resulted in a broken arm), a Year 10 boy was insisting on attending

school because he was anxious about his GCSEs. When the mother complained to the local authority that the community school was not dealing with the problem, the LEA suggested alternative schools, but all were unacceptable to the pupil and his parents because they were lower on the league tables than his current school. Instead of tackling the aggressors, the school had offered the pupil a pastoral support plan and a restorative justice counsellor.

CASE 11

A Year 10 boy had been subjected to persistent bullying after joining the school in Year 9.

The school failed to take action, and only after the police arrested the perpetrators of the most recent attack did the school admit that the victim was being subjected to unprovoked assaults. His coursework had also been stolen. The parent wanted a safer school in spite of the consequences of changing schools during GCSEs because she believed his physical and mental health was in danger as well as his GCSE chances, but the LEA was not helping her. Two other local schools had informally refused places for apparently unlawful reasons. The parent had taken out a formal complaint against his current school.

CASE 12

A teenage girl who was one of only a small number of black or mixed race children in a rural school was becoming depressed by constant racial taunts. Her mother, also black, had been to the same school herself and suffered similar treatment. The school felt because the girl was popular and doing well in school that the bullying was not serious and only tackled it in a half-hearted way. The family were considering moving back to London where 'you are looked at as a person rather than for your colour'.

CASE 13

A Year 8 boy who was plump was being physically and verbally attacked by other pupils. During one such attack, he escaped the bullies and was running away in panic when a teacher put out an arm to stop him. He 'ran through' the teacher's arm, and was then excluded for a week for that. His mother drew the school's attention to the bullying, including evidence of abuse on a web site and mobile phone messages. The parent says the school has ignored this and the child remained excluded.

CASE 14

A Year 9 girl who was severely asthmatic experienced mental and physical bullying from the same pupils (who transferred with her from primary school) for four years. She then had a mental health breakdown. On her return the school isolated her and appointed a mentor to work with her, but did not deal with the general problem among the other pupils. The mother decided to keep her at home, supported by her GP and clinical psychologist, who described the impact of the bullying as a 'lasting effect on her self-confidence and self-esteem'. But the school's reaction was to treat her absence as unauthorised, involving the education welfare officer to pursue the parent for her child's non-attendance.

The parent had attempted to persuade the school to deal with the bullying by every means at her disposal, writing to the head, governors, LEA, and involving the police.