Bullying prevention plan being studied

By Alita Savory

BUCKLAND—When the state asked every school district to teach social skills to prevent bullying, the Mohawk Trail Regional School District posted surveys online. More than 50 percent of the community participated and planning began.

Ruth Manna, director of curriculum and assessments, says, "It's a bully prevention and intervention plan. It has to include how you're going to talk with all the parents, teachers and staff and teaching kids about bullying and what it is and how to report it. It's really about educating the whole community."

The plan includes training for teachers well as for bus drivers, cafeteria workers and everyone else involved in the school.

The survey was included as part of the plan, which is currently being read by the School Committee. Afterward, there will be a time for "open comment" when the public can offer input. The plan will receive revisions, if any are necessary, and then it will be submitted to the state by Dec. 31. When the state gives the okay, it will be time to implement the plan.

School officials note that there will soon be an "anonymous bully report form" available on the homepage of the District Web site as well as on the homepage of every school Web site, and at public libraries. These will need to be mailed to the office. There will also be non-anonymous report forms available in every school's main office, guidance office and nurse's office.

"We have to provide special support for vulnerable students," Manna said, noting such students include those with social disabilities, minority groups and lesbian and gay students.

Among elementary students, "time will be set aside" for social skills, says Manna. Kindergarteners through sixth-graders already participate in a social skills program called "second step."

"Second step teaches pro-social values, self-control, anger management and empathy," Manna says. "We're putting together a more comprehensive approach."

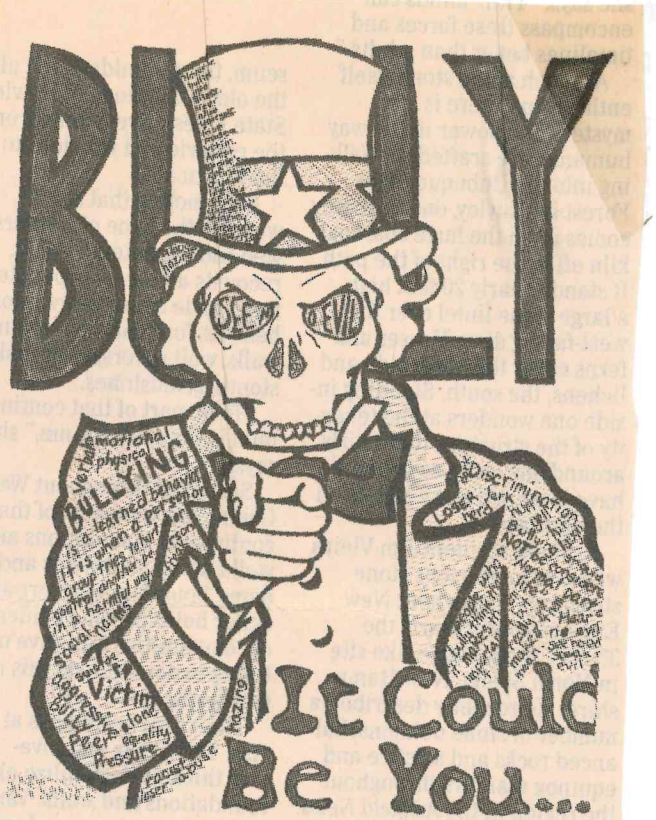
At the third-grade level, students will be taught "steps to respect," which teach pro-social values and specific training about bullying.

"We're still exploring programs for grades seven and up," Manna says.

There are currently three programs under review. One, Cyber-Smarts, is a program through the District Attorney's office in which high school students are trained to serve as mentors for elementary school students.

A second option, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, was created in the 1980s. Manna says that right now it is designed for students in grades 3-10 and a high school program is being developed.

The third option is a program through the Mass. Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University, which offers services (such as conferences and workshops) in the area of bullying and how to prevent it. The Mohawk District is looking into this program because it has trainers that may be willing to work with high school students.



Nora Rauch, who was graduated in 2009, designed this poster that lines the walls of a Mohawk Trail Regional School hallway reminding students that bullying could be anyone's problem.