Restorative Justice comes to Teton High

Editor's Note: The wrestlers involved in the hazing incident at the high school have been named Student 1, Student 2 and Student 3 to protect their identities.

This week is Anti-bullying Awareness Week in Teton School District 401. Every school in the district is addressing the topic of bullying through various assemblies and activities.

New school district policy is the driving force behind the week's activities, said Superintendent Monte Woolstenhulme.

According to the policy, one week out of each school year will be dedicated to:

Recognize that bullying is a serious issue that has damaging effects for our society such as the tragic school shootings, which occurred on April 20, 1999 in Littleton, Colo. at Columbine High School.

Recognize that bullying is not an acceptable part of how we should treat each other.

Teach students and staff the District's policy on bullying and the consequences.

Help students and staff recognize that bullying behaviors have different forms.

Recognize the tremendous leadership potential of our youth.

Celebrate/recognize those who are making a difference in addressing bullying.

Prepare for further work that needs to be done in the future.

"The Teton School District is committed to providing a positive and productive learning and working environment. Hazing, harassment, intimidation, menacing or bullying by students, staff or third parties is strictly prohibited and will not be tolerated in the district," the policy reads. "It is important that the students and parents have an awareness about the serious issues and the negative effects of bullying, including the long-term damage it can cause, which may include the increased risk of teenage suicide."
On Monday, nine Massachusetts teens were charged in the bullying of a teenage girl from Ireland who killed herself after enduring months of torment by classmates in person and online, according to the Associated Press.

Closer to home, three Teton High School wrestlers were each charged with two counts of battery for a hazing incident that occurred in December, causing a stir among Valley residents.

Woolstenhulme said he hopes the district's efforts of raising awareness about the negative impacts of bullying will be seen as proactive and will help build more positive relationships within the schools.

Restorative Justice

The three Teton High School students charged in the alleged hazing incident that took place in December may have their charges dropped as the result of a restorative justice program, a program the school board hopes to make part of its new policy.

"We are dropping the charges because my system wouldn't get any farther with these kids," said Prosecuting Attorney Kathy Spitzer. Spitzer said the three wrestlers have eight months to complete the eight action items that are on the restorative justice agreement. If they complete the items the charges are dropped. If they fail to complete the items, the court process will move forward.

Restorative justice brings together victims, offenders and members of the community that have been impacted by a crime and has them work cooperatively to repair the harm caused by the criminal behavior.

Martha Doyle, a Valley resident certified in restorative justice practices and holding a master's in juvenile justice, said the goal of the process is to create accountability, to repair the harm done to victims and to help keep the community safe. Doyle said each person involved in a crime - from victims to witnesses to offenders - comes to the table with a story. The process helps put those stories out there for all parties to consider and looks at the impacts of the events that took place and focuses on what can be done to repair the harm caused by those events.

Spitzer said she believes the restorative justice program is a good solution for some offenders, so good that she is applying for a small grant to help kick start
the program for the prosecutor’s office. She said she is also glad the school district is seriously considering putting restorative practices in place.

"I would have deferred right to that [restorative justice] instead of bringing formal charges," Spitzer said.

The three students charged in the THS hazing incident said they feel like the process is a good one.

Student 1 is a senior at THS. Student 2, also a senior, hopes to wrestle in college and to get a degree in sports medicine while Student 3 isn't sure what he wants to do after graduation.

"I feel much better that we could sit down and see what other people were thinking. See how it affected others and not just me," said Student 3.

Student 1 said it was good to see the incident from different points of view. "It helps you realize what other people were thinking," he said.

"I didn't think we were going to all agree on something," said Student 2.

The final result of a restorative justice session is an agreement that is signed by everyone that participated. In the case for the three wrestlers there were eight action items they agreed to complete in order to help repair the harm their actions caused.

"It's to hold people accountable, it's the action stuff," said Doyle about the agreement phase. She said the items agreed to in the action plan are a way for the people who did harm to give a voice the victims of that harm.

Teton School District is planning on making restorative justice part of district policy, said Doug Petersen, school board president.

"The quicker we can get that program in place the better," Petersen said. The school board will discuss the restorative justice program at its April board meeting.

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