

The New Zealand Herald



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Bullying: Principals want action



Secondary principals want clear policy guidelines for dealing with bullying in schools. Photo / Getty Images

The head of secondary school principals has criticised the Government for not doing enough to help schools combat the growing problem of bullying.

Secondary Principals Association president Patrick Walsh has asked the Government to urgently draft a comprehensive bullying policy for schools, after being surprised to find it did not have one. The School Trustees Association did not appear to have such a policy either, he said.

He has contacted the Ministry of Education's chief researcher asking for policy work on bullying to start.

"It's part and parcel of this systemic issue that we've got around Tomorrow's Schools - the default position of the ministry is that schools are self-managing, so, work it out yourselves," Mr Walsh said.

"That's really inefficient, and it would mean that all 2500 schools all have to reinvent the wheel. And it seems to me, given the importance of this area for boards, principals, parents and the public generally, that that would be a piece of work where the ministry could demonstrate really good leadership."

Ministry group manager Brian Coffey said comprehensive work had been done on bullying, much of it in close consultation with the education sector including the principals' group.

Development of a self-review tool had been commissioned, which would provide school leaders with a process to look at policies, systems and practices that prevent bullying.

Mr Coffey said another initiative was the implementation of Positive Behaviour for Learning, a range of initiatives and approaches to address behavioural issues in schools.

But Mr Walsh said there was a heightened sensitivity and awareness of bullying in schools, and feedback from his members showed a strong demand for clear policy guidelines.

The case of Titirangi Rudolf Steiner School, first reported in the *Herald* this month, showed how important it was for schools to have clear and effective policy for dealing with bullying, he said.

The school agreed to pay \$9000 to the family of an 8-year-old student who was bullied, and admit it had failed her.

The girl's mother, Angel Garden, said she backed Mr Walsh's calls.

It was essential schools had processes in place and did not sideline parents who reported bullying, she said.

"If [the school] say they'll deal with it ... you sort of have to trust them to a certain extent, even though your child might be suffering as a result. And then you feel responsible - as a parent you always feel responsible."

A *Herald* campaign on bullying last year began with Chief Coroner Judge Neil MacLean backing proposals to target cyber-bullying



because of concerns it was helping to fuel New Zealand's high youth suicide rate.

Justice Minister Judith Collins later asked the Law Commission to bring forward recommendations on how to reduce the harm caused by cyber-bullies, and the Government is drafting legislation to make cyber-bullying a criminal offence.

The campaign also highlighted research showing New Zealand was falling behind Australian schools in developing anti-bullying policies.

**Correction: In an earlier version of this story we reported that the Titirangi Rudolf Steiner School had been ordered by The Human Rights Commission to pay \$9000 to the family of a bullying victim. In fact, the \$9000 was an agreed sum settled upon between the school and family.*

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