

Educators on board with Casey's anti-bullying bill

By Gary Weckselblatt Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, January 29, 2015 12:00 am

When it comes to education, Joyce Mundy can expound passionately on just about any topic. But when the conversation turns to bullying, her emotion rises to another level.

It was that way Tuesday when the Centennial School District superintendent learned that U.S. Sen. Bob Casey planned to introduce the Safe Schools Improvement Act this week. Casey, a Pennsylvania Democrat, put together the bipartisan legislation with Illinois Republican Sen. Mark Kirk.

“I am thrilled to see the SSIA being brought back to the forefront and receiving bipartisan support,” said Mundy, who has traveled to Washington each year to lobby for the legislation.

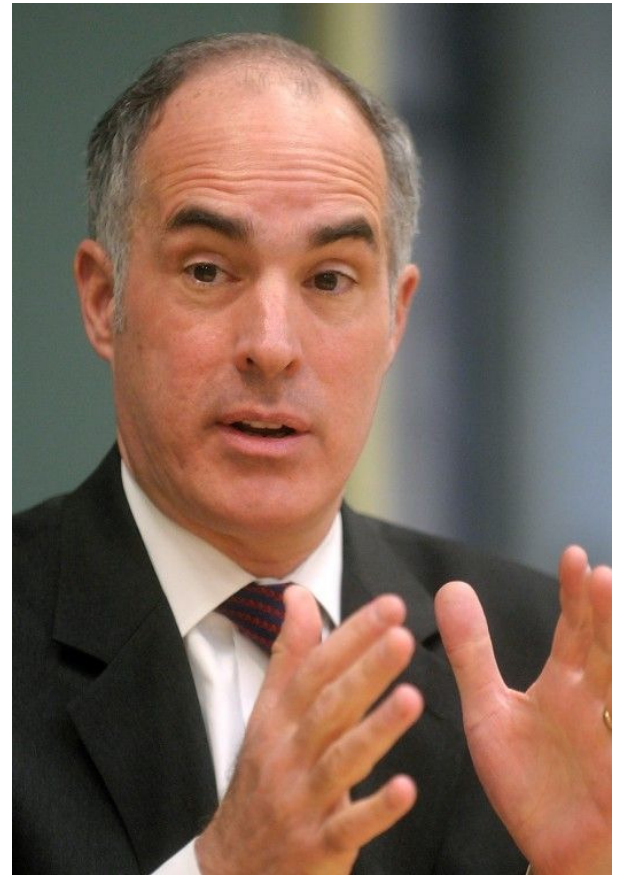
She contends it will help remedy the bullying problem because it requires schools to take more specific steps for prevention, education and responsiveness to reporting bullying and harassment both in school and online.

Casey’s measure requires school districts to specifically prohibit bullying and harassment, including conduct based on a student’s actual or perceived race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity or religion.

It also ensures that schools focus on effective prevention programs to better prevent and respond to incidents of bullying. Additionally, it requires that states report data on incidents of bullying and harassment to the U.S. Department of Education.

“Bullying is a challenge that impacts far too many children and families across the country,” Casey said.

He cited a 2009 Department of Education study that found bullying and harassment affects nearly one in every three American students between the ages of 12 and 18. Another study estimates that 160,000 students in the U.S. do not attend school each day because they fear being bullied.



Sen. Bob Casey during an Intelligencer and Bucks County Courier Times editorial board meeting in Doylestown on Monday morning.

Research shows that bullying and harassment have adverse long-term consequences, including decreased concentration at school, increased school absenteeism, damage to the victim's self-esteem, and increased social anxiety, he said.

Newer technologies can heighten the problem as the advent of text-messaging and social media provide the victim with no safety zone.

"Many children find they cannot escape the harassment when they go home at night," Casey said. "It follows them from the moment they wake until the moment they go to sleep."

Karin Kasdin, bully prevention resource center director at the Peace Center, called Casey's bill "great news." She said that while bullying has been a problem forever, its severity has grown because of social media.

"There's no panacea that prevents 100 percent of bullying in schools," she said. "Programs need to be put in place that promote climate change in schools. One speaker coming in is great, but it's not enough. It has to be an ongoing program."

And, she said, it should include the entire school community, including bus drivers, cafeteria and school aides.

In Centennial, for example, administrators are trained to handle bullying concerns and complaints through a comprehensive reporting and response system. The district is implementing programs in all grades to help students and adults to be connected in handling bullying behaviors and conflicts.

"We are doing restorative practices at our high schools, schoolwide positive behavioral support programs at our two middle schools and numerous programs at the elementary level," Mundy said.

"We have a program for middle school girls to build resiliency and assertive communication. Lastly, we formed a diversity and equity task force to help our students, staff and community recognize our differences as our strengths."

In Hatboro-Horsham, Keith Valley Middle School has created the K'NEX program, which focuses on best practices to prevent bullying and has had several anti-bullying assemblies.

"Each year Keith Valley K'NEX brings in a speaker with a dynamic message," said Andrew Osborne, a school counselor. "The message isn't so much anti-bullying as it is pro relationship — leadership, citizenship and community building. The more kids feel connected, the better they'll be with learning and achievement."

The Langhorne-based Peace Center, which has years of experience helping schools deal with conflict resolution, works with each of Bucks County's 13 districts.

Kasdin said while the Peace Center is dependent on receiving grants, a key issue for schools dealing with bullying going forward might be budgetary.

"Schools want to be proactive," she said. "The question might be whether or not they have the funds to bring in or hire a bully prevention specialist. I think, perhaps, legislation will make this necessary for

schools to put in their budgets.”