



## ISASA Statement on Bullying

The Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa (ISASA) would like to place on record that both the Association and its member schools condemn bullying in any form. The recent media coverage of alleged bullying in independent and public schools has prompted it to issue a public statement to this effect.

Bullying of any nature in public and independent schools is prohibited in the Schools Act (1996) and its subsequent amendments, and is a breach of learners' constitutional rights. Adults, and in particular parents and teachers, have a responsibility to report bullying if and when they become aware of it, not to condone it through silence. Children, like all people, are equal before the law and must be protected. Bullying is a criminal offence and can result in prosecution of the perpetrators.

It also contravenes ISASA's Requirement for Membership: an ISASA member school must "promote and nurture a commitment to a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights".

Moreover in its Code of Ethical Practice ISASA exhorts its members to.

- B.1.1. act honestly and fairly, with due respect for the rights of staff, learners, parents and members of the governing body; ...*
- B.1.4. exhibit moral leadership, and as such, promote the adoption and practice of a sound value system in the school;*
- B.1.5 encourage a learner-centred philosophy in order to develop*
  - each child to her/his full potential academically, emotionally, physically and spiritually,*
  - a community of learners who are self-disciplined and have a sound work ethic, and*
  - a code of conduct based on courtesy, mutual respect and acknowledgement of the rights of all groups in the school community.*

Any incidence of bullying is deplorable because it has such serious and far-reaching consequences for the victim, the aggressor, the families involved and the school.

### **Bullying in schools**

Unfortunately, despite school leaders' efforts to stop bullying, in all public and independent schools it can still occur, often beneath the radar screen. Bullying is a vexed problem for two main reasons:

- Young children who are victims of bullying tend not to bring these incidents to the attention of their parents and teachers for a number of reasons relating to poor self-

esteem and the desire for acceptance by the peer group. As a result, bullying is often only detected after it has been going on for a long time and has reached a very serious level;

- In dealing with incidents of bullying, the first priority is the protection of the victim. This can significantly complicate disciplinary procedures and so the process often takes much longer to thoroughly investigate and conclude.

### **Anti-bullying action in ISASA schools**

There is probably no issue that has exercised the minds of the ISASA community of schools more than bullying for many years. This is reflected in sessions devoted to it at our main conferences and articles in our publication, *Independent Education*. Schools have researched, discussed and initiated anti-bullying policies and programmes and ISASA has taken steps to both promote awareness of bullying in all its insidious forms and how to eradicate it. In the last two years, two prominent American educationists, Michael Thompson and Rachel Simmons, have been brought to South Africa by ISASA to conduct workshops and lectures on educating boys and girls respectively, with specific reference to bullying among other topics.

In the end, the only way that bullying can be effectively eradicated is by creating an enabling environment in the school community that makes it possible for victims to come forward without fear of reprisal and by taking appropriate disciplinary action against those found guilty of bullying. ISASA encourages its schools to strive towards establishing this type of school culture and, indeed, many of our schools have had much success in their endeavours.

ISASA has also made a number of resources on bullying available to its members on its website. They include:

- A pro-forma anti-bullying policy for schools
- Articles on international research on bullying

### **Recourse for parents**

It is important to note that not all independent schools are members of ISASA. ISASA is not an education department that owns and controls its schools, but a membership-based service organisation providing professional services to its member schools. Schools are independent, and enjoy the status of a private organisation, and therefore ISASA cannot interfere in their internal affairs.

Nonetheless there are procedures in ISASA for investigating serious allegations that might affect the school's membership in terms of ISASA's requirements.

*ISASA cannot take up an individual parent's cause* and will only consider the matter if it receives written, substantially supported allegations of practices that are in conflict with the standards of the Association, and then only as a basis for further inquiry.

In such circumstances ISASA requests its relevant Regional Director to conduct a confidential inquiry with the knowledge of, and in conference with those concerned. Depending on the outcome, ISASA will activate its internal disciplinary process that can result in either suspension or termination of membership.

**The advice ISASA gives to parents is as follows:**

If the school has a formal complaints procedure, the parents should begin by using these proper channels.

If parents are not satisfied with the way a school's management has dealt with the matter, they can refer a written complaint to the chairperson of the school's governing body.

If parents still feel that the school's response is unsatisfactory, then parents have recourse to **external avenues:**

- Parents can seek **legal** advice and action on the matter.
- Independent schools have to be registered with their **provincial education department**. If parents believe that complaint is of such a serious nature that the school should be investigated by the education department, they should send a written complaint to the department.
- Parents can lodge a complaint with the **Human Rights Commission**.

Where the child is deeply unhappy in a particular school for whatever reason, parents should consider removing the child from that school and finding another suitable one.

**22 July 2009**