

## EDITORIAL

# Bullying and more bullying

Reported incidents of bullying nearly doubled between April and September this year, reaching 144,054 cases, compared with 70,000 cases for the entire previous school year, according to the education ministry.

It might sound strange to say, but that increase may signal a certain step forward. The reasons for the huge increase in reported cases may have more to do with increased reporting, not necessarily more incidents.

The real number of incidents in the past will remain unknown, but was surely under-reported. Now, at least, the incidents are no longer as hidden as before.

The education ministry is finally doing its job of addressing this severe problem. School administrators, teachers and students are also finally taking the issue as seriously as it should be. That is the first step in the right direction. The second step is broader awareness and stepped-up action.

The reported cases for the half-year period included 278 extremely serious cases that endangered the lives and safety of students. That means nearly one student is being threatened at elementary, middle or high schools every day of the school year.

More bullying occurred at elementary schools, 88,000 cases compared with 43,000 at junior high schools and 13,000 at high schools. This suggests that even younger students are capable of bullying and less reluctant about reporting such incidents.

Awareness of bullying means identifying more specifically what bullying behavior is. Bullying is a way of acting, speaking or doing things that hurts another person, physically or psychologically. That definition covers a lot of territory, but more educators and students now know that bullying can include name-calling, punching or pushing, exclusion, extortion of money, or cyber-bullying. The intention of such behavior — to harm someone — has perhaps at last been clearly identified.

Bullying is also increasingly understood as a group activity. Bullying always involves witnesses and, almost always, occurs in secretive situations away from the eyes of teachers or parents. The solution is not to constantly monitor students, which would be a futile task, but rather to educate students about what bullying is and what they can do to stop it. Students who witness bullying are the only ones who can stop bullying right away.

There is also improved understanding of the mind-set behind bullying. Typically, bullying is fueled by high stress and occurs when students lack support networks from peers or adults. Those students who bully may appear confident, but are usually overwhelmed by intense feelings of inferiority and confusion. Bullying also occurs within a circle of bullying. Most bullies have been bullied themselves.

Bullying is also now understood as a conscious and deliberate act of contempt. Bullies are often quite savvy in their perception of the importance of disrespect as a way of harming sensitive peers. They tend to act correctly in the presence of adults.

Studies in Japan and abroad have found that adults are often surprised to learn that students who act appropriately in their presence are the very instigators of bullying when they are away from adults. Students who do the bullying deserve as much help as their targets and those witnessing the acts.

It seems unfortunate to add one more thing onto the already overloaded list of duties for teachers, but more direct and open teaching on this issue should continue to be integrated as a basic part of the school curriculum. Learning mutual respect and how to treat others is just as important as learning math, science or history, and arguably has more profound effects.

Teachers already suffer from overloaded schedules, but prioritizing bullying as an important teaching point is essential.

Perhaps one of the most surprising revelations coming out of the increased attention given to bullying is just how much students feel that they are alone. Students need to learn to trust teachers, administrators, friends and family so that they can speak up when they encounter incidents of bullying.

In the past, bullying was shrouded in silence, but the leap in reported incidents this year is an indication that such silence and isolation may be coming to an end. Those students who report bullying should feel proud of their courage, openness and compassion, and be commended for it.

Ignoring the problem for so long made it much worse than it needs to be. Already, schools are taking steps forward in this regard, and the programs, information and discussion about the issue are starting to take hold. Until it does, the number of bullying cases reported may well increase again.

It will take time for the education system in Japan to teach itself how to stop this problem. But it is essential that schools provide an environment where all students can learn the important life lessons they need — not the harmful and damaging lessons of bullying. The higher number of bullying cases recognized should not be viewed as cause for despair, but rather as a call for increased action on and awareness of an issue at the heart of the country's education system.

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