Should I be concerned about bullying in the regular classroom?

Working With Your School Board · https://inclusionactionontario.ca/docs/should-i-be-concerned-about-bullying-in-the-regular-classroom/

Who is at risk?

Students are at risk of bullying for a number of reasons, many of which are unrelated to disability. But unlike other groups at risk of increased bullying, only students with disabilities are routinely pulled out of the regular classroom, and placed in a special education classroom, "to protect them". This is only possible because the education system has enabled the option to remove students with disabilities from the general education population as a routine matter. There is no other situation in which we choose to remove the bullied rather than manage the bully.

Bullying is Everywhere

Ultimately students may be bullied whether they are in a regular class or a special education classroom. Bullying risks can even increase when a student is obviously a member of a special education classroom, including gifted programs. In fact, anything that marks a student as different can make them a target. Even having special equipment, for example, a lap top, can make a student a target, as other students know they have received the technology to support a learning difference. This is what makes universal design for learning so important: in a well designed learning environment, it is simply not obvious who needs or gets the extra help.

Duty to Address Bullying

If you find your child is being bullied at school, remember that the school board has a duty to address that under subsection 302(3.4) of the Education Act. The board must establish policies and guidelines to address bullying prevention and interventions and schools. The Ministry of Education has prepared

a policy and program memorandum (PPM 144) for boards that addresses bullying prevention and intervention.

What can schools and families do to prevent and manage bullying

It is important to be pro-active. Strategies can be implemented by the school to reduce the likelihood of bullying in general and specifically as it may relate to a vulnerable student. Specific learning goals around self-advocacy or asking for help can even be included in the Individual Education Plan.

School professionals that can help are Child and Youth Workers. They are employed in school boards and work to improve the physical, emotional, intellectual and social development of vulnerable children. They are one of the most overlooked resources in supporting students with disabilities in the regular classroom environment, with most people focusing on Education Assistants for classroom support (for more information on paraprofessional support, see our blog post, Be Careful What You Wish For). They often run whole classroom programming in the areas of social emotional learing, healthy relationships, self-regulation and wellbeing. They may provide more targeted support in small groups or to individual students, as well.

It is worth asking, at the start of the school year, for the board to assign a CYW to your student's classroom, if you believe they may be more at risk of bullying. This allows for proactive management. Minimally, you can ask your school to consider assigning a CYW if staff see signs of harmful behaviour occurring in the classroom or otherwise, like during lunch or on the playground.

This U.S. government website, stopbullying.gov, outlines a number of strategies that can be applied to help students with disabilities and prevent bullying from happening at school. This can have positive outcomes for all students, especially tactics that use a team approach, foster peer relationships, and help students develop empathy.

Some strategies include:

- Engaging students in developing high-interest activities in which everyone has a role to play in designing, executing or participating in the activity.
- Providing general up-front information to peers about the kinds of support children with special needs require, and have adults facilitate peer support.

- Creating a buddy system for children with special needs.
- Involving students in adaptive strategies in the classroom so that they participate in assisting and understanding the needs of others.
- Conducting team-based learning activities and rotate student groupings.
- Implementing social-emotional learning activities.
- Rewarding positive, helpful, inclusive behavior.

Are special education classrooms safer, though?

It's also important to understand that student safety in the special education classroom may also not be what we hope for and expect. See our post "Are Special Education Rooms Safer?", which explores the risks of special education settings and the need for "Wide Open Spaces".