

Sioux City Journal

OUR OPINION



WE MUST STOP BULLYING. IT STARTS HERE. IT STARTS NOW.

Siouxland lost a young life to a senseless, shameful tragedy last week. By all accounts, Kenneth Weishuhn was a kind-hearted, fun-loving teenage boy, always looking to make others smile. But when the South O'Brien High School 14-year-old told friends he was gay, the harassment and bullying began. It didn't let up until he took his own life.

Sadly, Kenneth's story is far from unique. Boys and girls across Iowa and beyond are targeted every day. In this case sexual orientation appears to have played a role, but we have learned a bully needs no reason to strike. No sense can be made of these actions.

Now our community and region must face this stark reality: We are all to blame. We have not done enough. Not nearly enough.

This is not a failure of one group of kids, one school, one town, one county or one geographic area. Rather, it exposes a fundamental flaw in our society, one that has deep-seated roots. Until now, it has been too difficult, inconvenient – maybe even painful – to address. But we can't keep looking away.

In Kenneth's case, the warnings were everywhere. We saw it happen in other communities, now it has hit home. Undoubtedly, it wasn't the first life lost to bullying here, but we can strive to make it the last.

The documentary "Bully," which depicts the bullying of an East Middle School student, opened in Sioux City on Friday. We urge everyone to see it. At its core, it is a heart-breaking tale of how far we have yet to go. Despite its award-winning, proactive policies, we see there is still much work to be done in Sioux City schools.

Superintendent Paul Gausman is absolutely correct when he says "it takes all of us to solve the problem." But schools must be at the forefront of our battle against bullying.

Sioux City must continue to strengthen its resolve and its policies. Clearly, South O'Brien High School needs to alter its approach. We urge Superintendent Dan Moore to rethink his stance that "we have all the things in place to deal with it." It should be evident that is simply not the case.

South O'Brien isn't the only school that needs help. A Journal Des Moines bureau report last year demonstrated that too many schools don't take bullying seriously. According to that report, Iowa school districts, on average, reported less than 2 percent of their students had been

bullied in any given year since the state passed its anti-bullying law in 2007. That statistic belies the actual depth of this problem, and in response the Iowa Department of Education will implement a more comprehensive anti-bullying and harassment policy in the 2012-13 school year.

But as Gausman and Nate Monson, director of Iowa Safe Schools, are quick to remind us, this is more than a school problem. If we want to eradicate bullying in our community, we can't rely on schools alone.

We need to support local agencies like the Waitt Institute for Violence Prevention and national efforts like the one described at stopbullying.gov. Bullying takes many forms, some of them – Internet, Facebook, cell phone – more subtle than others. Parents should monitor the cell phone and Internet usage of their children. All public and private institutions need to do more to demonstrate that bullying is simply unacceptable in our workplaces and in our homes. We need to educate ourselves and others.

Some in our community will say bullying is simply a part of life. If no one is physically hurt, they will say, what's the big deal? It's just boys being boys and girls being girls.

Those people are wrong, and they must be shouted down.

We must make it clear in our actions and our words that bullying will not be tolerated. Those of us in public life must be ever mindful of the words we choose, especially in the contentious political debates that have defined our modern times. More importantly, we must not be afraid to act.

How many times have each of us witnessed an act of bullying and said little or nothing? After all, it wasn't our responsibility. A teacher or an official of some kind should step in. If our kid wasn't involved, we figured, it's none of our business.

Try to imagine explaining that rationale to the mother of Kenneth Weishuhn.

It is the business of all of us. More specifically, it is our responsibility. Our mandate.

If we're honest with ourselves, we will acknowledge our community has yet to view bullying in quite this way. It's well past time to do so.

Stand up. Be heard. And don't back down. Together, we can put a stop to bullying. – *By the Journal Editorial Board*