# Harwinton and Burlington

# Community Conversation about Education

## Caring Community, Safe Schools

**Strengthening Our Community Safety Net**

**February 28, 2014**
**Lewis S. Mills High School**

# Small Group Discussion Summary

**ISSUES:**

<u>Harwinton and Burlington need to address physical and emotional safety</u>
There is a need to change or enhance the way the community teaches social skills, life skills, and communication. Bullying is easier now with internet and social media. Social media has also reduced some of the communication and relationship building skills for kids due to lack of face to face interactions.

<u>Relationships with adults/positive role models</u>
It is important for adults to have a relationship with the youth and be approachable to build trust so kids know where to go if there is a problem, especially for older kids. Peer to peer approaches would work well for older youth.

<u>Balancing parent, school, and community responsibility</u>
This is a community issue, not just on the school or parents. Family situations have changed over the years so the schools now assume part of the role to address these issues. Parents need to assume responsibility too; the community cannot place the whole burden on the schools. Kids need to have a support system outside and after school. The community needs to volunteer and help.

<u>The role of students</u>
We need to listen to youth so they are engaged in the process. We can use student leaders to build peer to peer approaches and programs for older youth and/or mentoring younger youth.

<u>How do we address issues?</u>
No one approach will work on its own; a blend of community wide curriculum and targeted approaches for at risk youth would be best. We need to be proactive; it is easier to prevent bad behavior than to address it. For any approach, we would need to make adjustments for the age of the audience.
In some situations, we need to give kids the opportunity to work through things on their own. We can't always put a cushion under them. They need to stand up and say something. We need to enforce the rules that are already in place, not necessarily create new ones.

**QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS:**

<u>The role of students/ student involvement</u>
We are not sure if teens would be invested.
At risk kids need more precise help but may not take it seriously.
How do we reach kids who fly under the radar?
How do we define a "bully"?
Are kids able to voice opinions on guest speakers? Is there follow up after?

<u>Increased participation/involvement</u>
The group would have liked to see more Region 10 administrators participating.
How do we get parents to know more?

<u>What are the programs/resources in place now?</u>
What is being done in elementary schools to address social-emotional concerns and self esteem?
Can we get a list of programs/services already in place in schools for overall and targeted help?

What are the confidentiality concerns when identifying an at risk or struggling youth; who can you tell? What is the protocol now?

What will happen with this information?
Will Region 10 administration receive the detailed feedback from the conversation? Will they do anything with it?
Will town leaders receive the detailed feedback from the conversation?


**IDEAS AND ACTION STEPS:**

Relationship building with adults/older youth in the community and schools
Have counselors spend more time getting to know youth and build relationships with them before there are issues.
Have students choose the teacher/adult faculty member they view as a positive person/mentor that they can access instead of being assigned a group for advisory.
Create a mentoring program for Region 10 schools. Bring in volunteers to have one on one time with kids such as police, firefighters, grandparents, older students, etc.
Increase non-parental involvement in the schools (ex: senior citizens)

Teach basic social and life skills at school and in the community
Train students on how to deal with specific bullies in the classroom in a positive way that will not negatively single out but help the youth who is bullying (Such as teaching kids to redirect the "bully" or respond in a positive way and understand their underlying issues.)
Repetition is key- bring in a series of presentations that coordinate with community activities.
Train coaches and other adults involved in youth's life outside of school (HYCA).
Bring in after school/in school programs to help students deal with stress.
Teach kids about real life resources.
Bring in more guest speakers (Chris Herron, Names Can Really Hurt Us).
Teach youth about healthy relationships (romantic, friends, working, etc.).

Get input from the students/make a safer environment for communication
Have an assembly to talk about student stories/struggles, focus on more interaction such as small groups.
Have another conversation with the message "bring a friend" or hold a school wide conversation during the school day.
Change advisory period (Pride Time and Paw Time) to be more like this conversation.
Create student led skits about real life scenarios to model solutions, have observers participate to help find solutions.
Put out letter boxes for kids concerns.
Student leadership is important- more programs like the Link program to help freshman.
Work with students to engage their parents and bring them into the process.
Create an anonymous way to report bullying or other issues:  amenity website, students create fake emails to email administrators, social media, etc.
Identify and close gaps where kids don't feel safe, target areas where they are being bullied (bus, bathrooms, cafeteria, social media, etc.)

<u>Increased communication between schools/town and parents</u>
Create a common web based means of communication (facebook, email list, etc.). Parents/youth need more information on what's going on in the town, especially if they do not attend Region 10 schools.
Hold parent meetings in café conversation format.
Connect with other towns to see what they are doing and gain ideas to bring together our community.
Create a school governance council/committee made up of parents, administrators, and town leadership that meet on a regular basis to discuss issues.
Create webinars to educate families on different topics, hold workshops for parents. Parents need to reinforce message taught in school.
Hold simultaneous events for parents and students- separate or together.

<u>More community and school mixed activities for youth</u>
There is a lack of gathering places for kids on afternoons and weekends. We need to give kids a platform to get together that is their own. Have the kids take ownership.
Create more opportunities for families to come together as a community, such as seasonally sponsored events by different age groups. Go beyond school boundaries to involve the community more.
Hold community speaking events outside of school.
Access help/support from businesses.
Look into agencies that serve different issue areas and involve them more in school and community activities

**FINAL SUMMARY:**

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that teaching social and emotional learning and life skills were important. They would like to see these skills taught in school, in the towns, and reinforced at home to have the best impact. Harwinton and Burlington would like to provide youth with real world skills. Being proactive to avoid stress and poor interpersonal interactions between students is a priority.

One major theme that ran through the discussion is that those involved in the conversation would like to have more opportunities to listen, share, and help shape the climate for youth in Harwinton and Burlington. Increased communication between parents, the schools, and the town would help bridge the gap between what resources are available, what is happening in the towns and schools, and what parents know. In addition, parents would like to be able to communicate their concerns, experiences, and ideas in a meaningful way and feel that they are heard and are active participants in their children's education.

Many community members would like to see more community based activities that engage diverse segments of the population, not one age group at a time. Similarly, many expressed the need to provide positive teen based recreation activities after school and on weekends for youth. While increasing the amount of opportunities to come together as a community would help, increasing the communication and attendance at the programs currently offered for youth and community members in both towns would also make an impact.

Student buy in is important to the success of any actions we take moving forward. Having youth input was priceless and will continue to play a major role. Harwinton and Burlington would like to involve the youth not only in the planning phases, but as part of the solution as mentors, role models, and active participants. They value the youth's ideas and experiences, and can envision leadership roles for them in this process.

Harwinton and Burlington would also like to make it easier for students to express their concerns or let the administration know if there is a problem. One major barrier to addressing issues between students such as insulting, harassing, or bullying is the lack of reporting. Many of the action steps outlined ways to improve the ability for students to safely provide teachers and administrators with this information so they can intervene before it becomes severe.