

Anti-bullying law will weed out menace

LETTERS: SCHOOL harassment and bullying are prevalent in Malaysia, with about 14,000 cases reported between 2012 and 2015.

Bullying should be seen as a systemic problem and a failure to respond would result in an increased rate of depression, aggressive behaviour, social anxiety, higher risk of suicide attempts and criminal behaviour.

It affects every aspect of life and has a negative impact on everyone. There are two categories of bullying; verbal and physical bullying.

Of these two, verbal bullying is the most frequent in schools.

Students who are bullies are likely to have disciplinary problems.

As the number of children involved in crime, as reported by the **Department of Statistics**, has increased from 4,833 in 2019 to 5,342 in 2020, there is a great deal to be worried about.

There has been an increasing number of reports of bullying at boarding schools.

This problem hampers teaching and learning, and causes tremendous suffering to victims.

Many scholars have associated bullying with students' personalities, such as ego, irritability, revenge, academic performance and mental health status.

Unfortunately, measures to curb bullying at the national level are far from satisfactory.

Over the last few decades, the Education Ministry implemented several initiatives to tackle school disciplinary problems including bullying, such as awareness campaigns, strengthening of co-curricular activities, counselling and motivational courses.

Recently the ministry introduced the "Sekolahku Sejahtera" anti-bullying portal to help victims file complaints against bullies.

As far as policy is concerned, support from the government is vital.

Experience from other countries shows that varying approaches to dealing with school bullying can be emulated.

In Finland, the National Anti-bullying programme, KiVa was introduced to reduce school bullying and victimisation.

This programme includes preventive and reactive anti-bullying techniques administered at the school level.

Perhaps, it is time for Malaysia to follow other countries in order to emulate and rebuild our own anti-bullying strategies.

In terms of legal provisions, Malaysia does not have anti-bullying laws. Existing legal provisions are largely deficient since bullying is not viewed as a "criminal act".

Existing legislation related to the protection of children, such as the Child Act, contains no provision on school bullying.

There are some forms of bullying that can be penalised under the Penal Code — such as in the cases of T. Nhaveen and Zulfarhan Osman — where there was evidence of assault.

In short, legal support in curbing school bullying is scarce, hence legal action can be taken only when bullying escalates to violence and criminal intimidation.

Therefore, it is time for policymakers to formulate an Anti-Bullying Act to deal with bullying among schoolchildren.

Perhaps through this legislation, awareness on bullying can be intensified and serve as a reactive mechanism in dealing with issues related to school bullying.

More collaborative decisions are expected through policy engagement with parents, teachers and counsellors.

Teachers and counsellors are responsible for dealing with the day-to-day situations in schools.

It is crucial that the ministry gives assurances that it will not tolerate schools that cover up bullying out of fear of tarnishing their reputation.

This happened once in 2017, when "hotspot schools" were announced, with 402 schools identified under Category 1 (discipline-related) and Category 3 (drug issue-related) by the ministry.

Such labelling should be avoided since support from all parties is needed to tackle bullying in schools.

Increasing empathy and support toward victims should be the priority towards a zero-tolerance policy of school bullying in Malaysia.

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