

How 13 High Schoolers Are Fighting The Bullying Crisis Facing Students With Disabilities

by Heather Morrison, MassLive.com/TNS | May 5, 2026

SPRINGFIELD, Mass. — Students with disabilities are bullied and socially excluded more than their peers. But a group of Massachusetts high school students is trying to change that.

“I learned that disabilities are more common than you think,” said Isabelle Ogutt, who is part of the Hampden County District Attorney Youth Advisory Board.

About 20% of the population has dyslexia, 15.5 million U.S. adults have been diagnosed with ADHD, about 1.4 million people in the U.S. have Tourette syndrome, about 5.5 million Americans use a wheelchair and about 1 million people are blind.

The group of 13 students created videos and a children’s book after talking to people with disabilities about how they want to be treated and how they navigate the world.

The district attorney’s Youth Advisory Board includes more than 70 students from schools across the region who participate in the year-long program. The first meeting was on Oct. 1 and started with Hampden District Attorney Anthony Gulluni giving a speech and encouraging the students.

“We’re going to learn from you,” he said.

The program has a history of teaching community leaders about the issues facing high school students. Before vaping became widespread, a student group brought it to Gulluni’s attention. The group was “way ahead of anyone else,” he said.

Throughout the year, the 70 students were divided into six groups to work on different projects. Those projects were presented to the DA’s staff, school principals, superintendents, parents and law enforcement last week.

Students Danny Casey, Ainsley Petell, Pilar-Onesty Wimberly, Vicki Powers, Gabriella Gebo, Brooke Johnson, Demetrius Holmes, Ogutt, Frank Gomez, Megan Lapinski,

Audrianna Martineau, Abigail McNulty and Cameryn Stallings worked on the project about disabilities.

“When there’s a lack of understanding, behavior can be misinterpreted,” Gulluni said. “A student who is struggling with a learning disability or another challenge may be seen as disruptive or disengaged, when in reality they need support. That can lead to disciplinary responses instead of appropriate intervention. The same principle applies in the justice system. Understanding the individual matters. Awareness leads to better, more appropriate outcomes.”

One area of focus for the group was invisible disabilities, which can leave people feeling isolated.

“When you have a disability, you think you’re the only one who has it and you feel like everyone around you is somewhat normal, but there is no normal,” Petell said.

But their project teaches other students that just because “it’s not on the surface doesn’t mean it’s something that doesn’t exist,” Ogutt said.

In the end, we’re all human, Petell said. “We’re not all the same, but we’re not all that different.”

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