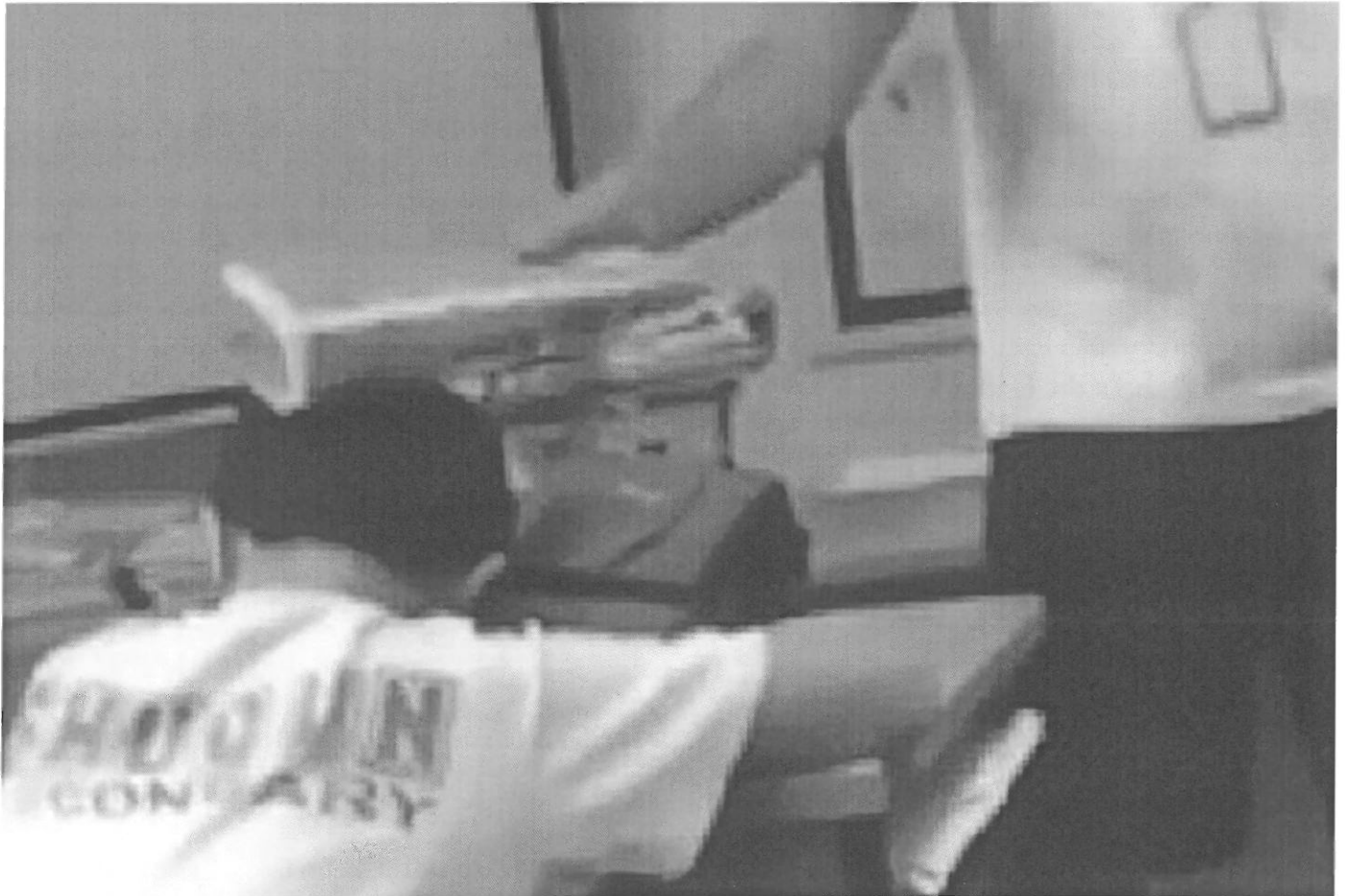


THE STRAITS TIMES

Don't let 'get tough on bullying' be mere slogan



The Ministry of Education (MOE) is investigating a case of alleged bullying that happened in a classroom at Shuqun Secondary School in Jurong East. PHOTO: ALLSINGAPORESTUFF/FACEBOOK

🕒 PUBLISHED SEP 24, 2015, 5:00 AM SGT

The alleged bullying incident at Shuqun Secondary is, regrettably, not an isolated phenomenon ("Jurong school counselling students in bullying video"; Tuesday).

Bullying is prevalent across many schools in Singapore. However, the measures taken to counter this pernicious trend have not been strong. It is time we came down hard on such cases.

Bullying remains prevalent because disciplinary actions against bullies have been too lenient. Our school disciplinary system prioritises maintaining order among students rather than actually acting against negative behaviour such as bullying.

This likely arises from the perception that bullying is "normal" and part of the usual horseplay among children.

Often, bullies are given only a scolding or some form of minor punishment by teachers; rarely is harsher punishment meted out.

This is an ineffectual solution.

Bullies act because they know that even if they are caught, the cost will be minimal. They will, hence, continue their actions.

However, giving bullies just a rap on the knuckles is also unjust, as bullying entrenches a sense of powerlessness and low self-esteem in the victims - issues that may last a lifetime.

Another problem is the under-reporting of bullying incidents. While school authorities often tell students to report bullying, few do so.

This is often out of a fear of reprisal from the bullies or from a feeling of powerlessness and resignation about their situation.

This often arises out of insufficient awareness about their right to a safe school environment, and a lack of confidence in the ability of the school's disciplinary system to help the victims.

Bullying cases must be treated with the utmost seriousness, and they need to be investigated immediately.

Harsher punishments are needed, not only to deter bullies from hurting their classmates, but also to provide just and proportionate punishment.

Students must be disciplined immediately, at the onset of bullying rather than later, to signal that swift and decisive action is taking place.

Students should be informed of their right to a safe environment and be given assurances that a fair and safe process is in place.

This will give students greater confidence should they need to report bullying cases, and ensure that more bullies are brought to justice.

For too long, "get tough on bullying" has been a mere slogan.

It is time to take tangible action to curb this serious problem and take a strong, zero-tolerance approach to bullying.

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