

What Every School Administrator Should Know About Bullying

Defining Bullying

The literature on bullying prevention suggests that bullying is a form of negative and hurtful behavior that is distinguished by an imbalance of power. The child who bullies may be stronger, more popular or hold some type of power over the child who is bullied. This power imbalance could also be represented by a group of students targeting one student.

The Center for Disease for Disease Control and Prevention has developed a uniform definition of bullying behavior. That is: “Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners⁶ that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm.”¹

Is Bullying Illegal?

Bullying behaviors may violate civil, civil rights or criminal laws, depending on the type and extent of the activities. Educators and school administrators have a legal mandate to keep students safe at school. They are mandated to take steps to ensure that the school environment is free of harassment. Further, schools are obligated to protect students from third-party harms, such as mistreatment of student(s) by other student(s). Federal legislation outlines schools’ duty to protect students from harassment.

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (US ED OCR) issued a series of “Dear Colleague” letters designed to provide school officials with guidance relative to their obligations under these statutes. These letters address:

- Disability harassment.
- Bullying relative to all protected classes.
- Sexual harassment and sexual violence.
- Gender-based violence.

School administrators are pivotal players in bullying prevention and intervention. This guide is designed to provide basic information for school leaders on their legal responsibilities and their role in preventing and intervening in bullying situations. In addition, this publication provides tips for administrators on how to work with parents and how to support children in the aftermath of bullying incidents.

In its letter dated October 26, 2010, US ED OCR states, “Bullying fosters a climate of fear and disrespect that can seriously impair the physical and psychological health of its victims and create conditions that negatively affect learning, thereby undermining the ability of students to achieve their full potential.” For this reason, US ED OCR provided various letters and tools to make schools more aware of their increased obligation to respond to bullying and harassment based on students’ protected class(es).

When bullying behaviors are of a physical nature, criminal charges may be appropriate. Check with your local criminal code or local law enforcement.

Federal Civil Rights Statutes

- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color or national origin.
- Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex.
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability.

What is the Administrator’s Role in Building-Level Bullying Prevention and Intervention?

Set the Tone for Your Building and District

School leaders play a critical role in establishing bullying prevention as a priority. Principals can support a school’s bullying prevention efforts by articulating their support for bullying prevention, identifying prevention strategies that emphasize bystander responsiveness and serving as an active participant on school climate leadership teams. Principals are also responsible for overseeing investigation processes, ensuring bullying policies are consistently applied and that students are free from harassment and retaliation.

Ensure Bullying Prevention Policies Are Understood, Communicated and Sufficiently Address All Aspects of Prevention and Intervention

A policy will only be effective when the content sufficiently protects students; it is understood by all stakeholders (administration, faculty, staff, parents and students); and it establishes clearly defined roles for all stakeholders. Additional information on recommendations for inclusion in bullying prevention policies is located on the Prevention at School and Set Policies and Rules sections on the StopBullying.gov website.

Appoint a Compliance Coordinator to Receive Complaints of Bullying and Harassment

Although every adult in the building should be trained on the proper procedures to follow if a student reports bullying or harassment, each building should have a point person responsible for tracking, investigating and responding to these incidents. In addition to being a best practice, this recommendation is mandated by Title IX (gender harassment) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (disability harassment). It is important that the compliance coordinator make the responsibilities listed above a primary focus, therefore it is recommended that the administrator of a building not be designated as the compliance coordinator.

Use Appropriate Data to Guide Decision-Making

In order to inform bullying prevention efforts, leadership teams should understand how bullying manifests among their students, where it occurs, how bystanders respond and the quality of students’ school relationships. Disciplinary reports provide a limited picture of students’ bullying experience, because research suggests that many cases of bullying go unreported or are not properly identified by adults.^{3,4} Bullying prevention plans should be based upon data from diverse sources, including student and parent surveys, and behavioral observations.

Provide Ongoing Professional Development and Care for Staff

It is important schools provide staff ongoing training and development in methods and programs that promote a safe and caring learning environment, prevent anti-social behaviors and support student engagement. Research has shown students’ academic and life success can be enhanced through school-based strategies aimed at improving learning climate and supporting social and emotional learning.⁵ Information about this research and the most effective SEL strategies can be accessed at Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) website.

Lifting up and supporting self-care for staff is also vital for them to build healthy relationships with students. Administrators should encourage a culture of self-care and empathy.

What is the Administrator’s Role in Student-Level Bullying Prevention and Intervention?

Learn to Differentiate Bullying from Other Behaviors

In order to effectively lead bullying prevention efforts, principals need to understand what constitutes bullying, how to prevent it, and how to effectively intervene in potential bullying situations. By understanding the difference between bullying and other negative behaviors, principals are able to intervene more appropriately across the spectrum of these behaviors.

Adult Intervention Matters

To reduce bullying in school, adults must take an active role in intervening in bullying situations and supporting students who are bullied.

The graphic to the right shows examples of what students report are helpful adult responses.²



Ensure Follow-Up and Support

In order for students to continue to report incidents, feel safe and minimize retaliation behavior, follow-up and support are critical. Administrators, teachers and other adults in the building must be vigilant in continued support of students involved in bullying incidents. Schools may wish to look beyond typical discipline methods when providing follow-up and support to ensure students have a safe learning environment.

What is the Administrator's Role in Parent and Community Bullying Prevention and Intervention Supports?

Engage the Community

Community leaders and organizations can be important partners in bullying prevention. They may provide material support to enhance a school's bullying prevention efforts, organize bullying awareness campaigns or work to align strategies and practices in bullying prevention across the community. Youth sports leagues, in particular, are critical partners in the prevention of bullying and hazing. Additional information is located on the Working in the Community section on the StopBullying.Gov website.

An administrator plays a pivotal role in setting the tone for bullying prevention and intervention. The degree to which an administrator is invested in bullying prevention and intervention directly impacts the investment made by staff, parents and the community. A safer learning environment for all students can be achieved when bullying prevention and intervention are intentionally integrated into the fabric of a school.

Best Practices for Responding to Parents About Bullying Concerns

- Listen to parents.
- Consider parents' needs.
- Express concern for the child, "I'm sorry this happened to your child."
- Discuss actions that can be taken by school personnel.
- Involve parents in developing a support plan for their child.
- Follow policy and procedures of the school district.
- Establish follow-up meeting with teachers and other relevant staff to assess effectiveness of interventions and supports.
- Establish follow-up meeting with parents.
- Maintain focus on supporting child's success, regardless of whether or not bullying is confirmed.
- Ensure staff feel heard and supported.

Supporting Children in the Aftermath of Bullying

After bullying has been reported and procedural steps initiated, administrators should consider implementing responsive strategies to promote student safety.

These may include:

- Increasing supervision of involved students by teachers and other responsible adults.
- Conducting separate follow-up meetings with the target and aggressor to ensure the issue is resolved.
- Scheduling follow-up conversations with parents to promote ongoing communication.
- Identifying an adult to serve as a formal or silent mentor for involved students. Silent mentors make deliberate attempts to notice, connect with and encourage students, without the student recognizing that the adult is their "mentor."

If bullying issues continue, administrators in collaboration with students, parents and support personnel may develop:

- **Individual Safety Plans** — These plans should delineate steps targets of bullying and school personnel will take to prevent bullying or limit the student's exposure to peer aggression. It may include strategies such as walking or sitting with supportive peers, identifying and accessing safe places in the school or community, and setting expectations regarding communication and follow-up.
- **Stay Away Agreements** — If there is reason to believe bullying is disrupting student learning, school administrators may choose to require the student(s) who are the aggressor(s) to sign a stay-away agreement, thereby limiting contact with the targeted child during the school day. These agreements should also define the steps that will be taken if the agreement is violated. It is important the targeted child feels safe, supported and there is as little disruption to their normal routine and activities at school as possible.



Cautions in Bullying Prevention and Intervention

Avoid any strategy or program that offers a “quick fix” to bullying.

Bullying is a social ecological problem that requires a comprehensive approach to prevention and intervention.⁶ It is recommended that schools use a universal framework to organize their bullying prevention and social and emotional learning efforts. If the framework is not specifically informed by research on bullying, schools should provide staff training and implement additional strategies to address bullying, specifically.

Avoid programs that promote a “one size fits all” approach to bullying prevention.

While it can be useful to adopt a framework for bullying prevention across a school district, the educational strategies and interventions applied in each school should be tailored to the developmental needs and characteristics of the students in the school.

Avoid strategies that place the blame on the victim.

Make sure that students know that bullying is unfair, undeserved and unacceptable. More importantly, assure the victim that all adults in the building take bullying seriously and will do everything possible to put an end to the harassment.

Limit the use of strategies that encourage kids to “talk it out.”

Face-to-face meetings between students involved in bullying frequently do not stop the behavior and can sometimes cause additional harm to students that are already hurting. If the bullied student requests a meeting with the offender, schools should consider engaging the services of a professional credentialed in victim-offender processes.

Recognize the limitations of “zero tolerance” and sanction-focused strategies.

Policies and strategies that severely punish all students involved in bullying instances with no contextual investigation may result in punishment of the victim as well as the perpetrator. These strategies may also result in students being less likely to report bullying and harassment, for fear of discipline.

Be suspect of any program or expert that suggests that “bullying” is a toxic or useless term.

Although adolescents and others may wish to eliminate the word “bullying” and replace it with “drama” or some other innocuous term, research shows that bullying is a form of peer abuse and as such, must be addressed.⁷ To do otherwise downplays the serious physical and emotional effects suffered by students who are bullied.

References

- 1 Gladden, R.M., Vivolo-Kantor, A.M., Hamburger, M.E., & Lumpkin, C.D. Bullying Surveillance Among Youths: Uniform Definitions for Public Health and Recommended Data Elements, Version 1.0. Atlanta, GA; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Department of Education; 2014.
- 2 Davis, S., & Nixon, C. (2010). The youth voice project. Preliminary results from the youth voice research project: Victimization & strategies. Retrieved from <http://www.youthvoiceproject.com/YVPMarch2010.pdf>
- 3 Frisé, A., Holmqvist, K., & Oscarsson, D. (2008). 13-year-olds' perception of bullying: Definitions, reasons for victimization and experience of adults' response. *Educational Studies*, 34, 105-117. doi:10.1080/03055690701811149
- 4 Wei, R. C., Darling-Hammond, L., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S. (2009). Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the U.S. and abroad. National Staff Development Council. <https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/status-of-professional-learning-phase-1-technical-report.pdf>
- 5 Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger, K.B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82, 405-32. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x
- 6 Swearer, S.M., & Espelage, D.L. (2011). A social ecological framework of bullying among youth. In D.L. Espelage, & S.M. Swearer (Eds.), *Bullying in North American schools*. New York: Routledge.
- 7 Olweus, D. (1995). Bullying or Peer Abuse at School: Facts and Intervention. *Current directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 4. no. 6. Dec., 1995

Note: The information in this publication was updated in 2023 by Center for Safe Schools, to reflect current best practices and research. This publication was originally created in partnership with Highmark Foundation, in 2017, as a companion piece to the Pennsylvania Bullying Prevention Toolkit. All current information and bullying prevention toolkit resources are now on CenterForSafeSchools.org.

Visit CenterForSafeSchools.org for bullying prevention resources and services.

**Center for Safe Schools is an initiative of Center for Schools and Communities,
a division of Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit**

275 Grandview Ave., Suite 200, Camp Hill, PA 17011 • 717-763-1661 • Info@CenterForSafeSchools.org

CenterForSafeSchools.org