



## **Connecticut's Bullying Prevention Law & Positive School Climate**

### **20 Questions for Your School: A Policy Checklist for Educators, Parents and Students**

*April 2010*

Positive school climate and a supportive community are essential elements in the success of every school in Connecticut. Taking effective steps to prevent bullying improves school climate and pays tremendous dividends in other ways. Bullying prevention strengthens communities, improves student learning, reduces the likelihood of depression and suicide in youth who are targets of bullying, and reduces crime – now and well into adulthood.

On June 12, 2008, Governor Rell signed into law a measure that strengthened local and state efforts to prevent school bullying. The law, *An Act Concerning School Learning Environment* (P.A. 08-160), required—among other things—that every school board implement a bullying prevention strategy, that the State Department of Education develop model policies, and that bullying prevention be an in-service training topic for school personnel.

Each school district was to develop and implement a bullying policy *and* prevention and intervention strategy. School districts were required to submit their policies to the State Department of Education by February 2009. One year later, in February 2010, Commissioner Mark McQuillan of the State Department of Education reported that while most districts had taken action, 59 school districts had not revised their bullying policies in response to the two-year-old law. In the report, Commissioner McQuillan wrote: “While many districts are working exceptionally hard to make school environments safer for their students, some are apparently doing very little.”

Most school leaders, teachers and parents want to do everything they can to comply with the law and – more importantly – to prevent bullying that can obstruct learning and endanger children's lives.

This policy checklist is one tool to determine whether a school is meeting the broad requirements of the state law on bullying. The checklist outlines what the law expects, and what it encourages schools to do, in order to improve school climate.

A checklist can only go partway in identifying the responsibilities of schools, parents and students. Compliance with the spirit of the law requires school communities to take actions that go beyond a written anti-bullying policy. They must be vigilant to ensure that every child learns in safety.

***The Governor's Prevention Partnership can help assess and meet your training needs related to bullying prevention. Visit [www.preventionworksct.org](http://www.preventionworksct.org) or call 860.523.8042.***

***For additional information on bullying prevention, contact Connecticut Commission on Children at 860.240.0290 or [www.cga.ct.gov/coc/bullying.htm](http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/bullying.htm).***

## **Connecticut's bullying prevention law**

### **☑ ☑ 20 questions for your school: A policy checklist ☑ ☑**

*The following 20 questions are intended to help educators, parents and students determine whether their school is meeting the requirements of Connecticut's law on bullying prevention, and is taking further steps to establish a safe school climate.*

#### **(1) Does your school district have a bullying policy approved by the school board?**

Connecticut law requires each local or regional board of education to adopt a bullying policy, including a strategy for the prevention of bullying.

#### **(2) How many of these eight strategic actions have been implemented at your school?**

State law recommends that the prevention and intervention strategy in each school district's bullying policy include implementation of these actions:

- A school survey to determine the prevalence of bullying
- A bullying prevention coordinating committee with broad representation to review the survey results and implement the strategy
- School rules prohibiting bullying, harassment, and intimidation and establishing appropriate consequences for those who engage in such acts
- Adequate adult supervision of outdoor areas, hallways, the lunchroom, and other specific areas where bullying is likely to occur
- Inclusion of grade-appropriate bullying prevention curricula in kindergarten through high school
- Individual interventions with the bully, parents and school staff, and interventions with the bullied child, parents and school staff
- School-wide training related to safe school climate
- Promotion of parent involvement in bullying prevention through individual or team participation in meetings, trainings, and individual interventions

The above eight strategic actions identified in state law are based on nationally proven best practices in bullying prevention. School districts and individual schools should give careful thought to each action – to what extent it has been implemented, and whether adding it to the

prevention and intervention strategy would strengthen school climate. Schools are encouraged to develop and implement other elements of their strategy.

### **(3) Does your school use an evidence-based model?**

State law recommends that – as part of the prevention and intervention strategy – school districts implement an evidence-based model approach. The law does not endorse a particular program, although it offers the example of a positive behavioral interventions and supports process. Twelve programs that have been used effectively in Connecticut and the nation are identified in a report, *Brave Enough To Be Kind*, issued by the Connecticut Commission on Children, The Governor’s Prevention Partnership and the State Department of Education (available at [http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/PDFs/bullying/110102\\_brave\\_enough.pdf](http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/PDFs/bullying/110102_brave_enough.pdf)). The State Department of Education has identified a number of programs in use by Connecticut school districts in a February 2010 report.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) initiative (<http://www.pbis.org/>) of the U.S. Department of Education is a valuable resource to schools in Connecticut in establishing positive behavioral supports.

### **(4) Has the school district’s bullying policy been formally revised since July 1, 2008?**

Effective July 1, 2008, school districts were required by state law to add new components to their local bullying policies. School districts were required to submit their revised policies to the State Department of Education (SDE) by February 1, 2009. As of February 2010, fifty-nine districts’ policies had not been revised and approved, according to SDE Commissioner Mark McQuillan.

The law requires SDE to develop model bullying prevention policies for grades K-12. In the short term, SDE is highlighting the policy adopted by the Connecticut Technical High School System as a laudable model.<sup>2</sup>

### **(5) Are there visible signs that all components of the revised bullying policy are actually being implemented at your school?**

Schools are required by law to implement their bullying policies.

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<sup>1</sup> McQuillan, M.K. (2010, Feb. 1). *Report on the status of analysis of bullying policies in Connecticut*. State of Connecticut, State Board of Education (copies available from SDE).

<sup>2</sup> The Connecticut Technical High School System policy is reprinted in the State Department of Education’s report of Feb. 1, 2010 (see footnote 1).

**(6)  Does the revised policy describe your school district's prevention & intervention strategy?**

Bullying policies are required by state law to include a two-pronged strategy of (1) prevention and (2) intervention. If the strategy is absent or unclear in the policy – or if the strategy is not being implemented – the school district may be failing to comply with the law.

The prevention element is an important part of the policy. It should spell out the school's efforts to create safe school climate, not merely to react when bullying incidents occur. The development of safe or positive school climate is the focus of the National School Climate Standards developed by the National School Climate Center. These are available at <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php>. The standards call on each school community in the nation to have “a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate.”

**(7)  Does your school's anti-bullying policy address bullying that occurs outside of school? Does it specifically address cyberbullying?**

State law explicitly permits school bullying policies to include provisions addressing bullying outside of the school setting if it has a direct and negative impact on a student's academic performance or safety in school.

Cyberbullying, described as intentional harm inflicted through electronic media, is a growing problem that affects almost half of U.S. teens, according to the Anti-Defamation League. It is conducted through computers, cell phones and other devices on school grounds and elsewhere. Schools may address cyberbullying that impacts student performance and safety through their bullying policy and strategies.

The Connecticut Technical High School System's bullying policy, highlighted by the State Department of Education as a strong policy example, prohibits “bullying through the use of technology” with specific reference to cell phones, the Internet and social networking sites.

**(8)  Does your school's anti-bullying policy specify sexual orientation or gender identity or expression?**

Although not required by Connecticut law, schools that have taken this step identify fewer problems with school safety in general, according to SDE's JoAnn Freiberg and the University of Hartford's Diane LaRocco and Donna Nestler-Rusack in their 2007 report, *Public School Principals' Experiences with Interpreting and Implementing Connecticut's Anti-Bullying Law*, available at [http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/School\\_Improvement/Bullying/PrincipalBullyingSurvey2007Report.pdf](http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/School_Improvement/Bullying/PrincipalBullyingSurvey2007Report.pdf).

**(9)  Does your school’s policy prohibit retaliation?**

The state’s bullying law makes no mention of retaliation. However, the bullying policy highlighted by the State Department of Education explicitly prohibits retaliation.

**(10)  Is your school’s bullying policy included in (a) the student handbook and (b) the publication of rules, procedures and standards of conduct?**

Publication of the bullying policy in these documents is required by state law.

**(11)  Are students, parents, teachers and school staff aware of how to report acts of bullying? Do they know whom to contact?**

State law requires schools to notify students annually of the process by which they may report bullying. Students may anonymously report bullying if they wish to do so. Schools must enable parents to file written reports of bullying, and they must require teachers and other school staff who (1) witness acts of bullying or (2) receive student reports of bullying to notify school administrators *in writing*.

The school’s policy must identify the appropriate school personnel responsible for taking a bullying report and conducting an investigation.

**(12)  Does your school investigate all reports of suspected bullying?**

State law requires that school administrators investigate all written reports of suspected bullying, regardless of who submits the report. School administrators must review all anonymous reports. It is widely considered best practice for schools to investigate oral reports as well. No disciplinary action may be taken solely on the basis of an anonymous report.

**(13)  Does your school develop appropriate interventions to address each bullying case?**

Under state law, schools must develop case-by-case interventions for addressing repeated incidents of bullying against a single individual or recurrently perpetrated bullying incidents by the same individual. These interventions may include both counseling and discipline.

**(14)  Does your school invite all parents of alleged bullies and bullying targets to attend at least one meeting to address the incident?**

Ongoing communication with parents is an important part of bullying intervention. State law requires that parents of students who commit, or are targets of, any verified acts of bullying are (1) notified and (2) invited to at least one school meeting.

When parents are notified of bullying, schools are required to describe the response of school staff to bullying acts and any consequences that may result from further acts of bullying.

Parents should know that successful practice guides schools to discuss behaviors of concern, consequences and ways to support behavioral change on an ongoing basis. Establishing systems of support can reduce aggressive behaviors and strengthen positive social interactions.

**(15)  Have all school administrators, teachers and pupil personnel received in-service training on bullying prevention, consistent with state law?**

Since 2009, state law has required bullying prevention as an in-service training topic. School boards that implement an evidence-based model approach to prevent bullying (see #3 above) are exempt from this requirement. Despite the state mandate, 14 percent of school districts provide no training on bullying, according to a Feb. 2010 report by the State Department of Education.

**(16)  What percentage of the teachers at your school received pre-service teacher preparation on school bullying?**

State law requires that all persons in a teacher preparation course leading to certification be encouraged to complete a bullying, school violence, suicide prevention, and conflict resolution component.

**(17)  Have all members of your school community – administrators, teachers, counselors, staff, parents and students – participated in whole-school training on bullying prevention? Have you let SDE know your training needs?**

A “whole school” approach – including bullying prevention training provided for all school community members – is widely considered to be a best practice. School-wide training is commended in state law as a successful strategy to prevent bullying (see #2 above).

Ideally, whole-school training should be conducted as part of a wider evidence-based model for bullying prevention, preferably a model selected by the school district for its policy’s prevention and intervention strategy. Experts recommend that training include not only teachers and administrators but also students, parents, and other adults who interact with students. In a 2009 survey conducted by the State Department of Education, a number of school district personnel identified the need for improved training and communication with parents.

The State Department of Education (SDE) is responsible for documenting school districts' needs for technical assistance and training. Make sure you inform SDE of your school's needs.

SDE provides training for schools as part of the Connecticut Accountability for Learning (CALI) initiative. In addition, The Governor's Prevention Partnership and the Connecticut Commission on Children provide bullying prevention training.

**(18)  Are school premises adequately patrolled to ensure safety of students in hallways, bathrooms, stairwells and other out-of-the-way places?**

Bullying often occurs in parts of school buildings and grounds where adults seldom visit. It is important that school personnel provide adequate supervision to protect students in these places.

**(19)  Does your school record the number of verified acts of bullying? Has the number increased or decreased over time?**

State law requires schools to maintain a list of the number of verified acts of bullying and make the list available for public inspection. Schools report the number annually to the State Department of Education.

**(20)  Does your school measure school climate and bullying? Is it improving or worsening?**

Schools can measure their own progress toward positive school climate based on student and staff surveys and other means of measurement. Evaluation should include ongoing pre- and post-test surveys to assess perceptions of safety and effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies.

Under Connecticut's bullying law, "**bullying**" means:

"any overt acts by a student or group of students directed against another student with the intent to ridicule, harass, humiliate or intimidate the other student while on school grounds, at a school-sponsored activity or on a school bus, which acts are committed more than once against any student during the school year."

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***The text of Connecticut's bullying laws (Section 10-222d of the Connecticut General Statutes and related statutory sections) is available on the Connecticut Commission on Children website at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/coclbullying.htm>.***