

Bullying Prevention in Public Schools

“Children can’t learn in a climate of fear. One caring adult, who takes the time to listen, who steps in when he or she sees bullying, can make a world of difference to a bullied child. Our students are counting on us.” ~NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

Bullying can no longer be dismissed as child’s play. More pervasive and lethal today than in the past, bullying exacts a terrible toll on the overall school community—targets, perpetrators, and bystanders—robbing students of their opportunities to learn and inflicting emotional scars that can last a lifetime.

On the rise across the country, bullying takes place not only on school buses and school grounds, but in the corridors of cyberspace, making it virtually inescapable for today’s students. A recent surge of bullying-related suicides has caused growing concern among educators and focused national attention on the seriousness of bullying and the importance of a healthy school climate.

NEA regards bullying as an education issue, a health issue, and a social justice issue. Given the core belief that all students deserve a great public school, NEA works to give educators the resources and information they need to support bullied students. Educators must be trained to handle bullying at the school level, and all stakeholders must collaborate on

policies and programs to eliminate bullying in our public schools.

WHAT IS BULLYING BEHAVIOR?

Bullying is the chronic infliction of physical hurt and/or psychological distress on another person, usually through an imbalance of power. Bullying can involve direct physical contact, verbal attacks intended to cause emotional harm, or indirect actions of social aggression intended to embarrass or isolate.¹ Verbal or social bullying can be just as damaging, or even more so, than physical bullying.²

Although traditional forms of bullying are more common, cyberbullying has taken bullying to a new level of intensity. Using interactive technologies, such as text messages and social media Web sites, cyberbullying can occur around the clock, and the text or images can be widely disseminated, well beyond school grounds.

School bullying and cyberbullying statistics show that 77 percent of students are bullied mentally, verbally, and physically and that one out of five students admits to doing some bullying.³ In one

study, 53 percent of students admitted to saying mean or hurtful things to someone online.⁴

WHO'S AT RISK?

Any student can be bullied, but some students are at higher risk than others, particularly those who seem “different” from the majority of the school population. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) students, students with disabilities, immigrants, and high-achieving ethnic minorities are often targets. Nationally, one out of three students is bullied monthly, with homophobia as one of the most common causes.⁵ In fact, roughly nine out of 10 GLBT students experience harassment at school.⁶

Bullying behaviors begin in elementary school and escalate in subtle and overt ways by middle and high school. The transition periods in a student’s life—from elementary to middle school, and from middle to high school—are among the most vulnerable periods of a student’s life.⁷

BULLYING AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Bullying can leave physical and emotional scars. Research also shows that bullied students tend to have lower grades and achievement test scores than nonvictimized students, and that high-achieving Black and Hispanic students are particularly vulnerable to long-lasting academic effects.⁸

One study found that bullying can account for a decrease of up to an average 1.5 letter grade in an academic subject across the middle school years.⁹ Another study found that 33 percent of GLBT students missed at least one day of school

in the past month because they felt unsafe, compared to less than five percent of all students.¹⁰

Nationwide, bullied students are more likely to fall behind in their studies, get sick and/or depressed, miss school, drop out, and even commit suicide. What’s more, studies have found that a school bullying climate may be linked with a school’s overall test scores.¹¹ The bottom line: students can’t learn when they fear for their safety.

THE POLICY LANDSCAPE

The rise in bullying-related tragedies among school-age children has led the U.S. Department of Education to take an aggressive stance towards the problem that includes issuing a “Dear Colleague” letter to schools clarifying when student bullying violates federal antidiscrimination laws and outlining schools’ responsibilities. In addition, states and localities across the country have adopted antibullying laws or strengthened laws already on the books. Currently, 48 out of 50 states, with the exception of South Dakota and Montana, have bullying-related legislation, but there is a lack of uniformity from state to state and among districts: definitions of bullying vary, some make no mention of cyberbullying, and incident reporting is usually emphasized over training and prevention.

NEA’s own research shows that school staff training is essential to addressing the problem. An NEA survey found that 98 percent of educators believe it’s their job to intervene when they see bullying happening in their school, but many don’t feel equipped to do so. Almost half of all

educators say they've received no training on their district's bullying policy, and 74 percent say they could benefit from training on when and how to intervene in cyberbullying. The survey also found that bus drivers and other education support professionals, often on the front lines of bullying, are far less likely to receive the training they need.¹²

NEA POSITION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

NEA believes that children can't learn in a climate of fear, that bullying has a profound impact on student achievement and overall school climate, and that the school environment/work site must be free from all forms of bullying—including physical, psychological, and cyber. NEA further believes that teachers, education support professionals, and administrators should be trained to handle bullying at the school level and that all stakeholders—local school districts, local affiliates, and higher education institutions—should collaborate on a range of bullying prevention policies and programs:

- Establish strong antibullying policies and legislation that include the definitions of bullying and cyberbullying, clear consequences for such behaviors, and procedures for reporting and appeals.

- Provide training for all school employees—including education support professionals—in the prevention and intervention of all bullying behaviors.
- Provide professional development materials and resources to school employees.
- Conduct an annual school climate survey. A positive school climate enhances the work environment for everyone—students, staff, and parents.
- Develop and implement educational programs designed to help students recognize, understand, prevent, oppose, and eliminate bullying, while emphasizing respect for all.

While recognizing the need for a coordinated effort to address bullying in America's public schools, NEA is encouraged by research that shows one caring adult can make all the difference to a bullied student if that adult listens to the student, asks the right questions, then takes decisive action. Prevent bullying by developing healthy social relationships and helping students feel connected to their school.¹³

NEA RESOURCES

School districts, with help from their state Departments of Education, can provide all public school employees with the training they need—and want—to eliminate bullying from our schools. NEA provides a variety of free resources to help educators create a healthy school climate and become effective antibullying agents:

- **National Bullying and Sexual Harassment Prevention and Intervention Program and National Training Program on Safety, Bias, and GLBT Issues** provide training and resources to members, along with easily implemented intervention strategies. nea.org/home/47681.htm
- **NEA's Bullyfree: It Starts with Me Campaign** identifies caring adults in our schools and communities willing to take a pledge of action to help bullied students. In return, they're provided with the resources to address bullying in their own schools and classrooms. nea.org/home/NEABullyFreeSchools.html
- **bNetS@vvy Program** helps educate adolescents, parents, and educators on the risks and benefits associated with Internet use. bnetsavvy.org
- **Priority Schools Campaign**, NEA's initiative to help local and state affiliates improve struggling schools, incorporates anti-bullying strategies into school transformation measures.

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(Endnotes)

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