

Florida Department of Education

Model Policy Against Bullying and Harassment for K-12 Schools

Office of Safe Schools
June 2022

MODEL POLICY AGAINST BULLYING AND HARASSMENT FOR K-12 SCHOOLS

Pursuant to Rule 6A-1.0018, F.A.C., and Section 1006.147, F.S., all School Districts and charter school governing boards must adopt a policy against bullying and harassment that is consistent with the Department of Education’s Model Policy Against Bullying and Harassment for K-12 Schools and contains the elements in Section 1006.147(4), F.S. Those 14 elements are set forth below.

Please note, any reference to “bullying” throughout this document includes “cyberbullying,” whether or not specifically stated. References to School District may be replaced with the name of a charter school, where appropriate.

1. STATEMENT PROHIBITING BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

It is the policy of the School District that all of its students and school employees have an educational setting that is safe, secure, and free from harassment and bullying of any kind. The district will not tolerate bullying and harassment of any type. Conduct that constitutes bullying and harassment, as defined herein, is prohibited.

2. DEFINITION OF BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

Bullying includes cyberbullying and means systematically and chronically inflicting physical hurt or psychological distress on one or more students or employees. It is further defined as unwanted and repeated written, verbal, or physical behavior, including any threatening, insulting, or dehumanizing gesture, by a student or adult, that is severe or pervasive enough to create an intimidating, hostile, or offensive educational environment; cause discomfort or humiliation; or unreasonably interfere with the individual's school performance or participation; and may involve but is not limited to:

1. Teasing
2. Social Exclusion
3. Threat
4. Intimidation
5. Stalking
6. Physical violence
7. Theft
8. Sexual, religious, or racial harassment
9. Public or private humiliation
10. Destruction of property

Cyberbullying means bullying through the use of technology or any electronic communication, which includes, but is not limited to, any transfer of signs, signals, writing, images, sounds, data, or intelligence of any nature transmitted in whole or in part by a wire, radio, electromagnetic system, photoelectronic system, or photooptical system, including, but not limited to, electronic mail, Internet communications, instant messages, or facsimile communications. Cyberbullying includes the creation of a webpage or weblog in which the creator assumes the identity of another person, or the knowing impersonation of another person as the author of posted content or messages, if the creation or impersonation creates any of the conditions enumerated in the definition of bullying. Cyberbullying also includes the distribution by electronic means of a communication to more than one person or the posting of material on an electronic medium that may be accessed by one or more persons, if the distribution or posting creates any of the conditions enumerated in the definition of bullying.

Harassment means any threatening, insulting, or dehumanizing gesture, use of data or computer software, or written, verbal, or physical conduct directed against a student or school employee that:

1. Places a student or school employee in reasonable fear of harm to his or her person or damage to his or her property;
2. Has the effect of substantially interfering with a student's educational performance, opportunities, or benefits; or
3. Has the effect of substantially disrupting the orderly operation of a school.

Bullying and harassment also encompasses:

1. Retaliation against a student or school employee by another student or school employee for asserting or alleging an act of bullying or harassment. Reporting an act of bullying or harassment that is not made in good faith is considered retaliation.

2. Perpetuation of conduct listed in the definition of bullying or harassment by an individual or group with intent to demean, dehumanize, embarrass, or cause emotional or physical harm to a student or school employee by:
 - a. Incitement or coercion;
 - b. Accessing or knowingly and willingly causing or providing access to data or computer software through a computer, computer system, or computer network within the scope of the district school system; or
 - c. Acting in a manner that has an effect substantially similar to the effect of bullying or harassment.

Cyberstalking as defined in Section 784.048(1)(d), F.S., means to engage in a course of conduct to communicate, or to cause to be communicated, words, images, or language by or through the use of electronic mail or electronic communication, directed at a specific person, causing substantial emotional distress to that person and serving no legitimate purpose.

**Please note: Districts have the flexibility to add additional specific categories of students to which bullying and harassment is prohibited in excess of what is listed.

3. EXPECTED BEHAVIOR FROM STUDENTS AND EMPLOYEES OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The School District expects students to conduct themselves as appropriate for their levels of development, maturity, and demonstrated capabilities with a proper regard for the rights and welfare of other students and school staff, the educational purpose underlying all school activities, and the care of school facilities and equipment.

The School District believes that standards for student behavior must be set cooperatively through interaction among the students, parents/legal guardians, staff, and community members producing an atmosphere that encourages students to grow in self-discipline. The development of this atmosphere requires respect for self and others, as well as for district and community property on the part of students, staff, and community members. Since students learn by example, school administrators, faculty, staff, and volunteers will demonstrate appropriate behavior, treat others with civility and respect, and refuse to tolerate bullying or harassment.

The School District upholds that bullying or harassment of any student or school employee is prohibited:

1. During any education program or activity conducted by a public K-12 educational institution;
2. During any school-related or school-sponsored program or activity;
3. On a school bus of a public K-12 educational institution;
4. Through the use of data or computer software that is accessed through a computer, computer system, or computer network of a public K-12 education institution within the scope of the School District, meaning regardless of ownership, any computer, computer system, or computer network that is physically located on school property or at a school-related or school-sponsored program or activity;
5. Through the use of data or computer software that is accessed at a non-school-related location, activity, function, or program or through the use of technology or an electronic device that is not owned, leased, or used by a School District or school, if the bullying substantially interferes with or limits the victim's ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or opportunities offered by a school or substantially disrupts the education process or orderly operation of a school; or
6. The above item 5 does not require a school to staff or monitor any non-school-related activity, function, or program.

The policy shall also:

1. Describe student responsibilities, including the requirements for students to conform to reasonable standards of socially acceptable behavior; respect the person, property, and rights of others; obey constituted authority; and respond to those who hold that authority;
2. Address appropriate recognition for positive reinforcement for good conduct, self-discipline, good citizenship, and academic success;
3. Explain student rights; and
4. Identify disciplinary sanctions and due process.

4. CONSEQUENCES FOR STUDENTS AND EMPLOYEES WHO COMMIT ACTS OF BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

Concluding whether a particular action or incident constitutes a violation of this policy requires a determination based on all of the facts and surrounding circumstances. The physical location or time of access of a computer-related incident cannot be raised as a defense in any disciplinary action. Consequences and appropriate remedial action for students who commit acts of bullying or harassment may range from positive behavioral interventions up to and including suspension or expulsion, as outlined in the Code of Student Conduct. Consequences and appropriate remedial action for a school employee found to have committed an act of bullying or harassment may be disciplined in accordance with district policies, procedures, and agreements. Additional, egregious acts of harassment by certified educators may result in a sanction against an educator's state issued certificate, pursuant to Rule 6B-1.006, F.A.C. Consequences and appropriate remedial action for a visitor or volunteer, found to have committed an act of bullying or harassment, shall be determined by the school administrator after consideration of the nature and circumstances of the act, including reports to appropriate law enforcement officials.

5. CONSEQUENCES FOR STUDENTS AND EMPLOYEES WHO WRONGFULLY AND INTENTIONALLY ACCUSE OTHERS OF BULLYING OR HARASSMENT

Consequences and appropriate remedial action for a student found to have wrongfully and intentionally accused another as a means of bullying or harassment range from positive behavioral interventions up to and including suspension or expulsion, as outlined in the Code of Student Conduct. Consequences and appropriate remedial action for a school employee found to have wrongfully and intentionally accused another as a means of bullying or harassment may be disciplined in accordance with district policies, procedures, and agreements. Consequences and appropriate remedial action for a visitor or volunteer, found to have wrongfully and intentionally accused another as a means of bullying or harassment, shall be determined by the school administrator after consideration of the nature and circumstances of the act, including reports to appropriate law enforcement officials.

6. PROCEDURE FOR RECEIVING REPORTS OF ALLEGED BULLYING OR HARASSMENT, INCLUDING PROCEDURES FOR ANONYMOUS REPORTING

At each school, the principal or the principal's designee is responsible for receiving complaints alleging violations of this policy. All school employees are required to report alleged violations of this policy to the principal or the principal's designee. All other members of the school community, including students, parents/legal guardians, volunteers, and visitors are encouraged to report any act that may be a violation of this policy anonymously or in-person to the principal or principal's designee.

The principal of each school in the district shall establish and prominently publicize to students, staff, volunteers, and parents/legal guardians, how a report of bullying or harassment may be filed either in-person or anonymously and how this report will be acted upon. The victim of bullying or harassment, anyone who witnessed the bullying or harassment, and anyone who has credible information that an act of bullying or harassment has taken place may file a report of bullying or harassment. A school employee, school volunteer, student, parent/legal guardian, or other person who promptly reports in good faith an act of bullying or harassment to the appropriate school official and who makes this report in compliance with the procedures set forth in the district policy is immune from a cause of action for damages arising out of the reporting itself or any failure to remedy the reported incident. Submission of a good faith complaint or report of bullying or harassment will not affect the complainant or reporter's future employment, grades, learning or working environment, or work assignments.

Any written or oral reporting of an act of bullying or harassment shall be considered an official means of reporting such act(s). **Reports may be made anonymously, but formal disciplinary action may not be based solely on the basis of an anonymous report.**

7. PROCEDURE FOR PROMPT INVESTIGATION OF REPORTS OF BULLYING OR HARASSMENT AND THE PERSONS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE INVESTIGATION

The investigation of a reported act of bullying or harassment is a school-related activity and begins with a report of such an act. Incidents that require a reasonable investigation when reported to appropriate school authorities include alleged incidents of bullying or harassment allegedly committed against a child while the child is on a school bus or at a school bus stop.

Procedures for investigating bullying and harassment must include:

1. The principal or designee selects a designee(s), employed by the school, trained in investigative procedures to initiate the investigation. The designee(s) may not be the accused perpetrator (harasser or bully) or victim.
2. Documented interviews of the victim, alleged perpetrator, and witnesses are conducted privately, separately, and are confidential. Each individual (victim, alleged perpetrator, and witnesses) will be interviewed separately and at no time will the alleged perpetrator and victim be interviewed together.
3. The investigator shall collect and evaluate the facts including, but not limited to:
 - a. Description of incident(s) including nature of the behavior, context in which the alleged incident(s) occurred, etc.;
 - b. How often the conduct occurred;
 - c. Whether there were past incidents or past continuing patterns of behavior;
 - d. The relationship between the parties involved;
 - e. The characteristics of parties involved (i.e., grade, age, etc.);
 - f. The identity and number of individuals who participated in the incident;
 - g. Where the alleged incident(s) occurred;
 - h. Whether the conduct adversely affected the student's education or educational environment;
 - i. Whether the alleged victim felt or perceived an imbalance of power as a result of the reported incident; and
 - j. The date, time, and method in which the parents/legal guardians of all parties involved were contacted.
4. Whether a particular action or incident constitutes a violation of this policy requires a determination based on all the facts and surrounding circumstances and includes:
 - a. Recommended remedial steps necessary to stop the bullying or harassing behavior; and
 - b. A written final report to the principal.
5. The maximum of 10 school days shall be the limit for the initial filing of incidents and completion of the investigative procedural steps. The highest level of confidentiality possible will be upheld regarding the submission of a complaint or a report of bullying or harassment, and the investigative procedures that follow.

8. PROCESS TO INVESTIGATE WHETHER A REPORT OF BULLYING OR HARASSMENT IS WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE DISTRICT AND FOR REFERRAL TO APPROPRIATE JURISDICTION

Computers without web-filtering software or computers with web-filtering software that is disabled shall be used when complaints of cyberbullying are investigated.

A principal or designee will assign a designee(s) that is trained in investigative procedures to initiate an investigation of whether an act of bullying or harassment is within the scope of the School District.

The trained designee(s) will provide a report on results of investigation with recommendations for the principal to make a determination if an act bullying or harassment falls within the scope of the district.

1. If it is within scope of district, move to Procedures for Investigating Bullying and Harassment.
2. If it is outside scope of district, and determined a criminal act, refer to appropriate law enforcement.
3. If it is outside scope of district, and determined not a criminal act, inform parents/legal guardians of all students involved.

9. PROCEDURE FOR NOTIFYING PARENTS/GUARDIANS OF VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS OF REPORTED BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

The principal, or designee, shall promptly **report via telephone, personal conference, or in writing, the occurrence of any incident of bullying or harassment as defined by this policy to the parent or legal guardian of all students involved** on the same day an investigation of the incident(s) has been initiated. Notification must be consistent with the student privacy rights under the applicable provisions of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) and state privacy laws.

Upon receiving a report of bullying, harassment, or other qualifying incident under Section 1002.40, F.S., the School District shall timely notify parents of the Hope Scholarship program, which allows students who have been bullied, harassed, or subjected to other violent acts to transfer to another public school or to enroll in an approved private school. Reported acts of bullying, harassment, or other violent incidents **do not have to be substantiated** in order to qualify for the Hope Scholarship. The School District shall follow all Hope Scholarship procedures in accordance with Section 1002.40, F.S., and Rule 6A-6.0951, F.A.C.

Once the investigation has been completed and it has been determined that criminal charges may be pursued against the perpetrator, all appropriate local law enforcement agencies will be notified by telephone or in writing.

10. PROCEDURE TO REFER VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS OF BULLYING AND HARASSMENT FOR COUNSELING

A district referral procedure will establish a protocol for intervening when bullying or harassment is suspected or when a bullying or harassment incident is reported. The procedure shall include:

1. A process by which the teacher or parent/legal guardian may request informal consultation with school staff (specialty staff, e.g., school counselor, school psychologist, etc.) to determine the severity of concern and appropriate steps to address the concern (the involved students' parents or legal guardian may be included).
2. A referral process to provide professional assistance or services that includes:
 - a. A process by which school personnel or parent/legal guardian may refer a student to the school intervention team (or equivalent school-based team with a problem-solving focus) for consideration of appropriate services. (Parent or legal guardian involvement is required at this point.)
 - b. If a formal discipline report or formal complaint is made, the principal or designee must refer the student(s) to the school intervention team for determination of counseling support and interventions. (Parent or legal guardian involvement is required.)
3. A school-based component to address intervention and assistance as determined appropriate by the intervention team that includes:
 - a. Counseling and support to address the needs of the victims of bullying or harassment;
 - b. Research-based counseling/interventions to address the behavior of the students who bully and harass others (e.g., empathy training, anger management); and
 - c. Research-based counseling/interventions, which include assistance and support provided to parents or legal guardians, if deemed necessary or appropriate.

11. PROCEDURE FOR INCLUDING INCIDENTS OF BULLYING OR HARASSMENT IN REQUIRED SESIR REPORTING UNDER SECTION 1006.09(6), F.S.

In accordance with Rules 6A-1.0014 and 6A-1.0017, F.A.C., the School District must utilize Florida's School Environmental Safety Incident Reporting (SESIR) system to report all incidents of bullying, harassment, as well as any other incident that is bullying-related. Reporting must be completed in the format and by the deadlines specified in Rule 6A-1.0014, F.A.C. Required SESIR reporting also includes allegations of bullying and harassment that are not able to be substantiated following an investigation.

12. LIST OF PROGRAMS THAT PROVIDE INSTRUCTION TO STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND SCHOOL STAFF ON IDENTIFYING, PREVENTING, AND RESPONDING TO BULLYING OR HARASSMENT

The district ensures that schools sustain healthy, positive, and safe learning environments for all students. It is important to change the social climate of the school and the social norms with regards to bullying or harassment. This requires the efforts of everyone in the school environment – teachers, administrators, counselors, school nurses, other non-teaching staff (such as bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers, and school librarians), parents/legal guardians, and students.

Students, parents/legal guardians, teachers, school administrators, counseling staff, and school volunteers shall be given instruction at a minimum on an annual basis on the district's Policy and Regulations against bullying and harassment. The instruction shall include evidence-based methods of preventing bullying and harassment, as well as how to effectively identify and respond to bullying or harassment in schools. Instruction shall include how to recognize behaviors that lead to bullying and harassment and how to take appropriate preventive action based on those observations:

The School District provides the following list of authorized programs including, but not limited to: *(Programs listed below are provided as examples only. Inclusion of programs within this list does not imply endorsement or promotion by the Florida Department of Education. Specific programs authorized for use in your schools will need to be determined by the Superintendent or appropriate School District staff.)*

- Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP)
- PBS/PBIS (Positive Behavior Support)/Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports
- Monique Burr Foundations for Children, Inc.'s Child Safety Matters
- Second Step
- Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders (AVB)
- Project Wisdom
- i-Safe
- Common Sense K-12 Digital Citizenship
- Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment in Our Nation's Classrooms (for teachers)
- Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment on Our Nation's School Buses (for bus drivers)
- Character Counts
- Values Matter

Decisions to include additional instructional programs or activities, not previously listed within this policy, will be made on a case-by-case basis and authorized by individual school principals.

13. PROCEDURE FOR REPORTING ACTIONS TAKEN TO PROTECT THE VICTIM

The principal, or designee, shall by telephone and/or in writing report the occurrence of any incident of bullying or harassment as defined by this policy to the parent or legal guardian of all students involved on the same day an investigation of the incident has been initiated. According to the level of infraction, parents/legal guardians will be notified by telephone or writing of actions being taken to protect the child; the frequency of notification will depend on the seriousness of the bullying or harassment incident. Notification must be consistent with the student privacy rights under the applicable provisions of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA).

14. PROCEDURE FOR PUBLICIZING THE DISTRICT'S POLICY

At the beginning of each school year, the superintendent or designee shall, in writing, inform school staff, parents/legal guardians, or other persons responsible for the welfare of a student of the district's student safety and violence prevention policy.

Each district school shall provide notice to students and staff of this policy through by publishing it the code of student conduct required by Section 1006.07(2), F.S., and all employee handbooks. The superintendent shall also make all contractors contracting with the district aware of this policy.

Each school principal shall develop an annual process for discussing the School District policy on bullying and harassment with students in a student assembly or other reasonable format. Reminders of the policy and bullying or harassment prevention messages such as posters and signs will be displayed around each school and on the district school buses.