

What Happens When Hazing, Harassment and Bullying Is Reported?

A plain-language guide for Vermont students, families and caregivers

Harassment, hazing and bullying (HHB) can interfere with a student's safety, wellbeing and ability to learn. This guide explains what students and families can expect when a concern is reported to a school, from the first report through the investigation and what happens afterward.

Start here: You do not need to know whether a situation legally "counts" as harassment, hazing or bullying before you report it. Share the concern with the school. The school is responsible for reviewing the information and deciding what process applies.

What Does HHB Mean?

Harassment, hazing, and bullying refer to specific categories of harmful behavior defined by Vermont State law. Vermont law also requires that certain processes and protections will apply if harmful behavior could be HHB. Schools are expected to address any inappropriate conduct through the policies, supports, discipline practices, or restorative approaches that apply to the situation.

- **Harassment:** Conduct connected to a legally protected characteristic that substantially interferes with a student's education or creates a hostile environment. The legally protected characteristics include race, creed, color, national origin, citizenship, immigration status, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability.
- **Bullying:** Repeated, intentional behavior by a student or group of students meant to ridicule, humiliate, or intimidate another student.
- **Hazing:** Humiliating, intimidating, demeaning, or dangerous conduct connected to joining, belonging to, or maintaining membership in a school-affiliated group or organization.

What if it isn't HHB?

Not every harmful, inappropriate, or negative interaction meets the legal definition of harassment, hazing, or bullying. **That does not mean the behavior is acceptable or should be ignored.**

If a concern does not meet the definition of HHB, the school should still consider what response is appropriate. Depending on the situation, this may include student supports, restorative practices, behavior interventions, discipline, or other steps under the school's policies.

Families should expect the school to explain how the concern will be addressed, even when it does not move forward as an HHB investigation.

What Can be Reported?

Vermont law sets specific definitions for harassment, hazing and bullying. Your school will review available information and decide whether a report may meet one of those definitions.

Conduct that does not meet the legal definition of HHB may still violate school rules and should still be addressed.

Retaliation is prohibited: A student or other person may not be punished, threatened or treated badly for reporting HHB or participating in an investigation. Tell the school promptly if you believe retaliation is happening.

The Process at a Glance

1. Report the concern

A student, family member, staff member or other person may report possible HHB. A report can be made orally or in writing to any school staff member.

2. The school reviews the report and addresses immediate safety

The school documents the concern, refers it to a Designated Employee, and takes steps to stop ongoing conduct and address immediate safety needs. A school administrator reviews the report within one day.

3. If the concern may meet the HHB definition, an investigation begins

Both (or all) parties are notified. A trained, unbiased investigator gathers information. The investigation should be completed within five school days after the Designated Employee receives the report, unless there is a justified delay. Any delays will be communicated by the school before the end of the investigation window.

4. The school makes a determination

All parties receive written notice that the investigation is complete and whether the conduct was found to meet the definition of harassment, hazing or bullying.

5. The school follows through

If HHB behavior is substantiated, or validated through the investigation process, the school must act to stop the behavior, prevent it from happening again, address its effects, and restore access to education. Supports may continue even when HHB is not substantiated.

Step 1: Making a Report

A report can be made by a student, family member, school employee or other person. It may be made verbally or in writing to any staff member and does not require a “formal” or “official” report. Each school must identify at least two Designated Employees who receive and review HHB reports. It is important to know that the initial report is an allegation, not a determination that HHB occurred.

Helpful Information to Share

- What happened, including words or actions you remember.
- When and where it happened, including whether it happened online.
- Who was involved and who may have seen or heard what happened.
- Any messages, screenshots, photos or other information you have.
- How the situation has affected the student, including safety, attendance, learning or participation.

Step 2: What Happens Right Away

When school staff learn about possible HHB, they should respond promptly. The exact response will depend on the situation.

- If the conduct is happening staff should take appropriate steps to intervene and stop it.
- If there is an immediate danger, law enforcement may be contacted.
- The staff member documents the concern and refers it to a Designated Employee the same school day.
- If the report may involve sexual harassment, it is referred to the school’s Title IX Coordinator. Additional procedures may be required, and your school’s designated Title IX Coordinator should provide you with more information.
- If there is suspected child abuse or abuse of a vulnerable adult, required reports are made to the appropriate state agency.
- If there is an immediate danger, law enforcement may be contacted.
- Within one day, a school administrator reviews the report and decides whether the information could meet the definition of HHB.

If the report does not appear to meet the HHB definition

The school will notify the reporting family when appropriate. The school may still respond under its student conduct or discipline policies and may provide supports to address the behavior and protect the learning environment.

If the report may meet the HHB definition

The school provides notice to the parties and begins an HHB investigation.

Support and Safety During the Process

The school may use interim measures that are non-disciplinary supports to help students remain safe and able to participate in school. Depending on the situation, these may include:

- A safety or no-contact plan

- Counseling or check-ins with a trusted adult
- Changes to seating, classes or schedules
- Academic supports or deadline extensions
- Additional supervision or separate transportation when feasible

Families can share safety concerns and suggest supports that may help. Students with disabilities should receive additional supports to consider needed accommodations and protections through applicable IEP or Section 504 processes. These measures can continue during and after the investigation.

Step 3: The Investigation

The school will assign a trained, unbiased investigator who will gather information about the reported incident. The investigator may interview students, staff or other people; review messages or documents; and consider other relevant information.

How long will it take?

The investigation is generally completed within five school days after the Designated Employee receives the report. Sometimes a delay is necessary, including when another process such as a threat assessment, child protection investigation, or law enforcement investigation must occur. If there is a justified delay, the school documents the reason and provides both parties a written update with a new expected completion date.

Will families know everything that is shared?

No. Schools must protect student education records. The school should keep families informed about the process, findings, supports affecting their student, and any delays, but schools generally cannot share identifying information or discipline information about another student without permission.

Students may be interviewed during an investigation: Schools may interview students as part of the investigation without first obtaining parent or caregiver consent. The school should provide appropriate supports and accommodations for students who need them, including students with IEPs, Section 504 plans or communication needs.

Step 4: The Decision

When the investigation is complete, the school provides a written determination. The letter should tell you:

- That the investigation is complete.
- A brief description of what was found, without improperly identifying other students.
- Whether the reported conduct occurred.
- Whether the conduct meets the definition of harassment, hazing or bullying.
- The school generally cannot share specific discipline imposed on another student because of student privacy requirements.

Step 5: What Happens After the Investigation

If HHB is substantiated

The school must take prompt steps to stop the behavior, prevent it from happening again, address its effects, and restore the affected student's access to school. The response should fit the situation and may include:

- Education or training for students, staff, classes, grades or the school community
- Counseling or other supports
- Restorative practices, when participation is voluntary
- Safety plans, schedule changes or additional supervision
- Restrictions or loss of privileges
- Discipline consistent with school policy and law

Special protections apply when discipline involves a student with a disability. Additional limits also apply to suspension or expulsion of students under age 8.

If HHB is not substantiated

A finding that the reported conduct does not meet the legal definition of HHB does not mean the school should ignore the concern or that harm has not occurred. The school may still address the behavior under other school policies and may continue to provide supports that help students feel safe and able to learn.

Review and Appeal Options

Different review options apply depending on the type of concern and whether the student is the person who made the complaint or the student who was accused. Your school should provide instructions for using the options that apply to your situation.

For a student/family who made a harassment complaint	For a student/family responding to an allegation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal review: May be requested following the initial decision. A Final Decision is issued within 30 days of the request. • Independent review for harassment: Request within 30 days of the Final Decision. A neutral reviewer examines the investigation, decision and response and makes recommendations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appeal: Request in writing within 10 calendar days to the school board or, for an independent school, its governing body. The board reviews the investigation report and determination to decide whether the school's decision was reasonable and supported by the evidence. Investigation materials may be available for appeal as allowed by law, with student identifiers redacted.

How Other Processes May Fit In

Title IX and sexual harassment

Concerns that may involve sexual harassment are referred to the school's Title IX Coordinator. Title IX grievance procedures may affect the timing of the HHB process. Supportive measures may be offered while that process is underway. Their goal is to protect safety and restore access to education.

Threats or emergencies

Schools act immediately when there is a safety threat or emergency. A Behavioral Threat Assessment may occur alongside, or temporarily before, the HHB investigation. Families should be informed about any resulting delay in the HHB process.

How Families Can Help and Where to Go for Help

How families can help	Key contacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Report promptly and share specific information or evidence. While reports can be made orally, documenting your interactions may help you in following up with the school, district, HRC, or OCR, if needed.• Share immediate safety concerns and supports your student needs.• Remind your student not to retaliate or continue the conflict.• Stay in contact with the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Designated Employee(s): school handbook or website.• Title IX Coordinator: school handbook or website.• Vermont Human Rights Commission: hrc.vermont.gov• U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights: ed.gov/about/ed-offices/ocr