

BULLYING PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

On May 3, 2010 Governor Patrick signed an *Act Relative to Bullying in Schools*. This new law prohibits bullying and retaliation in all public and private schools, and requires schools and school districts to take certain steps to addressing bullying incidents. Relevant sections of the law (M.G.L. c. 71, § 37O) are described below.

These requirements will be included in the school's or district's Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan, which must be finalized no later than December 31, 2010. The Plan will include the requirements of the new law, and also information about the policies and procedures that the school or school district will follow to prevent bullying and retaliation, or to respond to it when it occurs. In developing the Plan, schools and districts must consult with school and local community members, including staff, and parents and guardians.

The school or district will take specific steps to create a safe, supportive environment for all students in the school community, and provide all students with the skills, knowledge, and strategies to prevent or respond to bullying, harassment, or teasing.

Definitions

Aggressor is a student who engages in bullying, cyberbullying, or retaliation.

Bullying is the repeated use by one or more students of a written, verbal or electronic expression or a physical act or gesture or any combination thereof, directed at a target that: (i) causes physical or emotional harm to the target or damage to the target's property; (ii) places the target in reasonable fear of harm to himself/herself or of damage to his/her property; (iii) creates a hostile environment at school for the target; (iv) infringes on the rights of the target at school; or (v) materially and substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school. Bullying includes cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is bullying through the use of technology or any electronic devices such as telephones, cell phones, computers, and the Internet. It includes, but is not limited to, email, instant messages, text messages, and Internet postings.

Hostile environment is a situation in which bullying causes the school environment to be permeated with intimidation, ridicule or insult that is sufficiently severe or pervasive to alter the conditions of the student's education.

Retaliation is any form of intimidation, reprisal, or harassment directed against a student who reports bullying, provides information during an investigation of bullying, or witnesses or has reliable information about bullying.

Target is a student against whom bullying, cyberbullying, or retaliation has been perpetrated.

Prohibition Against Bullying

Bullying is prohibited: (i) on school grounds, property immediately adjacent to school grounds, at a school-sponsored or school-related activity, function, or program whether

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on or off school grounds, at a school bus stop, on a school bus or other vehicle owned, leased, or used by a school district or school, or through the use of technology or an electronic device that is owed, leased, or used by a school district or school and (ii) at a location, activity, function, or program that is not school-related, 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 creates a hostile environment at school for the target, infringes on the rights of the target at school or materially and substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school. Nothing contained herein shall require schools to staff any non-school related activities, functions, or programs.

Retaliation against a person who reports bullying, provides information during an investigation of bullying, or witnesses or has reliable information about bullying is prohibited.

Responsibility of Staff to Report Bullying

A member of a school staff is required to report immediately any instance of bullying or retaliation the staff member has witnessed or become aware of to the principal or to the school official identified in the Plan as responsible for receiving such reports or both. The following information can be used to contact your child's principal and central office personnel responsible for enforcing the bullying prevention and intervention law.

Please contact or send your correspondence to: Mr. Norman C. Robbins, Principal at (413) 821-0542 or via email at: nrobbins@agawampublicschools.org

Staff includes, but is not limited to, an educator, administrator, counselor, school nurse, cafeteria worker, custodian, bus driver, athletic coach, advisor to an extracurricular activity or paraprofessional,

Upon receipt of such a report, the school principal or his/her designee shall promptly conduct an investigation. If the school principal or designee determines that bullying or retaliation has occurred, the school principal or designee shall (i) notify the parents or guardians of the target, and to the extent consistent with state and federal law, notify them of the action taken to prevent any further acts of bullying or retaliation; (ii) notify the parents or guardians of a aggressor; (iii) take appropriate disciplinary action; and (iv) notify the local law enforcement agency if the school principal or designee believes that criminal charges may be pursued against the aggressor.

Upon the principal or designee determining that bullying or retaliation has occurred, the law requires that the school or district use a range of responses that balance the need for accountability with the need to teach appropriate behavior. M.G.L. c. 71, § 37O(d)(v).

Professional Development

Schools and districts must provide ongoing professional development to increase the skills of all staff members to prevent, identify, and respond to bullying.

The content of such professional development is to include, but not be limited to: (i) developmentally appropriate strategies to prevent bullying incidents; (ii) developmentally appropriate strategies for immediate, effective interventions to stop bullying incidents;

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(iii) information regarding the complex interaction and power differential that can take place between and among an aggressor, target, and witnesses to the bullying; (iv) research findings on bullying, including information about specific categories of students who have been shown to be particularly at risk for bullying in the school environment; (v) information on the incidence and nature of cyberbullying; and (vi) Internet safety issues as they relate to cyberbullying.

Additional information about the school's or district's Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan will be made available when it is finalized.