

BULLYING PREVENTION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES (1/5/12)
NJ Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention (www.njbullying.org/908 522-2581)
Expert Advisory Group

The recently enacted NJ anti-bullying law (Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights) requires school leaders to focus more intensively on preventing, investigating, reporting, and responding to harassment, intimidation and bullying (HIB) in school. This Expert Advisory Group, consisting largely of college- and university-based experts, was convened to provide guidance and assistance for schools throughout New Jersey to promote successful implementation of the law. "Bullying Prevention for Students with Disabilities" (1/5/12) is the 2nd in a series; you can access this document, the previous document, "Bullying Prevention Guidance for School Stakeholders" (9/1/11) and all subsequent documents at www.njbullying.org.

INTRODUCTION: STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, AND BULLYING

The term "disability" covers a wide range of conditions. Some disabilities are highly "visible," (e.g., a student with cerebral palsy who is in a wheelchair; a student with Tourette Syndrome who compulsively verbalizes or displays repetitive movements), while others are "invisible," (e.g., a student with a learning disability; a student with an internalized emotional disturbance). Students with disabilities are more often targeted for bullying than students without such challenges. To protect these students, the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, in defining HIB, specifically cites several distinguishing characteristics to consider as possible underlying factors motivating HIB behavior. These include, but are not limited to, "a mental, physical or sensory disability." There are several factors linked to the higher level of victimization for students with disabilities. *First*, some students with disabilities may be potential targets because their appearance is different. *Second*, students with disabilities may be more socially isolated than students without disabilities and lack relationships which buffer against being bullied. *Third*, having a disability in and of itself may create an imbalance of power so that students with disabilities have difficulty defending themselves. *Fourth*, students with disabilities may behave differently or in ways that others do not understand; this "different" behavior may be perceived, incorrectly, by other students – and sometimes staff – as "provoking" or even "deserving" a negative response. *Fifth*, students with disabilities may require support that staff – and sometimes other students – find challenging. *Sixth*, students with disabilities are often excluded from the mainstream social fabric of the school, a situation which limits other students from engaging with and acquiring familiarity with these students. The aggregate negative impact of these factors is exacerbated when schools do not develop policies and interventions which help protect all students, those with and without disabilities, from being bullied and appropriately address those who bully others.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL CLIMATE

In a positive school climate where all members of the school community expect and experience acceptance, the challenges of different populations within the diverse group of students with disabilities may not loom as large. In schools with positive climates, students with and without disabilities benefit from opportunities to interact and to develop friendships. When students with disabilities become less socially isolated, students without disabilities gain understanding about individual differences and the importance of empathy, acceptance, and support for all people. As a general rule, schools should adopt curricula and programs that promote dignity and respect for *all* students. This approach includes an emphasis on social-emotional learning, character development, human rights, and helping all students in a school develop appropriate social and behavioral skills. Subgroups among the larger group of students with disabilities may require elevated support to assimilate and benefit from the school's approach. Teachers and support staff, especially school psychologists and school social workers, have a major role to play in protecting students with disabilities from bullying, in helping them manage peer relations and to desist from bullying others. In cases where these students have been bullied, it is essential that each child understands that he or she is not at fault. The special education student who bullies must be disciplined in a way that is consistent with the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, but does not interfere with his/her rights as established by IDEA (please see <http://idea.ed.gov> for the IDEA regulations regarding discipline.)

KEY ACTIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS AND STAFF

- **Ensure that school policies and procedures specifically address students with disabilities.**
- **Create an understanding of diversity among all students.** Help students to understand ways in which we all are different and that disability is simply one of these differences.
- **Ensure that materials and communications about anti-bullying and climate-strengthening approaches are modified as/if needed so that students with disabilities understand the basic tenets and are engaged.** Barriers to such understanding/engagement, including language, communication, emotional/behavioral and cognitive challenges, can all be overcome with proper modifications
- **Include information that addresses anti-bullying issues specific to students with disabilities in all HIB training.**
- **Involve families.** Include students with disabilities and their families in the school's anti-bullying assessment, planning and implementation activities.
- **Include staff and parent/s with special education experience on the school safety (climate) team.** Having team members who are familiar with a wide range of students with disabilities will help your team be sensitive to their specific issues and challenges.
- **Include students with disabilities in data collection and assessment of bullying and school climate.** Their voices will contribute to the development of more effective programs and policies.
- **Encourage all students to participate in anti-bullying programs.** For example, students with intellectual and developmental disabilities can successfully participate in curricula and programs related to improving school climate, inclusion, and anti-bullying as long as these programs are appropriately modified to meet their learning needs.
- **Address isolation and moderate exclusion.** Be sensitive to the needs of students who are separated out of the mainstream because they receive special services. Establish peer support programs and activities to promote friendships between students with disabilities and their mainstream peers.
- **Encourage and provide for safe, accessible means for students to let an adult know about any HIB experienced.**
- **Address the needs of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.** This subgroup may be more involved in bullying (being bullied and bullying others), partly due to disability-related behaviors and deficits such as poor emotional self-regulation and impulse control. All school staff should receive training in understanding and responding to children with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a supportive manner. Counseling services which focus on prosocial skill development, including anger management training, should be available.
- **When bullying occurs, specific services should be available at school to help students with disabilities.** Individualized plans should be developed to help students with disabilities cope with the negative impact of being bullied. This may include individual counseling or group counseling to develop and strengthen relevant social and behavioral skills. Students with disabilities who engage in bullying behavior may also need an individualized plan of intervention that provides individual counseling and/or group counseling with a focus on social skill, behavioral skill, and anger management skill development.
- **School specialists, such as psychologists and social workers, have critical roles.** These school-based helpers should work with all adults involved with the student, preparing the adults to be vigilant, protective, and ready to support skill development relevant to bullying. Specialists should consult with teachers to help teachers provide the specific support students with disabilities may need.