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## A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ILLINOIS SCHOOL BULLYING POLICIES

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# A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ILLINOIS SCHOOL BULLYING POLICIES

## OVERVIEW

Bullying remains a serious concern for children and adolescents. However, each jurisdiction in the United States addresses bullying differently. Some states offer model school policies, require bullying prevention programs, or have specific regulations. While each jurisdiction differs, most states require that school districts implement a bullying policy to investigate and respond to bullying (“Laws, Policies & Regulations,” 2023). The U.S. Department of Education developed a framework of 13 common components of bullying state laws, policies, and regulations to help describe and compare how states address bullying (“Common Components in State Anti-Bullying Laws, Policies and Regulations,” 2023).

Within the state of Illinois, there are laws and policies addressing bullying. Illinois provides clear definitions for bullying and cyberbullying and includes 12 of the 13 components of state anti-bullying laws and regulations. In its policy toolkit, Illinois provides school district policy handbooks with requirements for how to address bullying (“Bullying Prevention Policy Requirements and Guidance,” 2024; Illinois State Board of Education, 2021). There are required elements that bullying policies must adhere to and policies are reviewed by the Illinois State Board of Education every two years (Illinois State Board of Education, 2021). The current study reviewed compliance among a stratified random sample of school districts across Illinois.

Specifically, we examined if a school district included the full requirements of the bullying policy on their school webpage or provided a link to the policy through their school district website. We then looked at this coding (i.e., school included the full policy or not) in relation to rates of bullying within each school district. This study has implications for the importance of school bullying policies and for the implementation of these policies.

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In the United States, an estimated one of five high school students report being bullied at school (“Fast Facts: Preventing Bullying,” 2023). Bullying includes repeated, unwanted aggression (that can be in physical, verbal, relational, and cyber forms) from peers with a power imbalance that is perceived or observed (Gladden et al., 2014). Bullying victimization can result in serious detriments to one’s social and emotional well-being, physical and mental health, and academic performance (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Thus, it is imperative that schools implement policies and programs that make schools safer and prevent bullying.

Each jurisdiction in the United States addresses bullying differently. Some states offer model school policies, require bullying prevention programs, or have specific regulations. While each jurisdiction differs, most states minimally require that school districts implement a bullying policy to investigate and respond to bullying (“Laws, Policies & Regulations,” 2023). The U.S. Department of Education developed a framework of common components of bullying state laws, policies, and regulations. It included 13 elements to help describe and compare how states address bullying (“Common Components in State Anti-Bullying Laws, Policies, and Regulations,” 2023). For more information on these 13 components and how Illinois addresses them, please visit: <https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/laws/illinois>

#### Common Components of Bullying State Laws:

1. Prohibiting statement—included in Illinois
2. Definition—included in Illinois
3. Scope—included in Illinois
4. Protected groups—included in Illinois
5. District policy requirement—included in Illinois
6. Reporting and investigations—included in Illinois
7. Consequences—included in Illinois
8. Communication of policy—included in Illinois
9. Safeguards and supports—included in Illinois
10. Review and update of local policies—included in Illinois
11. Prevention education—included in Illinois
12. *Staff training— not included in Illinois*
13. Parent engagement —included in Illinois

In *Bullying Prevention*, Statute 105 ILCS 5/27-23.7 (Education: School Codes), Illinois requires school districts, charter schools, and non-public, non-sectarian schools to educate students, parents, and school personnel on prohibited bullying behaviors, and to create, maintain, and implement a bullying prevention policy. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) provides a toolkit with guidance on policy requirements and these policies are reviewed every two years (ISBE, 2021). The full statute is included in the Appendix of this report.

#### **Current Study**

Although Illinois has specific laws to address bullying, it is important to assess school compliance with those laws. The current study assessed a stratified, random sample of 400 schools representing Northern, Southern, and Central regions, as well as Cook County, including Chicago. For each school, we found the bullying policy in either the school handbook or the district handbook. We then examined the policy compliance (i.e., included the full policy with all 12 components in the state statute or not) of schools in relation to rates of bullying.

## METHOD

A list of all schools in Illinois was generated by Illinois Report Card (<https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/>). We then removed schools that did not have middle (6-8) or high school grades (9-12). Stratified random sampling was used to select 400 schools from four regions and one county (i.e., 100 schools from the Northern, Central, and Southern regions and 100 schools from Cook County). We searched for each school's student handbook on their school website. If the school's handbook did not provide a bullying policy, then we searched the school district's student handbook.

Regions were based on the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) map (see Figure 1). We examined: 1) Cook County (Region 1); 2) Northern Illinois (Region 2); 3) Central Illinois (Regions 3 and 4, which are North-Central and South-Central); and 4) Southern Illinois (Region 5). For this report, Regions 3 and 4 in the IDHS map were combined into "Central Illinois."

### Coding System

A content analysis was conducted; each handbook was coded in the following manner:

- 1 = the entire bullying policy, with all required statute components was included in the student or policy handbook by the school or school district.
- 2 = the entire policy with all statute components was not provided in the handbook by the school or school district (e.g., only parts of it were included, or no policy was publicly available).

### Links with Bullying Data

Schools were matched with data from the 2022 Illinois Youth Survey (IYS, n.d.), a survey conducted statewide every two years. Rates of bullying were calculated based on self-reported responses of students.

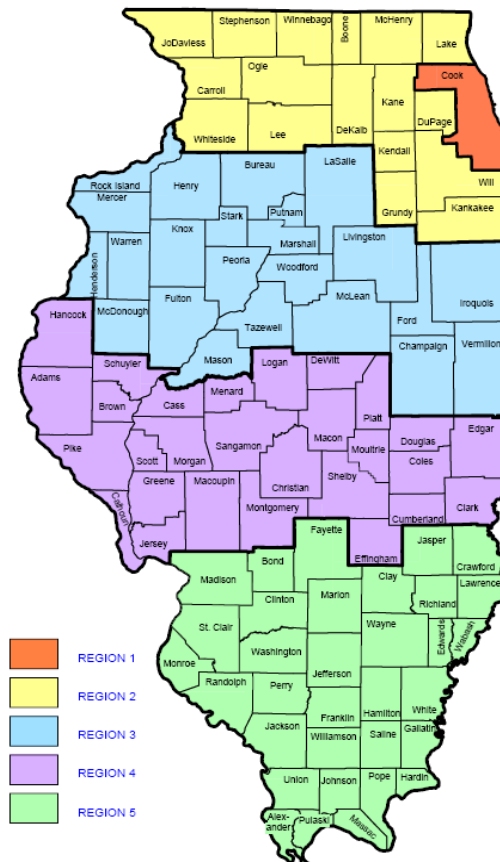
### Types of bullying included:

- Verbal bullying. ("During the past 12 months, has another student at school bullied you by calling you names?")
- Threats of bullying. ("During the past 12 months, has another student at school threatened to hurt you?")
- Physical bullying. ("During the past 12 months, has another student at school bullied you by hitting, punching, kicking, or pushing you?")
- Cyber bullying. ("During the past 12 months, has another student at school bullied, harassed, or spread rumors about you on the Internet, social media, or through text messages?")

Students answered these questions with a yes/no response. These data were aggregated at the school-level for analyses.

Figure 1

Regions According to IDHS



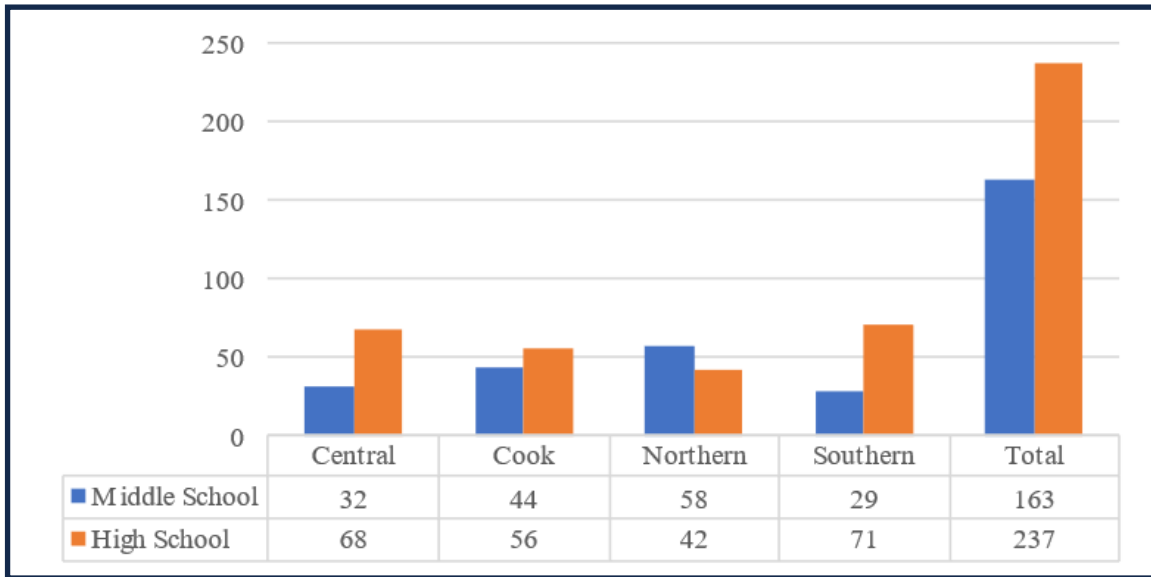


RESULTS

A total of 400 schools were randomly selected from the four regions in Illinois. There was a mix of middle and high schools within each region (for a total of 41% middle schools and 59% high schools in this sample). As shown in Figure 2, 100 schools were selected from each region.

**Figure 2**

*School Type by Region*



Each region represented a diverse number of counties. Across the state, schools from 96 of 102 counties were represented (94%). The number of counties in each region, as well as the number of counties represented in this random selection, are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Number of Counties in the Sample by Region Compared to Total Number of Counties in Each Region*

	Northern	Southern	Central	Cook
<b># of Counties Represented</b>	17	32	46	1
<b># of Counties in Region</b>	17	33	51	1

## RESULTS, CONTINUED

Of the schools that were selected, 149 schools also participated in the Illinois Youth Survey.

Depending on the type of bullying, some regions had higher rates of bullying prevalence than others (see Table 2). The regions with the highest and second highest prevalence for each form of bullying are bolded in the table below. Central and Southern Illinois schools reported the highest and second highest rates of bullying across forms.

**Table 2**

*Rates of Bullying by Type and by Region*

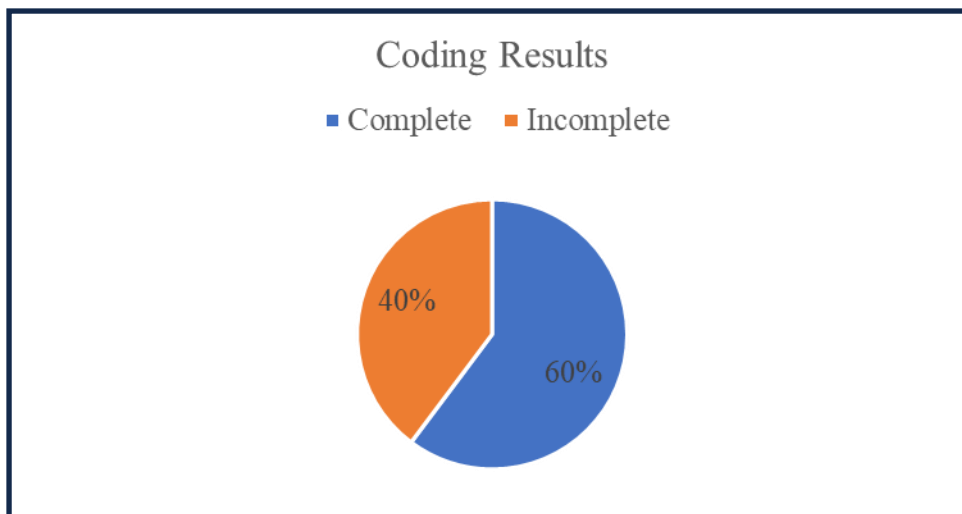
Forms of Bullying	Northern	Southern	Central	Cook
Verbal	22.31%	<b>29.11%</b>	<b>28.75%</b>	18.21%
Threats	11.86%	<b>17.50%</b>	<b>19.66%</b>	11.12%
Physical	8.05%	<b>11.48%</b>	<b>11.88%</b>	6.97%
Cyber	17.65%	<b>23.56%</b>	<b>25.09%</b>	15.06%

*Note.* Regions with the highest and second highest rates of bullying types are bolded in the table.

Of the 400 schools, 241 schools (60%) were in compliance. Their entire bullying policy, with all statute components, was found in the school or district online handbook. However, as shown in Figure 3, 159 schools (40%) had incomplete information and were not in compliance. Schools received an incomplete code when they had only partial information or no policy at all.

**Figure 3**

*Coding Results of Bullying Policies*

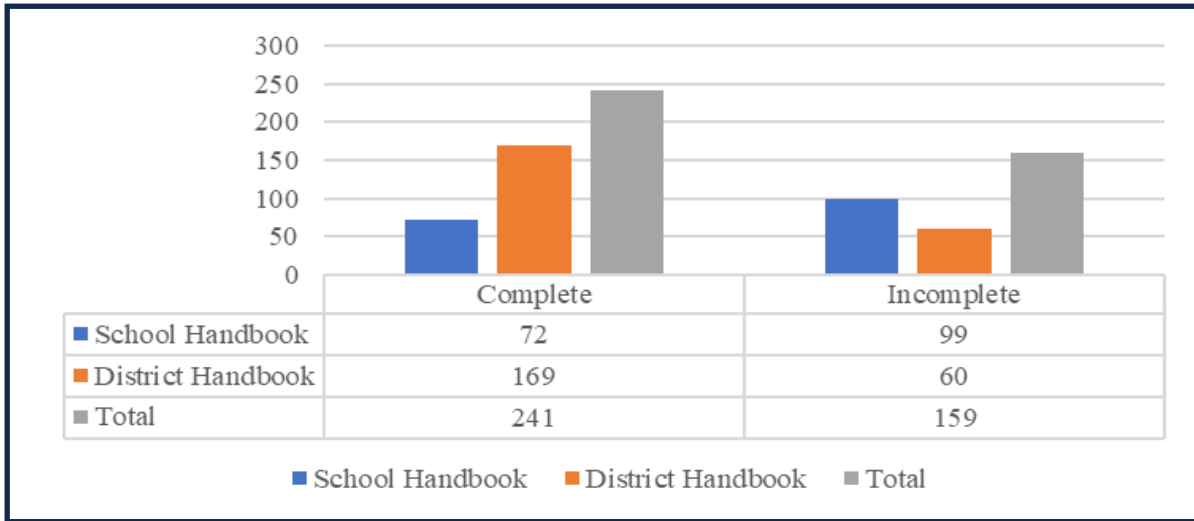




As shown in Figure 4, among schools that had the full policy in their student handbook ( $n = 241$ ), the majority had it in the district handbook ( $n = 169$ , 70%) compared to those having it in the school handbook ( $n = 72$ , 30%). Among schools that did not have the full policy ( $n = 159$ ), the majority had their incomplete policy information in the school handbook ( $n = 99$ , 62%) compared to the district handbook ( $n = 60$ , 38%).

**Figure 4**

*Coding Results by School or District Handbook*

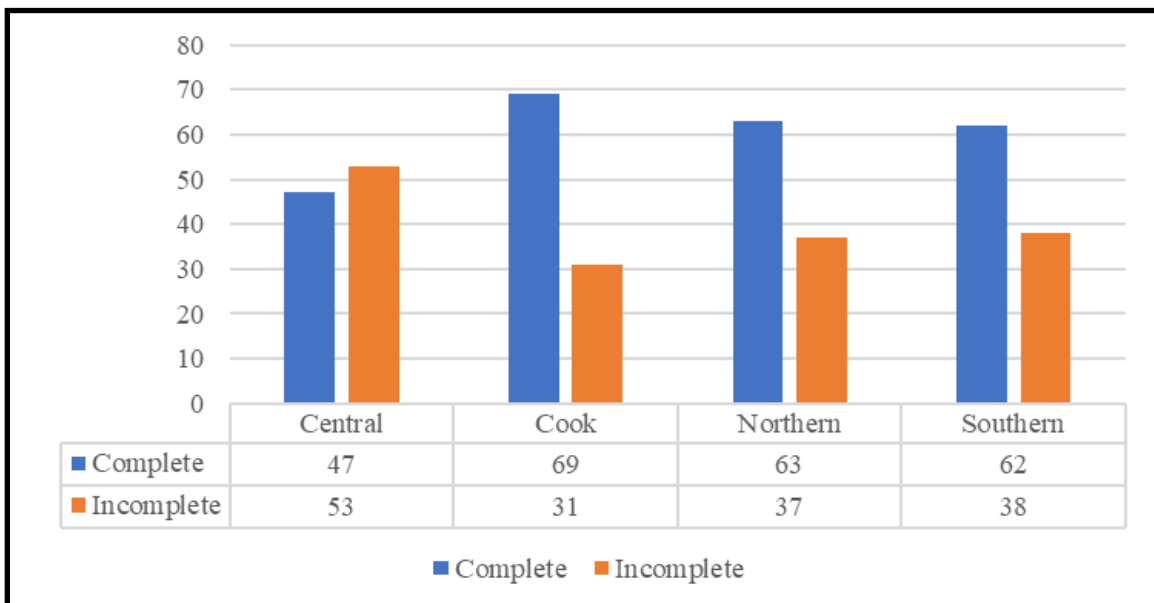


**Coding Results by Region**

Among schools in Cook County and the Northern and Southern regions, a greater proportion complied and had the full bullying policy than those that were incomplete (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Coding Results by Region*

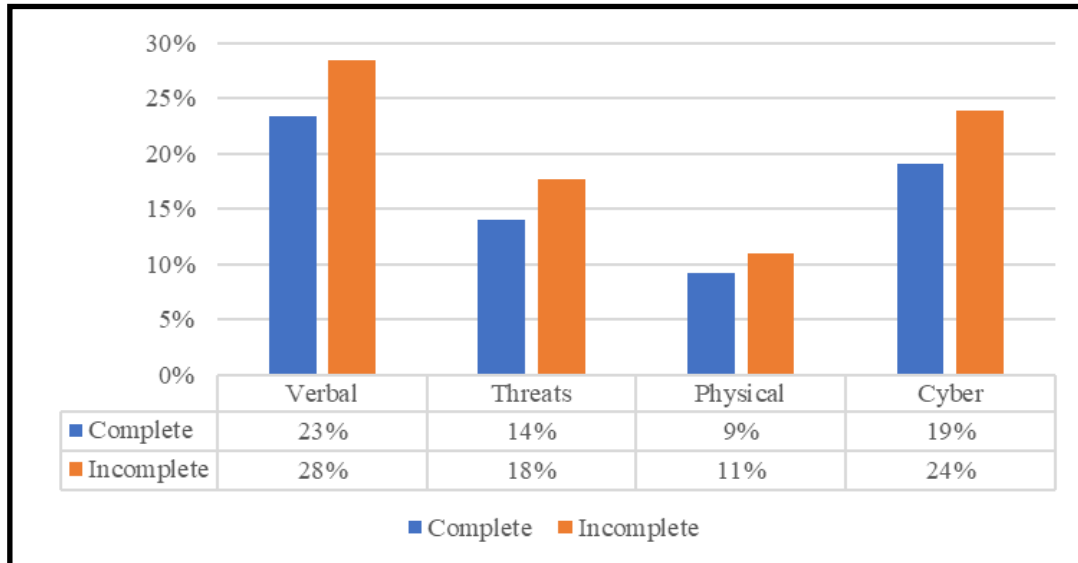


## RESULTS, CONTINUED

Next, we examined differences in the percentages of bullying prevalence by policy coding (i.e., complete versus incomplete). As shown in Figure 6, rates of bullying appeared higher in schools with incomplete bullying policies than in schools with complete bullying policies.

**Figure 6**

*Bullying Prevalence by Policy Coding*



We conducted independent sample t-tests to examine if there were statistically significant differences in the mean level rates of bullying prevalence between schools with complete versus incomplete policies. Differences were statistically significant for three of the four types of bullying (see Table 3). School districts with incomplete policies had significantly higher rates of verbal, threat, and cyber bullying compared to school districts with complete policies. There was not a statistically significant difference for rates of physical bullying ( $p = .151$ ).

**Table 3**

*Results of Independent Samples t-tests Comparing Rates of Bullying by Complete Versus Incomplete Policies*

Types of Bullying	t	p
Verbal	-2.440	.016
Threats	-2.505	.013
Physical	-1.444	.151
Cyber	-3.226	.002

## DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Only a small majority of schools in this study included the full bullying policy (i.e., the entire bullying policy, inclusive of all required statute components) in their school or district handbook (60%). This highlights the need for the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to continue working with schools and districts around bullying policy inclusion and implementation. ISBE requires school districts to file their policies annually, and it conducts a review biennially (“Bullying Prevention Policy Requirements and Guidance,” 2024). More guidance may be necessary, especially at the school level.

When we examined policies by region, Central Illinois schools showed the greatest need for support. These counties constituted the largest proportion of schools not in compliance (i.e., not fully providing the policy with all required statute components in the handbook by the school or school district). Additionally, the youth within these schools reported high rates of all forms of bullying. Percentages of students experiencing bullying was highest in Central Illinois for three of the four forms of bullying compared to other regions.

Finally, when we related our policy coding to rates of bullying, we found that schools with complete bullying policies had significantly lower rates of verbal, threat, and cyber bullying victimization. This means that schools that were missing policy components or did not have a bullying policy were more likely to have higher rates of bullying.

Study findings highlight the importance of schools having full policies included in their school or district handbooks. These policies may help reduce rates of bullying, although more rigorous research testing the direct impact of school policies is necessary. An important limitation to note is that less than half of the randomly selected schools for a policy review also completed the Illinois Youth Survey. Future researchers should consider randomly selecting from school districts that completed the Illinois Youth Survey for more complete data linking policy compliance and rates of bullying. Also, the current study combined North-Central and South-Central regions of Illinois as “Central Illinois.” Given that our findings highlighted this region as an area of greater need for supports, future researchers may wish to tease apart these areas for a more nuanced look at areas within Central Illinois. Finally, future research is also needed to assess the difference between having a policy and the implementation of these policies within schools.



## APPENDIX

**Per 105 ILCD 5/27-23.7** (<https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/documents/010500050K27-23.7.htm>)

### **Bullying prevention.**

(a) The General Assembly finds that a safe and civil school environment is necessary for students to learn and achieve and that bullying causes physical, psychological, and emotional harm to students and interferes with students' ability to learn and participate in school activities. The General Assembly further finds that bullying has been linked to other forms of antisocial behavior, such as vandalism, shoplifting, skipping and dropping out of school, fighting, using drugs and alcohol, sexual harassment, and sexual violence. Because of the negative outcomes associated with bullying in schools, the General Assembly finds that school districts, charter schools, and non-public, non-sectarian elementary and secondary schools should educate students, parents, and school district, charter school, or non-public, non-sectarian elementary or secondary school personnel about what behaviors constitute prohibited bullying.

Bullying on the basis of actual or perceived race, color, religion, sex, national origin, ancestry, age, marital status, physical or mental disability, military status, sexual orientation, gender-related identity or expression, unfavorable discharge from military service, association with a person or group with one or more of the aforementioned actual or perceived characteristics, or any other distinguishing characteristic is prohibited in all school districts, charter schools, and non-public, non-sectarian elementary and secondary schools. No student shall be subjected to bullying:

- (1) during any school-sponsored education program or activity;
- (2) while in school, on school property, on school buses or other school vehicles, at designated school bus stops waiting for the school bus, or at school-sponsored or school-sanctioned events or activities;
- (3) through the transmission of information from a school computer, a school computer network, or other similar electronic school equipment; or
- (4) through the transmission of information from a computer that is accessed at a non-school-related location, activity, function, or program or from the use of technology or an electronic device that is not owned, leased, or used by a school district or school if the bullying causes a substantial disruption to the educational process or orderly operation of a school. This item (4) applies only in cases in which a school administrator or teacher receives a report that bullying through this means has occurred and does not require a district or school to staff or monitor any non-school-related activity, function, or program.

(a-5) Nothing in this Section is intended to infringe upon any right to exercise free expression or the free exercise of religion or religiously based views protected under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution or under Section 3 of Article I of the Illinois Constitution.

(b) In this Section:

"Bullying" includes "cyber-bullying" and means any severe or pervasive physical or verbal act or conduct, including communications made in writing or electronically, directed toward a student or students that has or can be reasonably predicted to have the effect of one or more of the following:

- (1) placing the student or students in reasonable fear of harm to the student's or students' person or property;
- (2) causing a substantially detrimental effect on the student's or students' physical or mental health;
- (3) substantially interfering with the student's or students' academic performance; or
- (4) substantially interfering with the student's or students' ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or privileges provided by a school.

Bullying, as defined in this subsection (b), may take various forms, including without limitation one or more of the following: harassment, threats, intimidation, stalking, physical violence, sexual harassment, sexual violence, theft, public humiliation, destruction of property, or retaliation for asserting or alleging an act of bullying. This list is meant to be illustrative and non-exhaustive.

"Cyber-bullying" means bullying through the use of technology or any electronic communication, including without limitation 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 photo-optical system, including without limitation electronic mail, Internet communications, instant messages, or facsimile communications. "Cyber-bullying" 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 effects

enumerated in the definition of bullying in this Section. "Cyber-bullying" 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 effects enumerated in the definition of bullying in this Section.

"Policy on bullying" means a bullying prevention policy that meets the following criteria:

- (1) Includes the bullying definition provided in this Section.
- (2) Includes a statement that bullying is contrary to State law and the policy of the school district, charter school, or non-public, non-sectarian elementary or secondary school and is consistent with subsection (a-5) of this Section.
- (3) Includes procedures for promptly reporting bullying, including, but not limited to, identifying and providing the school e-mail address (if applicable) and school telephone number for the staff person or persons responsible for receiving such reports and a procedure for anonymous reporting; however, this shall not be construed to permit formal disciplinary action solely on the basis of an anonymous report.
- (4) Consistent with federal and State laws and rules governing student privacy rights, includes procedures for promptly informing parents or guardians of all students involved in the alleged incident of bullying and discussing, as appropriate, the availability of social work services, counseling, school psychological services, other interventions, and restorative measures.
- (5) Contains procedures for promptly investigating and addressing reports of bullying, including the following:
  - (A) Making all reasonable efforts to complete the investigation within 10 school days after the date the report of the incident of bullying was received and taking into consideration additional relevant information received during the course of the investigation about the reported incident of bullying.
  - (B) Involving appropriate school support personnel and other staff persons with knowledge, experience, and training on bullying prevention, as deemed appropriate, in the investigation process.
  - (C) Notifying the principal or school administrator or his or her designee of the report of the incident of bullying as soon as possible after the report is received.
  - (D) Consistent with federal and State laws and rules governing student privacy rights, providing parents and guardians of the students who are parties to the investigation information about the investigation and an opportunity to meet with the principal or school administrator or his or her designee to discuss the investigation, the findings of the investigation, and the actions taken to address the reported incident of bullying.
- (6) Includes the interventions that can be taken to address bullying, which may include, but are not limited to, school social work services, restorative measures, social-emotional skill building, counseling, school psychological services, and community-based services.
- (7) Includes a statement prohibiting reprisal or retaliation against any person who reports an act of bullying and the consequences and appropriate remedial actions for a person who engages in reprisal or retaliation.
- (8) Includes consequences and appropriate remedial actions for a person found to have falsely accused another of bullying as a means of retaliation or as a means of bullying.
- (9) Is based on the engagement of a range of school stakeholders, including students and parents or guardians.
- (10) Is posted on the school district's, charter school's, or non-public, non-sectarian elementary or secondary school's existing Internet website, is included in the student handbook, and, where applicable, posted where other policies, rules, and standards of conduct are currently posted in the school and provided periodically throughout the school year to students and faculty, and is distributed annually to parents, guardians, students, and school personnel, including new employees when hired.
- (11) As part of the process of reviewing and re-evaluating the policy under subsection (d) of this Section, contains a policy evaluation process to assess the outcomes and effectiveness of the policy that includes, but is not limited to, factors such as the frequency of victimization; student, staff, and family observations of safety at a school; identification of areas of a school where bullying occurs; the types of bullying utilized; and bystander intervention or participation. The school district, charter school, or non-public, non-sectarian elementary or secondary school may use relevant data and information it already collects for other purposes in the policy evaluation.

The information developed as a result of the policy evaluation must be made available on the Internet website of the school district, charter school, or non-public, non-sectarian elementary or secondary school. If an Internet website is not available, the information must be provided to school administrators, school board members, school personnel, parents, guardians, and students.

(12) Is consistent with the policies of the school board, charter school, or non-public, non-sectarian elementary or secondary school.

"Restorative measures" means a continuum of school-based alternatives to exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions, that: (i) are adapted to the particular needs of the school and community, (ii) contribute to maintaining school safety, (iii) protect the integrity of a positive and productive learning climate, (iv) teach students the personal and interpersonal skills they will need to be successful in school and society, (v) serve to build and restore relationships among students, families, schools, and communities, (vi) reduce the likelihood of future disruption by balancing accountability with an understanding of students' behavioral health needs in order to keep students in school, and (vii) increase student accountability if the incident of bullying is based on religion, race, ethnicity, or any other category that is identified in the Illinois Human Rights Act.

"School personnel" means persons employed by, on contract with, or who volunteer in a school district, charter school, or non-public, non-sectarian elementary or secondary school, including without limitation school and school district administrators, teachers, school social workers, school counselors, school psychologists, school nurses, cafeteria workers, custodians, bus drivers, school resource officers, and security guards.

(c) (Blank).

(d) Each school district, charter school, and non-public, non-sectarian elementary or secondary school shall create, maintain, and implement a policy on bullying, which policy must be filed with the State Board of Education. The policy or implementing procedure shall include a process to investigate whether a reported act of bullying is within the permissible scope of the district's or school's jurisdiction and shall require that the district or school provide the victim with information regarding services that are available within the district and community, such as counseling, support services, and other programs. School personnel available for help with a bully or to make a report about bullying shall be made known to parents or legal guardians, students, and school personnel. Every 2 years, each school district, charter school, and non-public, non-sectarian elementary or secondary school shall conduct a review and re-evaluation of its policy and make any necessary and appropriate revisions. No later than September 30 of the subject year, the policy must be filed with the State Board of Education after being updated. The State Board of Education shall monitor and provide technical support for the implementation of policies created under this subsection (d). In monitoring the implementation of the policies, the State Board of Education shall review each filed policy on bullying to ensure all policies meet the requirements set forth in this Section, including ensuring that each policy meets the 12 criterion identified within the definition of "policy on bullying" set forth in this Section.

If a school district, charter school, or non-public, non-sectarian elementary or secondary school fails to file a policy on bullying by September 30 of the subject year, the State Board of Education shall provide a written request for filing to the school district, charter school, or non-public, non-sectarian elementary or secondary school. If a school district, charter school, or non-public, non-sectarian elementary or secondary school fails to file a policy on bullying within 14 days of receipt of the aforementioned written request, the State Board of Education shall publish notice of the non-compliance on the State Board of Education's website.

(e) This Section shall not be interpreted to prevent a victim from seeking redress under any other available civil or criminal law.

## REFERENCES

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