

SERIES: 2001-2002
CIRCULAR LETTER: C-14

TO: Superintendents of Schools
School Principals
Leaders of Education Organizations
Deans/Department Heads of Education

FROM: Theodore S. Sergi, Commissioner of Education

DATE: January 8, 2002

SUBJECT: Taking Action to Make Schools Free From Discrimination and Harm

The Policy and the Law

The Connecticut State Board of Education believes that every individual and group should have both full access to and full participation in all educational experiences of Connecticut's public elementary and secondary schools. Connecticut General Statutes, Section 10-15c states:

“The public schools shall be open to all children five years of age and over who reach age five on or before the first day of January of any school year, **and each such child shall have, and shall be so advised by the appropriate school authorities, an equal opportunity to participate in the activities, programs and courses of study offered in such public schools,** at such time as the child becomes eligible to participate in such activities, programs and courses of study, **without discrimination on account of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, or sexual orientation;** provided boards of education may, by vote at a meeting duly called, admit to any school children under five years of age.”

In **1997**, the state legislature amended Section 10-15c to include the prohibition of discrimination based on sexual orientation. **All students, without exception, have the right to come to school feeling safe and grow to be productive and contributing citizens.** Some students, because of their race, gender, ethnic background or actual or perceived sexual orientation, have been subject to discrimination through abuse, harassment or exclusion from participation in educational activities. By law, such barriers to student participation should be identified and removed. The law applies to all educational activities and programs – both curricular and extracurricular.

In January 1998 (Series: 1997-98, Circular Letter: C-23), I wrote to remind school districts of this statute and to ask superintendents to take appropriate steps to eliminate these behaviors. This effort is not something we do once and believe the goal is accomplished. It requires attitude changing, school climate development, unified action by all staff members and daily monitoring.

Particularly in the last two years, the Department and I have made improving school climate and character education a major initiative across the state. The June 16, 2000, **Call to Action** letter, from me and 10 statewide organizations, asked each one of us to play a role in improving the learning environment for all students in Connecticut and to **help students understand their duty to others.** Many very positive character education and other prevention efforts have taken place and are continuing across the state.

In the last year, the State Board adopted a new position statement on **Creating a Healthy School Environment.** It states, in part, that “All school personnel, board members, parents, students and community agencies share a role in creating a safe and nurturing learning environment for all students.” Examples of appropriate efforts cited in the statement include monitoring and supervising all areas of the school; ensuring that all students share a caring relationship with at least one adult in the school; modeling positive behaviors that adults hope to instill in students; and sending a clear and consistent message that each of us has a duty to behave responsibly and respectfully toward others.

Changing Behaviors

Writing a state law and local policy is a lot easier than changing behavior and practice. I believe we have done a good job in the area of overt discrimination, but must pay more attention to the more subtle, but equally harmful, behaviors. In some schools we continue to hear of students being harassed based on their being members of the protected groups listed in the statute – and of the failure of school personnel to take action. These harassed students can experience isolation, fear, stigmatization and sometimes the lack of peer or family support. I do not believe there is a school principal in Connecticut who knowingly is allowing any student to be harmed; but there are no circumstances, including lack of awareness, that allow us to inconsistently enforce the law; such as failing to prevent harm based on sexual orientation – the most recent group protected by state statute. **Every student has a right to a safe school experience.**

Each school and school district should review programs, services and activities to ensure that they are conducted in a manner that is free of bias, prejudice and discrimination. In addition, **each staff member carries the responsibility to stop and prevent future occurrences of teasing, taunting, bullying, harassment and harm of any kind based on race, color, sex, religion, national origin or sexual orientation – whether the actions are initiated by students or adults.** The development and enforcement of appropriate student and staff behavior and disciplinary **policies** is an important place to begin and/or update this work.

It is often the ill-conceived **humor and language** of people that can be the most hurtful. If teachers and administrators observe this behavior and do not address it immediately as **unacceptable**, not just inappropriate, then all of those participating and observing perceive it as “okay.” Failing to stop the harmful action immediately teaches one person that it is okay to be hurtful and the other that he or she will not be protected against discriminatory statements or behaviors.

It is imperative to talk with students and adults about why discriminatory incidents occur, and to implement long-term, proactive strategies for combating stereotyping, prejudice and negative attitudes about differences in the classroom and school. Some strategies that are beneficial in addressing harassment include training of school personnel and students, developing district policies, providing educational materials in the classroom and library, and strengthening school and community support services. The implementation of a coordinated school health program that deals with physical and mental health, as well as counseling and other social services, is also essential.

No student or group of students should suffer the indignities of harassment, which jeopardizes their right to a free public education. **Our message to all students and staff members should be one of respect for all people, as each of us would like to be respected by others. Tolerance, while important, is not equal to respect.**

We are convinced that the issues of crime and violence prevention, substance abuse, teen pregnancy prevention and comprehensive health education – including mental health, character education, anti-bullying and anti-hazing strategies – are all best addressed in the same way: by **teaching responsibility to others at the earliest ages.** To better address these many issues within our schools, the State Department of Education has undertaken initiatives that encourage all schools to improve school climate by addressing the issues of name calling, harassment and exclusion. Additionally, the State Department of Education’s Bureau of School, Family and Community Partnerships will be working to strengthen the capacity of Connecticut’s schools to address all these issues. Please call Dr. Eddie Davis, Bureau Chief, at 860-713-6580.

TAKE ACTION – NOW

THESE ISSUES REQUIRE OUR CONSTANT ATTENTION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT. THEREFORE, WE ARE SUGGESTING THAT EACH SCHOOL DO A CLIMATE ASSESSMENT, BEGINNING AT A FACULTY MEETING AND BEING HONEST ABOUT THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS: “HOW ARE OUR STUDENTS TREATING EACH OTHER?” “WHAT GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS ARE BEING HARMED?” “WHAT DO STUDENTS AND PARENTS PERCEIVE AS THE SCHOOL CLIMATE?” “WHAT ACTIONS CAN WE TAKE IMMEDIATELY TO REDUCE THOSE BEHAVIORS?”

Actions taken to improve the school learning environment, in addition to achieving important behavioral goals, also have a very positive and documented impact on academic learning. Further, schools are not the only place where learning to behave appropriately takes place. The family is the first and primary teacher of these character traits but schools must be the partners of the family in this important objective.

I urge each of us to look at these issues in new ways, to teach personal responsibility, to respect every child, and to consistently and persistently address any behavior that is harmful to any one of our students or staff members.

Thank you.