

Series: 2009 – 2010
Circular Letter: C-12

TO: Superintendents of Schools

FROM: Mark K. McQuillan
Commissioner of Education

DATE: June 14, 2010

SUBJECT: Summary of the February 1, 2010, Report Recommendations to the Legislature on the Status of Analysis of Bullying Policies in Connecticut, release of National School Climate Standards and the General Trends of Bullying complaints coming to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE)

On July 1, 2008, the Governor signed amendments to the existing Connecticut policy on bullying in schools (originally passed on July 1, 2002, and amendments made in 2006). Among the changes in 2008 was for the CSDE, within available appropriations, to report to the Legislature no later than February 1, 2010, on the following:

- review and analyze the policies submitted to the CSDE pursuant to Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.) Section 10-222d;
- examine the relationship between bullying, school climate and student outcomes;
- document school districts' articulated needs for technical assistance and training related to safe learning and bullying;
- collect information on the prevention and intervention strategies used by schools to reduce the incidence of bullying, improve school climate and improve reporting outcomes;
- develop model policies for Grades K-12, inclusive, for prevention of bullying; and
- make any recommendations regarding additional activities or funding to prevent bullying in schools and improve school climate.

The contents of this report can be found at http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/school_improvement/bullying/report_on_the_bullying_legislation_1-28-10_.pdf.

Given the recent student suicides in Massachusetts and the heightened awareness of the potential tragic outcomes of the phenomenon of bullying, sharing the recommendations made in the February 1, 2010, report seems appropriate and timely, especially because Connecticut school districts are highly aware that the ultimate remedy for diminishing and eventually eliminating bullying behavior rests with creating and maintaining climates of respect. Learning and socializing in a physically, emotionally and intellectually safe

school climate is the right of every student in our state. The CSDE recommended four research-based changes to C.G.S. Section 10-222d.

Implementing these recommendations is highly likely to prevent bullying in schools and improve school climate. The following are four high priority recommendations.

1. **Amend C.G.S. Section 10-222d, “Policy on Bullying Behavior” to become the Policy on Creating Safe School Climates.**

Rationale: C.G.S. Section 10-222d should be amended and its title revised to encourage districts to create Safe School Climates. Reframing the current statute will articulate and honor the “spirit” of the law (creating physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually safe and healthy learning environments for children). Doing so would place increased focus and attention on prevention by being proactive, rather than reactive, and would be aligned with all other CSDE efforts. Additionally, reframing the statute in this manner would align with the national School Climate Standards.

2. **Change the definition of “bullying” to recognize and align the state and federal legal differences between “bullying” and “harassment.”**

Rationale: The present definition of “bullying” in C.G.S. Section 10-222d contains inconsistencies with state and federal harassment legislation and is not entirely consistent with the federal Family Educational Rights Privacy Act (FERPA). Amending the current definition of bullying to recognize these legal differences between “bullying” and “harassment” will provide clarity and direction for schools. It is further recommended that “bullying” be given the level of weight commensurate with that given to “harassment.” Making these changes would mean that bullying complaints would be required to be taken as seriously as would complaints under Title II, Title VI, Title IX, and 504 pursuant to federal civil rights laws (severe, persistent or pervasive). Bullying will not significantly diminish until it is considered on par with matters of discrimination, harassment and hate crimes that exist for the state and federally identified protected classes.

3. **Develop and implement statewide common school climate assessments**

Rationale: C.G.S. Section 10-222g, “Prevention and intervention strategy regarding bullying,” currently requires that schools implement a “school survey to determine the prevalence of bullying.” CSDE recommends amending this statute to require districts to assess the quality of the school climate rather than assessing the prevalence of bullying in school. School Climate Assessments will allow districts to collect meaningful data to determine if efforts to improve school climate and diminish bullying are successful or, if not, to implement the necessary improvement plans. Because of the known relationships among the quality of the school climate, dropout

rates, levels of academic achievement and overall positive student outcomes, this kind of assessment will support the overarching CSDE goals for school and district improvement in academic achievement for all students.

4. **Provide sufficient funding to complete the above three legislative recommendations.**

Rationale: The above recommendations will require appropriations to be completed.

All local school districts are working diligently to make their schools safe for all school community members, including students, parents/guardians, faculty and staff. It remains the case that allegations of bullying in schools persist, regardless of this focused attention paid to improving school climate. One tool that may be of help to districts and schools are the recently released, National School Climate Standards. Guided learning according to standards-based curriculums has long been a hallmark of high performing schools. Since March 2010, there are now standards-based criteria in the area of school climate and I recommend that you review these standards and consider adoption. The contents of these standards can be found at http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/school_improvement/bullying/school_climate_standards_csee-march_2010.pdf. Experts from throughout the country have worked collaboratively to align these standards with innovative research in the climate/culture, social/emotional, school safety and behavioral arenas. These standards support and enhance the work that Connecticut is doing to raise student achievement, especially for those children who require targeted attention to close the achievement gap. Additional work is currently being done to recommend specific and concrete strategies that will make these broad school climate standards and indicators easier to implement in practice. The United States Department of Education is similarly working to place School Climate at the center of the reauthorization of Title IV (Safe and Drug Free Schools). Adopting these current National School Climate Standards aligns with all of this ongoing work and the work of the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI).

In closing, despite the on-going and collaborative work among local educational agencies (LEAs) and the CSDE, allegations of bullying continue to come to our attention, and this year in increased numbers. In part, this may be due to the Massachusetts student suicide, but it is also due to the seriousness with which local districts and the CSDE take these allegations coupled with the hard work to make schools safe and welcoming for all. For the first time since the original passage of C.G.S. Section 10-222d in 2002, about 10 percent of the cases coming to the attention of the CSDE are from educators seeking advice of best practice and appropriate interventions for situations that they are managing. In past years, educators were only involved *after* an allegation was reported to the CSDE. This is important progress.

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There remain far too many children with special needs who are disproportionately reported to be bullied, and schools and families continue to struggle with perceptions of what is actually happening in any given case. I want to encourage you to continue to focus on diminishing bullying by improving school climate. The CSDE has been committed to working collaboratively with you for more than a decade.

Thank you for your ongoing efforts. Closing the achievement gap and realizing the highest levels of academic achievement for all of Connecticut's children cannot be done without maintaining positive school climates.

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