BULLYING PREVENTION GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOL STAKEHOLDERS (9/1/11)
NJ Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention (www.njbullying.org/908 522-2581)
Expert Advisory Group

INTRODUCTION

The recently enacted NJ anti-bullying law (Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights) requires school leaders to address an unprecedented set of responsibilities. NJDOE will provide some guidance but school administrators and staff will inevitably also need to rely on guidance from non-governmental expert sources. This Expert Advisory Group, consisting largely of college- and university-based experts, was convened to provide this kind of assistance for schools throughout New Jersey. A sequential strategy is strongly recommended. All school personnel should first familiarize themselves with the nature and dynamics of bullying. Second (as the law requires), schools should form an advisory or leadership group - consisting of administrators, teachers, parents, community members and students - to integrate ideas and information from the larger school community. Third, schools should develop a plan for ongoing assessment of the specific types of bullying that occur in their school, and of school climate, in order to develop and then modify a strategic plan. Fourth, schools should design prevention and intervention strategies to address bullying, in particular by strengthening school climate. Assistance from experts - ideally, local colleges and universities, or recommended non-profit organizations - is likely to be needed. But commitment, leadership, sustained effort, with proper understanding and prioritizing, can take schools most of the way. This information bulletin is designed to provide initial guidance to school leaders, advisory groups and the school community.

DEFINITIONS OF BULLYING

- Bullying refers to actions repeated over time which harm, harass, intimidate, or humiliate another person. Typically, there is an imbalance of power (e.g., a difference in physical strength, or popularity) which makes it difficult for the bullied child to defend himself or herself.
- Bullying may be physical, verbal, relational (e.g., exclusion or isolation), in-person or electronic ("cyberbullying"), direct (e.g., hitting, texting a negative message to a child, insulting a child) or indirect (encouraging another person to hurt a child, spreading rumors). It can take place at school or off school grounds.
- Bullying differs from rough and tumble play or friendly teasing because in these types of interactions the 'targeted' child varies (one child does not consistently dominate the other), and children display remorse when a playmate is inadvertently upset and hurt.
- The phrase "harassment, intimidation and bullying" ("HIB") is often used in place of the term "bullying"; it is equivalent..
- "Bias-based bullying" is commonly used to describe bullying in which legally protected characteristics (such as sex, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, race, ethnicity, and religion) are targeted.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF BULLYING

- Consequences of frequent bullying (once a week or more) are serious. Children who are bullied may experience related depression, school avoidance, or social anxiety, often into adulthood. Children who bully are at higher risk of subsequent involvement in the criminal justice system and of continuing bullying in adult life.
- Bullying differs from other forms of peer aggression in that there is an imbalance in power. In this way, it is similar to child abuse or intimate partner violence.
- Peers are typically involved as "bystanders." The behavior and attitudes of bystanders can inhibit or facilitate bullying behaviors. If peers support the targeted child or express disapproval of the bullying child, bullying usually subsides. Most children who bully are sensitive to peer responses to their behavior.
- Frequent bullying (once a week or more) is perpetrated, on average, by about 10 to 15 percent of students, with a similar percentage targeted. About 5 percent of students bully some children and are bullied by others; these children are generally more troubled and require more attention, including psychological services.
- Children who bully are not necessarily lacking in self-esteem, empathy, or general social skills. However, such children are more likely than children who do not bully to have lower competence in managing emotions, empathy, evaluation of consequences and problem solving. Many children who bully are popular among peers and with adults.
- While family and community environment, peer associations and personality traits do influence bullying behaviors, the most important factor determining the occurrence of bullying in schools is school climate. School climate is generally defined as the subjective experience or perception of the school by students and school personnel. School climate is primarily influenced by school norms, disciplinary practices, and the behavior of adults in the school.

KEY ACTIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS AND STAFF

- **Form an advisory or leadership group** - consisting of administrators, teachers, parents, community members and students - to integrate ideas and information from the larger school community.
- **Involve all stakeholders** - especially teachers - in understanding and supporting the plan. Include school nurses, food service staff, maintenance staff, coaches, volunteers, bus drivers, among others. All staff and volunteers are responsible for following school and district policies and therefore all must receive information and participate in training.

- **Involve youth and families** in planning, implementation, and assessment. Students want a school in which they feel safe, respected, supported, challenged and cared for and they will work to create and maintain such a school.

- **Develop a clear definition of bullying**. Refer to the formal definitions but also develop definitions and examples through discussion with students and other stakeholders. From the earliest grades, embed the issue of bullying in written policies, including mission statements, handbooks, parent communications and the school's code of conduct.

- **Continually seek school-specific data**, through initial and ongoing assessment, using multiple methods (such as surveys, incident reports, case studies, focus groups, student and staff perceptions of school safety, etc.).

- **Don't rely mainly on a single anti-bullying program** or tactic; rather, use an approach that is integrated - multiple components planned to fit together developmentally, and 'whole-school' - affecting all stakeholders and school functions, including curriculum. The curriculum should include prosocial skill development and specific instruction on behavioral norms (as detailed in the Core Curriculum Content Standards).

- **Focus on the culture and climate of the school** and the ways people interact. Emphasize social-emotional learning and character development, and provide evidence-based social skills training and positive behavioral support programs for students. Such programs should be provided for *all* students, not just at-risk students or students with special needs. There should be clear expectations for positive student-student and student-staff relations.

- **Staff (and other adult) behavior is especially critical**. Staff *must* behave respectfully, politely and professionally toward each other at all times, especially around students. Principals and other leaders must never denigrate others, generate fear or overemphasize power and control. Teachers who denigrate peers or bully students must be counseled and educated about the harmful effects of such behavior and the behavior must be eliminated.

- **Create ongoing communication** among students, families, staff, and the surrounding community. This links stakeholders, and promotes engagement, trust and motivation to support school initiatives. Increase public awareness of bullying and its impact through posters, newsletters, classroom lessons/discussions on bullying and community programs.

- **Provide safe, responsive avenues of communication for bullied students.** Set up procedures (as the new law requires) for investigating and reporting incidents. But don't wait for incidents to be reported – make proactive efforts to identify students being hurt, increase support of at-risk groups, increase supervision of high-risk areas, strengthen school climate, continuously reinforce norms of acceptance of differences, and work to prevent most incidents.

- **Support those most at risk of being hurt** as a priority. Systematically and proactively strengthen school culture and activities to support students at elevated risk, specifically minorities in the school of any kind (e.g., racial, ethnic or religious minorities, students with special needs, gay, lesbian and transgender students), and all those isolated from peers. Engage the school in activities that affirm minority identities, such as by providing clubs for minority groups, and creatively developing a range of other supportive methods. Students isolated from peers, for whatever reason, should be systematically identified and engaged by staff, including encouraging outreach and support from peers.

- **Actively identify and then engage children who have harmed peers**, then address their social, emotional and behavioral needs, and the mental health issues that sometimes arise. Children who persistently bully may need prosocial skill training such as anger management, and encouragement to reflect on their behavior and any harm done.

- **Increase supervision and structured activities in each school's settings where bullying frequently occurs.** In most schools, highest risk areas are those least supervised: playgrounds, buses, locker rooms, bathrooms. Have policies and procedures that address cyberbullying, whether originating on or off school grounds, and other bullying off school grounds (as the new law requires).

- **Provide instruction to all students and staff on strategies to effectively respond to bullying** when they see it. Some students may be able to voice or provide support for victimized students or chastise those who bully, but students should not be required to do so. Students should be informed about designated adults to whom they can report bullying (though any school personnel can take a report, and all should be trained to do so). When bullying is reported to adults in the school, the school must respond (as the new law requires). Lack of response or an ineffective response will weaken student motivation to report.

- **Do <u>not</u> use peer mediation and conflict resolution to address bullying issues.** Children who are bullied can be traumatized by such engagement with the peers who harmed them and may be subjected to further bullying as a result.

- **Responses to bullying should be graduated**, and appropriate to the case, including developmentally, not a single response out of proportion to the offense and automatically imposed. '*Zero tolerance' does not work and does harm.* In schools using zero tolerance approaches, minority students are disproportionately disciplined. Suspensions (and expulsions) should only be used as a last resort. Consistency and fairness in structuring and implementing consequences is critically important. Consult with School Resource Officers and local law enforcement in advance to clarify roles and any required involvement. (Review and revise the district's Memorandum of Agreement with law enforcement as needed.)

- **Avoid public identification of bullying or targeted** children and avoid encouraging public expressions of and by the targeted child or bullying child/children. Shaming bullying children mirrors bullying and should be avoided.