



New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force

December 28, 2023

Governor Philip J. Murphy
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 001
Trenton, NJ 08625

Dear Governor Murphy,

As Chairperson of the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, I am pleased to submit our 2023 report as required under *P.L. 2019, c. 179* on the current implementation of the ABR. The Anti-Bullying Task Force recommends additional revisions and regulations, as well as additional development in guidance, tools and support for students, schools and communities, expanding and reinforcing additional state resources that together will better clarify portions of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights in order to enable most effective implementation.

Through the collective work of the ABTF, we believe that schools and communities together with stakeholders and policymakers all have a role to play in creating welcoming inclusive safe schools working towards further building the groundwork for positive school climates for all New Jersey students to thrive and learn and feel safe and supported.

Thank you for your continued support of the Anti-Bullying Task Force. Members of the Task Force are committed and eager to continue the work of ensuring welcoming inclusive safe schools for all students in New Jersey.

We look forward to your review of our recommendations and corresponding feedback.

Sincerely,

Shannon Cuttle
Chairperson

cc: New Jersey State Library
Office of Legislative Services Library

**Report from the
New Jersey
Anti-Bullying Task Force**



December 28, 2023

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Executive Summary

The Anti-Bullying Task Force (Task Force) was established in March 2012, as part of an amendment to the *Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act*, (ABR; *P.L.2010, c.122, N.J.S.A.18A:37-13.2 et seq.*) and was in existence from 2012-2016.

The current Task Force was established under *P.L. 2019, c.179*, as part of an amendment to the ABR and convened in June 2023. The ABTF was established in order to study and evaluate the current implementation of the “Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act.” to: 1) examine and evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of the ABR in the schools of the State; 2) examine any unintended consequences resulting from implementation of the ABR and the regulations promulgated pursuant to the act including, but not limited to, impacts of the law on athletic coaches; and 3) present any recommendations deemed necessary and appropriate to modify or update the ABR and its implementing regulations. 4) The task force shall issue a final report of its findings and recommendations to the Governor, and to the Legislature pursuant to section 2 of *P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1)*, no later than 180 days after the task force organizes.

This report satisfies the requirements above and serves as a final report of the Task Force. This report provides an overview of Task Force activities, as well as our findings and recommendations over the past six months. This report is being submitted to the Governor, Legislature, and Commissioner of Education in accordance with the requirements of section 2 of *P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.)*. This report and all prior reports are available on the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) [website](#). The Task Force established via *P.L. 2019, c.179* is an entity independent from the Administration of Governor Philip D. Murphy and its Department of Education. Please contact the authors for answers to questions regarding its content.

Introduction

The current ABTF was established under *P.L. 2019, c. 179*, as part of an amendment to the *Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act (ABR; P.L. 2010, c. 122, N.J.S.A. 18A:37-13.2 et seq.)* and convened in June 2023, consisting of 11 members with “background in, or special knowledge of, the legal, policy, educational, social or psychological aspects of bullying in the public schools” and were appointed in the following manner: 1) one appointed by the Senate President; 2) one appointed by the Speaker of the General Assembly; 3) one appointed jointly by the Senate President and the Speaker of the General Assembly; and four appointed by the Governor. The members of the Task Force, who serve without compensation are:

- Shannon Cuttle — Chairperson: Appointed by Governor Philip D. Murphy; Director of New Jersey Safe Schools Coalition. Safe Schools Action Network, consultant and trainer, former First Vice President Essex County Board of Education, South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education, educator, and school administrator.
- Nagla Bedir — Appointed by Governor Philip D. Murphy; Teacher in the Perth Amboy Public School District; Executive Director of Teaching While Muslim.
- Spencer Cronin — Appointed by Governor Philip D. Murphy; Assistant Education Director with the Anti-Defamation League.
- Kathryn Dixon — Appointed by then Senate President Stephen M. Sweeney; Executive Director of Interstate FACTS, LLC., Co-Chairperson GLSEN North Jersey.
- Stuart Green, DMH, LCSW — Appointed by Governor Philip D. Murphy; Former Chairperson NJ Commission on Bullying in Schools, 2009; Director New Jersey Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention; Board Member, SEL4NJ, Associate Director, Overlook Family Medicine-Atlantic Health System; Clinical Assistant Professor of Family Medicine, Sidney Kimmel Medical College, Thomas Jefferson University.
- Damien Alan Lopez — Appointed by Speaker of the General Assembly Craig J. Coughlin; Director of Training and Trans Resiliency of Garden State Equality.
- Mediha Sandhu — Appointed by Governor Philip D. Murphy; Owner of Ninjabi, LLC.

- Thomas Tamburello — Appointed by Governor Philip D. Murphy, Teacher, Coach & GSA Advisor in the Lenape Regional High School District.
- Patricia Wright — Appointed by then Senate President Stephen M. Sweeney; Previous Chairperson Anti-Bullying Task Force 2012-2016. Former Executive Director of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, former teacher, assistant principal, principal and chief school administrator.

Over the past six months, the Task Force has met regularly with over 80 hours in public service and focused its work on understanding the recent implementation of the ABR and its impacts. In order to do this effectively and with transparency, the Task Force heard from various stakeholders through focus groups, listening sessions, meetings, subcommittees, and public testimony. Through the collective work of the Task Force, we believe that schools and communities together with stakeholders and policymakers all have a role to play in creating welcoming, inclusive, safe schools working towards further building the groundwork for positive school climates for all New Jersey students to thrive and learn and feel safe and supported.

Although several areas of improvement have been noted around harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB) since the last Task Force convened in 2016, the current trends and research around HIB both nationally and in New Jersey show that hurtful and harmful rhetoric, hate speech, bias and HIB continues to impact all students, especially our most marginalized students disproportionately. The Task Force heard from stakeholders and received testimony from school staff, students, parents, and caregivers that also expressed an increase in hate speech and bias based incidents both online and offline impacting classrooms and school communities across the State. Additionally, since the last Task Force convened, there have been several HIB cases that have made national headlines that also reinforce the need for additional student support services and have led local school districts and officials on the state level to reevaluate unintended consequences, understaffing, the adequacy of school actions to protect and support vulnerable

students, and to explore additional ways to address HIB and foster the creation of healthy school climates and cultures.

According to the data collected from the New Jersey Office of the Attorney General (NJ OAG), since 2018 and continuing through 2023 bias-based incidents have quadrupled. Since 2015, there has been a 400% increase in bias-based incidents being reported. According to the NJ OAG report, the number of reported bias incidents occurring at elementary and secondary schools increased from 96 in 2020 to 207 in 2021 (an increase of 116%) as children returned to in-person education (New Jersey Office of the Attorney General, 2022).

In response to an increase in school-based incidents of hate speech in classrooms and schools across the state, the NJ OAG along with the NJDOE issued in June 2023, [a guidance memo](#) on school-based anti-bias initiatives. In this memo, the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights (DCR) along with the NJDOE encouraged all New Jersey schools, school boards, and administrators to continue to develop and implement initiatives to counter bias; to continue to display inclusive markers, flags, and symbols in and around their buildings; to continue to ensure students have access to books representing a diversity of experiences and identities; and to continue to implement and comply with the state's anti-bias curriculum requirements regarding race, gender, LGBTQIA+, disability, and diversity (Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Martinez et al., 2021)

The Task Force also heard from the community and stakeholders on the impacts of hate speech, bias, and HIB on school climate and culture. Evidence-based research has shown that school climate and culture have a direct impact on the overall well-being of students. All students deserve to feel safe, supported, welcomed and cared for in a positive school environment from inside the classroom, across the school community and on and off the athletic field. New Jersey is not immune to the impacts of what is happening nationally around the

increase in hate speech and bias-based bullying discourse happening in schools and communities online and offline.

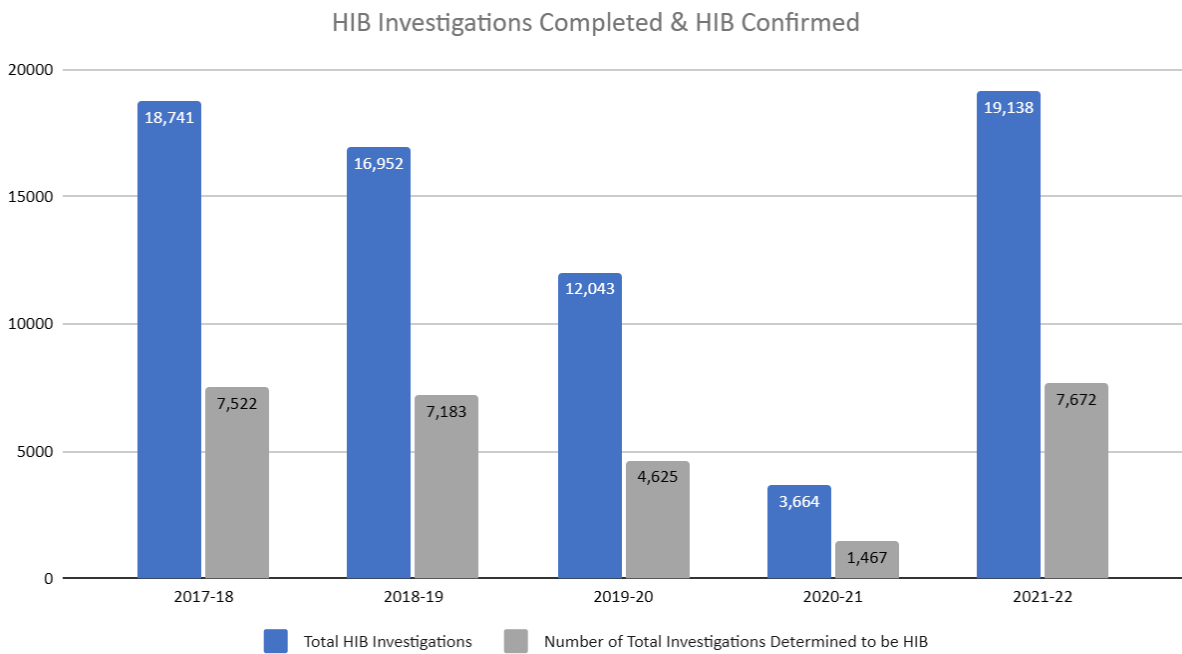
In a recent 2021 report on *K-12 Education: Bullying Hate Speech, Hate Crimes, and Victimization in Schools*, in reviewing data from The U.S. Department of Education, reported from 2014 - 2019, found that 1 in 5 students ages 12 -18 experienced bullying, and 1 in 4 students experienced bullying related to their race, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, religion, or disability. And 1 in 4 students ages 12 -18 saw hate words or symbols written in their schools, such as homophobic slurs and references to lynching (United States Government Accountability Office, 2021).

The Task Force also reviewed data from the NJDOE that looked at all incidents of HIB since the last Task Force report in 2016 until the 2021-2022 school year. In looking at the overall number of confirmed HIB incidents during that time frame the trend continues to be moving upward in the number of confirmed incidents. During the 2021-2022 school year, an alarming 7,672 incidents of HIB were confirmed, while a staggering number of 19,138 investigations were reported. Since the last Task Force report, current available state data reviewed indicates the highest levels of HIB reported since the state began collecting information. It is noted that during the COVID pandemic from the school years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, HIB significantly declined to the lowest rates ever reported in New Jersey, but students still experienced a prevalence of different types of victimization and HIB. Due to the COVID pandemic and remote learning, the significant decline in the number of HIB incidents and reporting are thought to have contributed to under-reporting and other due to the pandemic and not directly due to improvement changes in school climate and culture during that time. We also know from recent research that the COVID pandemic has had negative effects which have impacted overall student

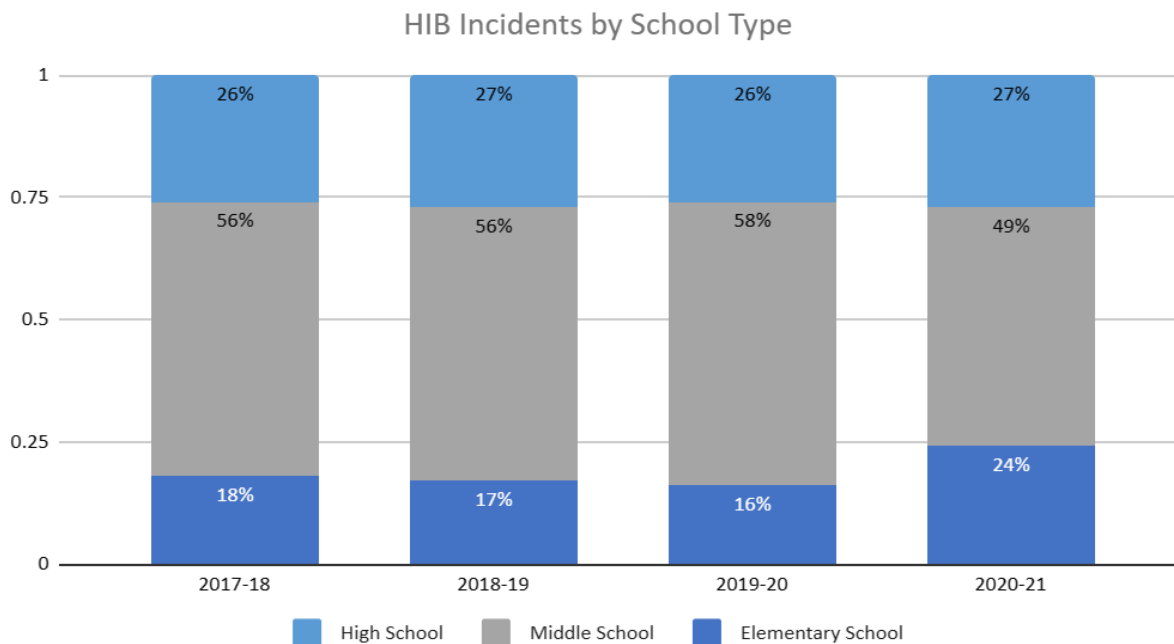
mental health and wellness and academic success.

Post-COVID return to the classroom and in-person learning, incidents of HIB rose alarmingly in New Jersey during the 2021-2022 school year with 7,672 confirmed and 19,138 reported incidents of HIB.

Reported Incidents of HIB



Source: New Jersey Department of Education, 2023.



Source: New Jersey Department of Education, 2023.

The overarching goal of the ABR and the Task Force is to assist schools throughout the State of New Jersey to effectively prevent and address HIB. We must work to ensure all students, especially our most marginalized students, feel safe, valued, welcomed, and treated with dignity and respect across our K-12 schools, colleges and universities, and in our communities. We all have a responsibility to ensure welcoming, inclusive, safe schools for all students, staff, and families in New Jersey. We need to combat hurtful and harmful narratives, hate speech, bias and HIB and address misinformation and disinformation that lead to further harm. Reevaluating and strengthening school climate is critical so as to not foster school climates in which students may be subjected to messages of othering, saying in effect ‘you don't belong here’, or ‘you don't exist.’

New Jersey has taken additional strides to be a national leader and model in supporting more inclusive and equitable classrooms and in celebrating our diverse students, families and communities, which further contributes to a positive school climate. The Task Force would like to recognize a sample of recent proactive welcoming school climate measures such as:

- ***N.J.S.A. 18A:36-41***: Established guidelines to provide direction from the NJDOE for schools concerning the needs of transgender students, and to assist schools in establishing policies and procedures that ensure a supportive and nondiscriminatory environment for transgender students.
 - The [NJDOE Transgender Guidance for School Districts](#) protects transgender and gender-expansive students to help school and district administrators to create an inclusive environment in which transgender and gender nonconforming students feel safe and supported, and to ensure that each school provides equal educational opportunities for all students.
- ***N.J.S.A. 18A:35-4.35 and 4.36a***: Requires school districts to provide instruction in grades K–12 at an appropriate place in the curriculum that highlights and promotes diversity, including economic diversity, equity, inclusion, tolerance, and belonging in connection with gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and religious tolerance; as well as the political, economic, and social contributions of persons with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.
- ***N.J.S.A. 18A:35-28***: Instruction on Holocaust, and genocides required in elementary, and secondary school curriculum.

- **N.J.S.A. 18A:35-4.44:** Ensures that the contributions, history, and heritage of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) are included in the New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Social Studies for students in kindergarten through Grade 12.
- **SB108:** Requires public schools to include instruction on accomplishments and contributions of African Americans to American society.
- **S84/2093:** Requires public and non-public middle schools and high schools, as well as higher education institutions, to adopt anti-hazing policies and penalties.
- **N.J.S.A. 18A:6-112:** Requires instruction in suicide prevention for all public-school teaching staff.
- **A1176:** Requires institutions of higher education be required to ensure that individuals who have training and experience in mental health annually train their faculty and staff on how to recognize signs of depression among students as well as the warning signs and risk factors associated with student suicide.

The Task Force also heard testimony and reviewed evidence-based research and data that demonstrated that when young people see themselves in the lessons they learn, rates of HIB and risks of student mental health decline including ideations of self-harm drastically decrease. While New Jersey has one of the leading and most comprehensive anti-bullying laws in the country, it's imperative to acknowledge that there are more factors to examine. Well-meaning anti-bullying laws alone will not prevent HIB and further needs to be done to help cultivate inclusivity and understanding to promote a safe, welcoming, holistic school climate environment for all students in New Jersey to thrive.

As we end our Task Force work, we feel strongly that in order to continue to address HIB and accomplish the larger aspirational goals outlined in the report, a standing advisory commission on HIB, school climate, and the implementation of the ABR be established. The commission should be established in 2024 and convened on a regular ongoing basis in order to set into motion a continuous process of evaluating the effectiveness of the ABR and making recommendations for improvement. The commission should work in conjunction with the NJDOE, including the Office of Student Support Services, the School Climate State Coordinator, and other related State offices or agencies. It should consist of a minimum of nine members who each have a background in, or special knowledge of, the legal, policy, educational, social, or psychological aspects of bullying in public schools; one appointed by the Senate President; one appointed by the Speaker of the General Assembly; one appointed jointly by the Senate President and the Speaker of the General Assembly and four appointed by the Governor. It should also contain four members of the public, to be appointed by the Governor, including one of whom is a family member of a student who has experienced bullying and one of whom is a student who personally has experienced bullying. Members should serve subject to term limits.

This report by the Task Force is based on our review of available current trend data, evidence-based research, including through holding focus groups and listening sessions with stakeholders, school staff and the public to assess the effectiveness of the current implementation of the ABR. Sections II-VII of this report will address findings and recommendations based on the deliberations of the past six months. The appendix will also include a summary of the complete recommendations and tools.

Section I: Committee Actions

The ABTF met regularly from June 2023 – December 2023 virtually via both Zoom and Microsoft Teams and obtained feedback from various sources to gain further insight into current trends, challenges, and implementation issues related to the ABR and recent updates. This was done through utilizing focus groups, data reports, reviewing current research, and listening sessions to review trends, identifying areas that may need additional support and resources, and the overall impacts and effectiveness of the implementation of the initiative. The collection of feedback and data led the Task Force to identify several areas of focus in this report. The last Task Force report was released in 2016 and was commissioned under law to convene from 2012 - 2016 with annual reports released each year to opine on challenges, feedback, and trends in implementation. The current Task Force was commissioned under law as part of the 2019 ABR amendments and was limited to meeting for only six months and charged with looking at the implementation of the most recent amendments and to submit a report within 180 days.

Focus Groups/Feedback/Other Testimony

In previous reports, the Task Force utilized feedback from various groups, individuals, and meetings including surveys during its tenure. During the past six months, the truncated Task Force with a limited timeline, scope and function, conducted extensive outreach to various stakeholders, individuals and groups to collect feedback and data on implementation. The Task Force over the past six months extended outreach to many stakeholders, and held focus groups and listening sessions with the following individuals, agencies and organizations:

- Representatives and members of the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA).
- Representatives and members of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA).

- Representatives and members of the New Jersey School Administrators Association (NJASA).
- Representatives and members of the New Jersey School Counselors Association (NJSCA).
- Representatives and members of the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA).
- Representatives and members of the New Jersey School Board Association (NJSBA)
- Representatives and members of SPAN Parent Advocacy Network.
- Representatives and members of the Education Law Center.
- Representatives and members of South Orange-Maplewood School District.
- Kelly Allen, Manager of Office of Student Support Services, New Jersey Department of Education.
- Jill Kuppel, School Climate State Coordinator, New Jersey Department of Education.
- Dr. Alicia Raia-Hawrylak, Co-Project Manager, School Climate Transformation Project.
- David Nash, Director of LEGAL ONE, Director of Legal Education, Foundation for Educational Administration (FEA).
- Michael Kaelber, Coordinator of Continuing Legal Education and Research, Foundation for Educational Administration (FEA).

The Task Force also received written, in-person and virtual testimony from the public and various community stakeholders. The Task Force held public in-person testimony on October 4, 2023 at the NJDOE in Trenton, and a public virtual testimony was held on October 5, 2023 via Microsoft Teams, and public written testimony was received until November 15, 2023. The Task Force reviewed all testimony and correspondence that was submitted including research and data

collection. Thank you to all the community members and stakeholders who volunteered to provide information through participation in focus groups, listening sessions, and submitting testimony.

In addition, the Task Force would like to extend appreciation to the NJDOE who provided guidance in facilitating the Task Force, assisted in obtaining input from stakeholders, and supported submission of the final report.

The Task Force would also like to extend appreciation to Governor Philip J. Murphy, Speaker of the General Assembly Craig J. Coughlin, former Senate President Stephen M. Sweeney, Acting Commissioner of Education Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan and Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin. The Task Force members appreciate having the opportunity to be part of the 2023 Task Force and hope that our work contributes in some part in moving us forward to continue building welcoming, inclusive, safe schools for all students in New Jersey.

Section II: The Definition of Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying

Discussion

The single greatest continuing challenge to identifying and addressing “bullying” or “Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying” (HIB), remains the difficulty in defining these terms. Schools are still struggling with a lack of understanding of when an incident is bullying and when it is normal conflict. According to the initial NJDOE guidance provided to schools in 2011, “*Conflict* is a *mutually* competitive or opposing action or engagement, including a disagreement, an argument or a fight which is a normal part of human development. *Bullying* is *one-sided*, where one or more students are *victims* of one or more person’s aggression, which is intended to physically or emotionally hurt the victim(s).” As noted by the previous Task Force, bullying is marked by an imbalance of power. The aggressor uses that power, which is “based on an actual or perceived characteristic” to victimize the target. As noted by the previous Task Force, “The power differential between two children is not a visible characteristic itself, but rather the interplay of a distinguishing and motivating characteristic of the target, namely a perceived weakness in terms of physical strength, popularity, socio-economic status, or a myriad of other characteristics, relative to the aggressor. The perceived weakness of the target and the power or perceived power of the aggressor makes it possible for the aggressor to bully.”

The previous Task Force recommended that the State Board of Education amend the administrative code to include the concept of power differential as a method of distinguishing the motivating characteristic of the aggressor.

Previously proposed code language at *N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.7 (a)(2)iii*,

iii. A statement that bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The power differential is not a visible characteristic itself, but a method of distinguishing the motivating characteristics of the aggressor, relative to a perceived weakness of the victim (in terms of physical strength, popularity, socio-economic status, or a myriad of other characteristics).

Subsequently, the code was changed to read:

iii. A statement that bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior that may involve a real or perceived power imbalance;

The Task Force asks that the State Board remove the word “may” and recognize and define that the power differential and the perceived weakness of the target, relative to the strength/position of the aggressor is a hallmark that underlies all HIB, and points to the dynamic and contextual nature of the motivating characteristics and adopt the original language proposed by the previous Task Force.

When identifying HIB, the school must also show that the incident must be one that “disrupts or interferes with the orderly operation of the school or the rights of other students.” The ABR clarifies that an incident of HIB may be on or off school grounds, and can be a single incident or a series of incidents, but must meet this threshold requirement of substantial disruption or interference. In addition, the ABR requires that an HIB incident also meet one of

the following: 1) cause physical or emotional harm or put a student in fear of such harm, 2) insult or demean a student or group of students, or 3) create a hostile educational environment.

The use of the words “substantial disruption” and “interference” are directly related to several court decisions, including *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School Dist.*, 393 U.S. 503, 513 (1969); *Sypniewski v. Warren Hills Regional Bd. Of Educ.* 307 F.3d 243, 253 (3d Cir. NJ 2002), and *Saxe v. State College Area School Dist.*, 240 F 3d 200, 217 (3d Cir. 2001).

In light of these important constitutional considerations and past precedent, the Task Force supports the finding of “substantial disruption” and “interference” as an important additional threshold requirement for HIB. This threshold requirement assists practitioners in differentiating HIB from typical age-appropriate student conflict, which may be relatively minor in nature and, in some cases, quickly forgotten by the students involved, and therefore, not satisfy the substantial disruption or interference threshold. Legal One, in conjunction with the NJPSA and Foundation for Educational for Educational Administration, has created a useful tool to assist administrators conducting HIB investigations in determining if a substantial disruption occurred. It can be found in Appendix A of this report.

Finally, the Task Force would also like to clarify that the ABR protects all students and not just those who are members of the stated protected classes. The specified characteristics (i.e., race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or a mental, physical or sensory disability) are not exclusive. By adding, “any other distinguishing characteristic,” the Legislature’s intent was clearly not to limit HIB to an incident that takes place because the HIB target has one of the specified characteristics.

Recommendations

1. The State Board of Education amend the administrative code to include the concept of power differential as a method and understanding of distinguishing the motivating characteristic of the aggressor.

Proposed code language at *N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.7(a)(2)iii*:

- iii. A statement that bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance.

After the adoption of the above code amendment, the NJDOE must add the following language to Section 3, Issues for Consideration, Sample Policy Language and Requirements, Local Policy Development, of the Model Policy and Guidance for Prohibiting Harassment (August 2022):

“The district board of education recognizes that bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance.”

The NJDOE similarly must change the following language and provide additional guidance to districts on the use of power imbalance to identify HIB.

“It is important to understand that the policy statement that bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior **that involves a real or perceived power imbalance** is not an additional criteria that school districts must fulfill when determining whether an incident meets the criteria of HIB. However, recognizing “a real or perceived power imbalance” may assist school officials in identifying HIB within the context and relative positions of the alleged aggressor and target, rather than focusing solely on the real or perceived characteristics of the target. District boards of education should take care to clarify how

the presence of a power imbalance will be considered in determining whether a distinguishing characteristic is a motivating factor.”

2. The NJDOE issue formal guidance to assist practitioners in understanding the significance of the power differential in HIB. The formal guidance should also assist practitioners in moving beyond the list of specified characteristics and considering characteristics in a broader, contextual sense that considers the relative positions of the alleged aggressor and target.
3. The Task Force reiterates that the definition of HIB in the ABR encompasses hazing, therefore an incident of hazing should trigger the same protection and thorough investigation as an incident of HIB.
4. NJSIAA in collaboration with the NJDOE and the state education associations continue to develop professional learning opportunities that target hazing and the role that sports play in the development of a positive school climate and culture.

Section III: Reporting, Investigating, and Staff Roles

Discussion

One of the most significant aspects of the implementation of the ABR is the process of reporting, investigating, determining, and remediating cases of HIB. Focus group discussions and testimony submitted to the Task Force raised multiple topics around reporting, investigating, and staff roles in the HIB process that merit discussion.

The Task Force first wishes to address the accessibility of the HIB reporting and investigating process in regard to family members/guardians. Testimony submitted to the Task Force called attention to the fact that many family members are unfamiliar with how to file an HIB report as well as their rights during and after the investigation process. The Task Force reinforces the importance of the requirement that districts prominently display information on HIB on their websites. During their focus group with the Task Force, members and representatives from the SPAN Parent Advocacy Network also highlighted the challenges posed by language barriers, and that some families are unable to access pertinent HIB forms and information in their primary language. Schools should ensure that all HIB-related information, processes and communication are conveyed in the family members' primary language and other.

At the initiation, duration, and conclusion of an HIB investigation, it is critical that schools maintain ongoing and consistent timely communication with the families of involved students, both aggressors and targets. The Task Force also wishes to reemphasize the work of the previous Task Force around the reporting of sensitive information. In its [January 16, 2015 report](#), the previous Task Force wrote,

“Reports of HIB based upon a student’s sexual orientation, perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and/or disability may inherently involve concerns that

are challenging. When such issues arise, those involved in the reporting and investigation must be mindful to recognize the sensitivity of the issues and how to intervene should the investigation trigger trauma. The ABTF recognizes that the procedural aspects of these incidents can be difficult to navigate, especially as it relates to notifying parents/guardians. These cases should be handled delicately, but consistently, and in accordance with the requirements of the ABR.”

In navigating communication around HIB investigations that involve sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, and other potentially sensitive identities, it is crucial that schools prioritize the protection of their students.

Testimony submitted to the Task Force and also focus group discussions illustrated the need for additional guidance around HIB investigation and remediation with respect to the age of the students involved. Multiple anti-bullying specialists (ABS), educators, and administrators highlighted to the Task Force that there are particular challenges to navigating the HIB process when it involves young elementary and pre-k students who lack the developmental capacity to understand the impact of their words and actions. As outlined in *N.J.S.A. 18A:37-15(b)(7)*, a school principal and ABS may offer a range of appropriate responses to an incident of HIB, including counseling and support services. The Task Force recommends that schools and Boards of Education also adopt and incorporate age-appropriate restorative justice practices and trauma-informed care when mediating HIB and student behavior outcomes and across all student disciplinary measures. The NJDOE, in consultation with the School Climate State Coordinator, should develop additional guidance and offer targeted training to support ABSs and administrators in navigating the HIB process involving younger elementary students.

In its [January 16, 2015 report](#), the previous Task Force recommended that the NJDOE issue guidance to districts that “if possible, an individual who is counseling a particular student shall not serve as the investigator in any matter in which that student is an alleged target or aggressor and that another ABS be assigned to the investigate the case.” The Task Force wishes to strongly reemphasize this recommendation. A number of focus group participants noted that when school counselors, social workers, and psychologists serve as the ABS, it not only takes away from their time meant to be supporting students’ mental health but can also have the unintended consequence of eroding the nurturing relationships these staff members seek to build with students.

The concept of the principal’s preliminary determination was raised during Task Force focus groups and in submitted testimony. Following the recommendations of the previous Task Force, administrative code (*N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.7*) was amended allowing school boards to adopt the language to their district HIB policy to reflect the following:

(e) Upon receipt of a report alleging harassment, intimidation or bullying, the school principal shall review the information presented to determine whether or not the facts presented, if true, would constitute HIB pursuant to *N.J.S.A. 18A:37-14*. When the facts presented, if true, do not satisfy the definition in law, the principal shall handle the matter consistent with the district’s code of student conduct. All other reports shall be referred to the anti-bullying specialist for investigation.

1. The use of the terms “harassment,” “intimidation,” and/or bullying,” in and of themselves, shall not determine whether or not the principal shall refer the matter

to the anti-bullying specialist.

2. If additional information becomes available subsequent to the principal's initial determination, the principal shall review said information and refer the matter to the anti-bullying specialist, as appropriate, pursuant to this section.

The Task Force wishes to reinforce that if a district's policy does include a clause permitting preliminary determination, it is important that principals consider the social and emotional status and the relationships of the students involved. The Task Force recommends that principals make use of the Threshold Assessment Checklist tool (found in Appendix B) to assist in this process. As outlined in the recent amendments, if a preliminary determination is made regarding an HIB report, it must be noted in the [HIB 338 Form](#). Furthermore, the Task Force wishes to reinforce that the superintendent must annually report to the Board of Education information on the number of times a preliminary determination was made that an incident or complaint was outside the scope of that definition for the purposes of the State's monitoring of the school district, as outlined in Section 1 of *P.L.1982, c.163 (C.18A:17-46)*.

The Task Force also wishes to address the role of district Boards of Education under the ABR. Current legislation (*N.J.S.A. 18A:37-15(b)(6)(e)*) requires that upon reviewing the results of each HIB investigation "the board shall issue a decision, in writing, to affirm, reject, or modify the superintendent's decision." Both in testimony submitted to the Task Force and focus group feedback raised questions as to whether boards should continue in this role. The Task Force recommends that the NJDOE, in consultation with the School Climate State Coordinator, with the relevant departments review and assess the effectiveness and role of school boards under administrative code and the ABR.

The Task Force agrees that school boards should be presented with the results of HIB investigations as mandated by *N.J.S.A. 18A:37-15(b)(6)(c)*, as this is critical to cultivating an understanding of school climate in a district. Moreover, as outlined in Section VII of this report, the task force recommends that school boards receive annual training around HIB and school climate and should review school climate improvement plans. However, testimony submitted to the task force and focus group discussions illustrated that, in many cases, Boards of Education are not equipped with the knowledge and/or training around HIB to rule on the superintendent's decision in a meaningful way, and that there is a lack of consistency across districts as to how this requirement is interpreted and enacted. Additionally, focus group participants and testimony reported the impact of the current politicized climate on the board review process.

While it is critical that schools oversee the reporting, investigating, and remediating of instances of HIB in accordance with the ABR, this should not be viewed as a checklist-style process in isolation. Reports of HIB, both founded and unfounded, are important indicators of a school's overall culture and climate. All school staff have a part to play in the prevention of HIB and promoting a positive school climate and culture. School administrators should be working in concert with School Safety/School Climate teams to closely examine the ongoing patterns and themes in HIB reporting as a part of the larger effort to create a climate where HIB is less likely to occur.

Recommendations

1. The NJDOE provide further support to districts to ensure that they are able to provide state HIB reporting forms and information regarding their rights under the ABR to families in their primary language.

2. The NJDOE, in consultation with the Division of Civil Rights (DCR), develop guidance and training to assist schools in navigating the HIB process with respect to the developmental age of students.
3. The NJDOE, in consultation with the School Climate State Coordinator, review and assess the effectiveness and role of school boards under administrative code and the ABR.

Section IV: School Climate

Discussion

As noted in the United States Department of Education’s report, *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline*, “The first step in building safe and supportive schools conducive to academic excellence and student success is to create positive climates. Such climates prevent problem behaviors before they occur and reduce the need for disciplinary interventions that can interfere with student learning” (United States Department of Education, 2014). The connection between school climate and culture and HIB has been supported in research which confirms that the more positive the school climate, the lower the prevalence of bullying and victimization (Bradshaw et al., 2021).

The previous Task Force identified an existing confusion over the role of the School Safety/School Climate Team. (SS/SCT). In reviewing Focus Group data, the current ABTF finds this confusion remains. The primary charge for this team, as stated in the ABR (*N.J.S.A.* 18A:37-21), is “to develop, foster and maintain a positive school climate by focusing on the on-going, systemic process and practices in the school to address school climate issues such as HIB.” It is important to note, that by the use of the phrase, “such as HIB,” legislators acknowledged that school climate is a much larger concept (See Appendix C:14 Dimensions of School Climate). There are still SS/SCTs that merely review incidents of HIB, ignoring their primary role - to create the type of school climate where it is least likely to occur.

This charge is at the heart of the spirit of the ABR. The New Jersey Commission on Bullying in Schools (NJCBS) [2009 report](#) recommended that “Each school form a school climate team or use an existing team to participate in professional learning opportunities related to school climate programs/approaches and assist in developing a comprehensive school-wide

program/approach to address school climate-related issues, including HIB.” The ABR established “Safety Teams.” Unfortunately, the “Safety Team” title caused confusion, because the major role of this team is to improve school climate, not to focus on school security. The previous Task Force made suggestions for administrative code changes to clarify the role. The code was revised and currently refers to the team as the School Safety/School Climate Team. The code also clearly states the role of the team.

N.J.A.C. 6A:16-1.3 now reads:

“School safety/school climate team” means the designated individuals collectively responsible in each school to develop, foster, and maintain a positive school environment by focusing on the ongoing systemic process and practices in the school and to address school climate issues.”

However, more needs to be done to ensure this pivotal team is fulfilling its main obligation under the law. School climate improvement is key to a proactive approach that addresses not only HIB, but other dimensions of school climate that are barriers to a positive and productive climate for learning.

The ABR also requires SS/SCTs to meet at least twice per year to review investigations of bullying. However, although reviewing HIB incidents is important in order to analyze possible trends, this alone is clearly not sufficient enough if the teams are to fulfill the fundamental charge to create a cycle of continuous positive school climate and culture improvement. The Task Force in receiving feedback wants to uplift the SS/SCT should be meeting at least monthly.

School climate improvement necessitates the use of additional climate data, such as surveys, attendance data, disciplinary referrals, grade distributions, etc., to identify both areas of strength and areas of concern. Understanding the need for SS/SCTs to collect baseline data in

order to identify strengths and concerns related to school climate issues, the NJDOE in collaboration with the School Climate Transformation Project, has provided a free tool to help schools secure meaningful school climate data from staff, students and the community. The no-cost [NJ School Climate Improvement \(NJ SCI\) Platform](#) features a new and enhanced, comprehensive instrument that was developed with the specific needs of New Jersey schools in mind. It is designed to help schools understand school climate needs and strengths from the perspectives of students, families, and staff, but will also provide insight into a school community's relationships, safety, sense of connectedness, teaching and learning, and measures of an equitable and supportive learning environment, including supports for social and emotional learning. School Safety/School Climate Teams using the NJ SCI Survey also have access to an online platform managed by Rutgers University that will facilitate data collection and analysis, strategic planning, and progress monitoring. This tool can be an invaluable support in the work of continuous school climate improvement.

The SS/SCTs should use school climate data to develop yearly school climate improvement plans with clear goals and action steps. The team must work with the entire school community to implement a systemic and coherent plan of action and use formative and summative assessments to reflect on progress and inform changes to the plan. The Task Force recommends that district school climate improvement plans be reviewed and approved by Boards of Education and be monitored as part of the New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC) to ensure that every school is taking this proactive approach focused on creating the type of school climates where HIB is least likely to occur.

In an attempt to prevent HIB and enhance school climate it is critical that school improvement plans avoid implementing “single event” programs, approaches and initiatives.

Disjointed programs are not effective. Every piece of the school's climate improvement plan must be purposeful and connected. This will help avoid "initiative fatigue" and instead result in a comprehensive and systemic approach to school climate improvement.

The ABR requires school year-long grade appropriate instruction in bullying prevention. As the previous ABTF noted, this necessitates consistent and comprehensive instruction in social and emotional learning skills that enable students to build healthy relationships with adults and peers. This instruction should be part of the school and district climate improvement plan. The SS/SCT should consider focusing on the relationships component of the [New Jersey Social Emotional Learning Competencies and Sub-Competencies](#) and teach school-wide lessons that can help establish clear behavioral expectations while supporting positive relationships and safe and caring learning environments. Such expectations should be modeled by all stakeholders in the school community. Lessons should focus on building not only positive face to face relationships, but positive peer online relationships. The ABTF recommends that such instruction be part of a coherent and connected approach to school climate improvement, which can be instrumental in establishing healthy and positive learning environments. Results from two studies suggest that teaching age-appropriate pro-social skills is shown to increase student achievement between 11 and 17 percentile points (Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008).

The School Safety/School Climate Team is also encouraged to build relationships with community organizations. This engagement with community organizations and stakeholders is especially important with organizations representing the interests of students who are of marginalized or disenfranchised populations in schools, including populations most often targeted. As an aspect of a school's climate improvement efforts, school administrators should ensure that there are well-identified staff mentors for such student populations. Such staff

mentors should be supported in their personal participation in the organizations' initiatives and events. These community organizations should also provide their perspectives on the school's climate to the SS/SCT, specifically in regard to the protection and support of the student populations for whom they advocate.

Staff mentorships are one way to ensure that all students are connected to a trusting adult who they can seek out for assistance. Peer mentorship can also provide strong support and protection of vulnerable students. It has shown when students have invested peer support, they are exponentially less likely to experience HIB. To note, when peers have the tools and understanding to express disfavor, and intervention and support when HIB is occurring, such incidents resolve more often. Some examples of peer mentorship include senior students who mentor junior students, students without identified special needs who mentor students with special needs, and student tutors for students with academic challenges. Students who experience social isolation can especially benefit from such peer support networks and programs.

Since the SS/SCT team plays a pivotal role in overall school climate improvement, it is imperative that its members be representative of the whole school community. The law requires that the ABS chair this team, however, it is meant to be a shared leadership team. The principal should be a member of the team. If the principal appoints a designee, that person should be another senior administrator. A parent must also be appointed to the team and should be a part of any discussions as long as they do not include issues of student confidentiality. Teachers from various grade levels and cross-sectional content areas should be encouraged to join the team. In addition, since school climate does not end when the bell rings at the end of the school day, but instead continues to be reflected in school sponsored activities and events, coaches and club advisors should also take part in team conversations.

As the SS/SCT engages in conversations related to school climate, it is imperative to include student voice. Students can and should participate in age-appropriate team conversations, fostering joint ownership of and responsibility for school climate and culture. Focus groups revealed a misconception around the makeup of SS/SCTs - as no part of the ABR prohibits the inclusion of student leaders on the SS/SCT where developmentally appropriate.

Currently, the NJDOE requires schools to utilize the [Self-Assessment Tool](#), to assess their compliance with the ABR. This document, however, is not currently emphasizing the legislation's call for SS/SCTs to "develop, foster and maintain a positive school climate by focusing on the on-going systemic process and practices to address school climate issues, such as harassment, intimidation and bullying." The ABTF, therefore, recommends that this tool be revised to ensure schools understand the steps that these teams need to take in order to fulfill this mandate.

Recommendations

1. The NJDOE revise the Self-Assessment tool to emphasize the steps SS/SCTs should be taking in order to fulfill their role, "to develop, foster and maintain a positive school climate by focusing on the on-going systemic process and practices to address school climate issues, such as harassment, intimidation and bullying."
2. Annual training be provided to all SS/SCTs in accordance with the ABR. All members of a team attend the training, so there is a shared understanding of their work. The focus of such trainings include the following:
 - Understanding the dimensions of school climate;
 - Utilizing best practices in creating inclusive and affirming school climates;
 - Collecting and analyzing school climate data;

- Developing school climate goals and action plans to achieve those goals;
 - Implementing schoolwide approaches to social and emotional learning; and
 - Evaluating school climate improvement efforts.
3. Anti-bullying coordinators (ABC)s attend SS/SCT training, as they can coordinate the work district-wide, providing opportunities for teams to share ideas and resources.
 4. School districts reexamine their approach to year-long HIB prevention instruction and incorporate a systemic approach to teaching social and emotional learning skills that strengthen both face to face and online relationships.
 5. SS/SCTs develop annual school climate improvement plans that promote a coherent approach to social and emotional learning.
 6. SS/SCTs foster strong relationships with community organizations that represent marginalized student populations.
 7. Schools develop staff and peer mentorship programs to help ensure every student is connected to another member of the school community.
 8. Boards of Education review and approve annual School Climate Improvement Plans in May of each school year. These plans be presented to the Board of Education by the SS/SCT in May of each year and focus on the actions that will be taken the following school year in order to continually improve school climate. An update on the current year plan's progress be provided to the board every December.
 9. The NJDOE add the development of an annual school climate improvement plan to the NJQSAC monitoring system in order to ensure that SS/SCTs in every school have developed coherent and systemic school climate improvement plans.

Section V: The Role of Social Media

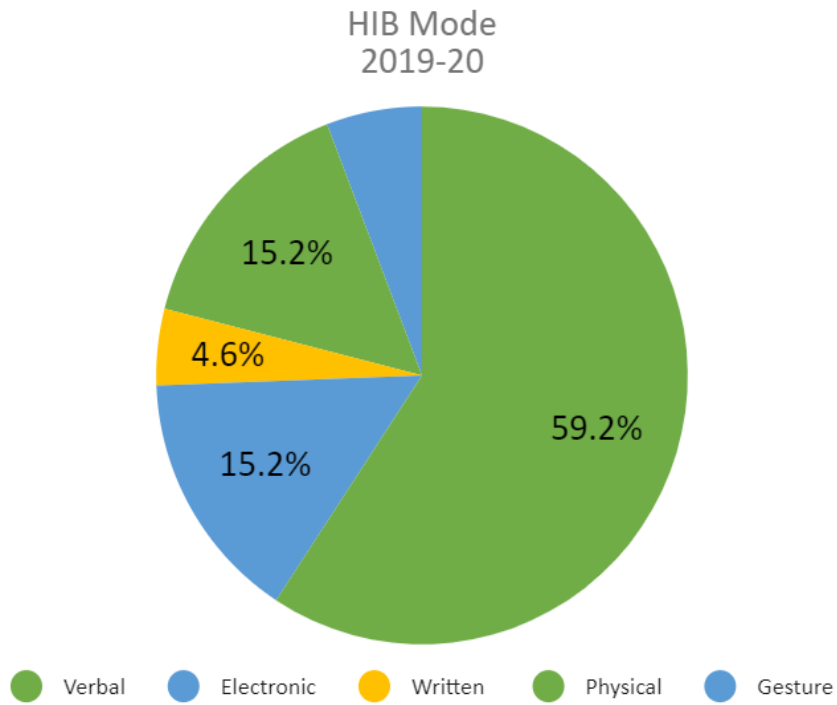
Discussion

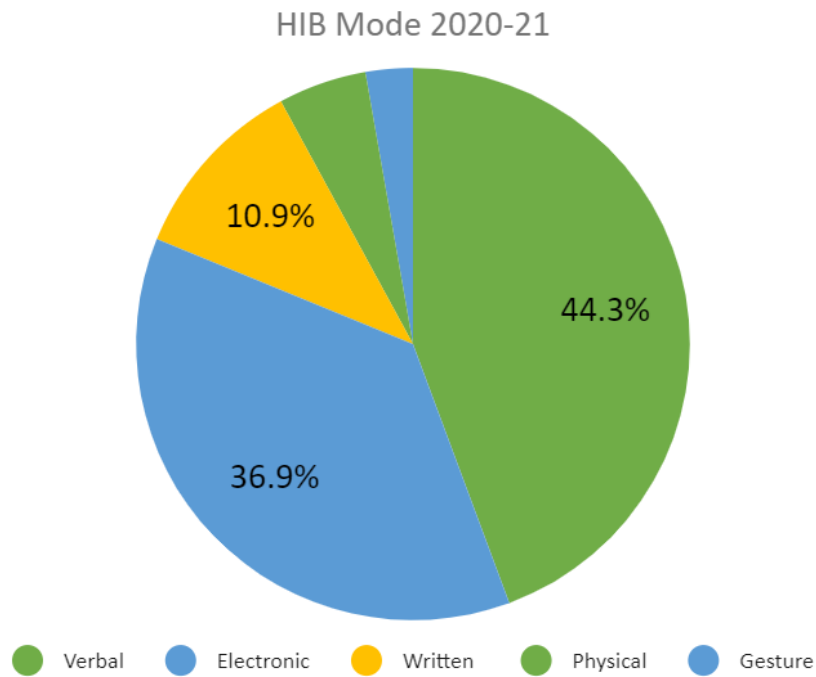
To effectively address the landscape of bullying in New Jersey, the Task Force deems it critical to examine the role of social media in bullying. Both focus group members and testimony submitted to the task force repeatedly emphasized the significant role social media often plays in HIB incidents as well as the barriers it presents to the effective investigation of HIB reports. The larger question of the overall impact of social media on young people is also of concern to the Legislature. The recently enacted bill (S-715/A-1992) establishes the Commission on the Effects of Social Media Usage on Adolescents, which will work to determine:

- the extent of social media usage both in and out of public schools, including the average amount of time students in various age groups spend each day on electronic devices;
- the effects that use has on the emotional health of students, including incidents of depression, anxiety, body dysmorphia, harassment, intimidation/bullying, or other disruptive behaviors;
- the effects that use has on the academic performance of students; and
- the effects that use has on the physical health of students, including incidents of sleep deprivation, weight loss or gain, or high blood pressure.

Since the publication of the last Task Force report, we have witnessed a nationwide surge in social media engagement among adolescents, particularly via smartphones, within the confines of educational institutions (Anderson et al., 2023). Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat allow students to engage with each other at all hours of the day, including outside of school hours.

According to the most recently available data collected by the NJDOE, electronic communication as a mode of confirmed HIB incidents rose from 15% of all cases in 2018-19 to 37% of all cases in 2020-21(New Jersey Department of Education, 2022).





Source: New Jersey Department of Education, 2023

It is important to note that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many HIB incidents may have been underreported or not reported at all. Most applicable data dates back to 2018-2019, when students were on site for the entirety of the year, however, the prevalence of cyberbullying remained steady. Current research shows that adolescents who experience cyberbullying are four times more likely to report suicidal thoughts and attempts than those who do not (Arnon et al., 2022).

A recently conducted national survey of cyberbullying by the Cyberbullying Research Center (Patchin & Whitecotton, 2023) found that:

“26.5% of students said they had experienced cyberbullying within the 30 days before taking the survey. This compares to 23.2% in 2021, 17.2% in 2019, and 16.7% in 2016. In 2023, the most common forms of cyberbullying experienced (among those who were cyberbullied) included:

- *Someone posted mean or hurtful comments about me online (77.5%)*
- *Someone spread rumors about me online (70.4%)*
- *Someone embarrassed or humiliated me online (69.1%)*
- *Someone intentionally excluded me from a group text or group chat (66.4%)*
- *Someone repeatedly contacted me via text or online after I told them to stop (55.5%)*

In 2016, 10.3% of students told us that they had stayed home from school because of cyberbullying. In 2023, that number nearly doubled to 19.2%. Finally, in 2016, about 43% of students said that bullying and cyberbullying were “a big problem” in their schools while in 2023 54% of students said that was the case.”

Due to the increasingly substantial amounts of time young people spend on social media, aggressors of HIB are able to exploit nearly unrestricted access to their targets, leaving little refuge for victims of online harassment. Research has shown that, more often than not, instances of cyberbullying that occur outside of school hours are an extension of in-person interactions that take place among students during the school day (Twyman et al., 2010). However, outside the school building, students may have limited access to resources and support to interrupt harassment, intimidation, and bullying that is actively causing distress.

Additionally, social media often allows users to remain anonymous and or create pseudonymous profiles, contributing to obstacles for administrators and ABSs to thoroughly conduct an HIB investigation. This also allows for reduced accountability, and this anonymity can embolden individuals to continue to engage in bullying behaviors offline and in the classroom. Furthermore, the rapid evolution of online spaces and technology has presented school staff with unprecedented challenges. The recent emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and deepfakes with the ability to replicate the voice, image, and likeness of an

individual has been weaponized by students to target their peers as well as school staff.

The prevalence of incidents involving social media, as highlighted in Task Force Focus Groups, not only underscores the severity of the issue but also presents significant barriers to effective investigation of HIB reports as well as remediation of confirmed incidents of HIB. ABSs and administrators have found themselves faced with the need to gain access to and review content shared from private accounts – many times involving more than two parties whose identities may be challenging to determine – across various platforms to investigate HIB reports, which often takes significant time. Furthermore, if the remediation of an HIB incident involves the removal of posts or messages, this has the potential to involve the school in a social media platform’s content review and moderation process, over which it has no control.

Several pieces of pending legislation in New Jersey address young people’s social media use, including some that would restrict access to aspects of social media platforms. Additionally, S.1409, the Kids Online Safety Act introduced to the Senate would require age verification steps and restrict minors from accessing certain content on social media. Such provisions, while intended to protect young people, may also cause harm to those with marginalized identities, such as members of the LGBTQ+ community, by restricting their access to resources, support, and community. This is particularly concerning, as research has shown that LGBTQ+ youth, and trans youth in particular, are at increased risk of depression and suicidal ideations (The Trevor Project, 2022). Furthermore, research has also shown that LGBTQ+ youth already experience school discipline at disproportionate rates compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers (GLSEN, 2016).

Addressing the negative impact of social media in school communities requires a complex and nuanced approach. School staff as well as parents and caregivers would benefit

from professional learning, resources, and guidance to assist in navigating this topic. Social media has grown into a macrocosm through which young people’s lives unfold. It plays a significant role in the development of both their sense of self and peer-to-peer relationships. According to the Pew Research Center’s December 2023 report on teens and technology, nearly half of all teens report being online “almost constantly” (Anderson et al., 2023). Research has shown that consistent social media use can lead to poor mental health outcomes for children and adolescents including anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, distorted body image and eating behavior (United States Surgeon General’s Advisory, 2023). While schools must address this negative impact of social media, particularly as it relates to HIB among students, it cannot fall to schools alone. Parents, families, caregivers, and communities at large must play an active role in addressing this critical issue.

Recommendations

1. The Task Force wishes to elevate the role of the Commission created by S-715/A-1992 and encourages the Commission to closely study both the role that social media plays in facilitating incidents of HIB in New Jersey and the impact of those incidents on young people.
2. The Task Force further recommends that the Commission utilizes its findings to develop guidance and best practices to assist schools in navigating the role of social media in bullying.
3. The State Board of Education review and update the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (social studies and media literacy) to ensure incorporation of age-appropriate media digital citizenship instruction for K-12.

4. NJDOE, through the School Climate State Coordinator and related offices, offer an online portal through which school staff, parents, and caregivers can access additional resources, guidance, and professional learning opportunities around social media and young people.
5. Districts implement training to support their staff in navigating the role of social media in HIB.
6. Funding be made available through the Bullying Prevention Fund and/or other sources to assist schools in implementing training to address this issue effectively.

Section VI: Coaches

Discussion

As part of its charge when established, the Task Force was tasked with examining the impact of the ABR and its implementation on athletic coaches. The Task Force addressed the role of athletic coaches under the ABR in a number of focus groups, including a focus group with the NJSIAA.

Focus groups illustrated the importance of further including coaches in a school's overall approach to climate improvement and creating a school culture where HIB is less likely to occur. Many focus group members reported that coaches at their school were not a part of the School Safety/School Climate Team. School climate does not end with the school day, and athletics often play a significant role in shaping the culture of a school or district. Moreover, athletics has tremendous potential to foster positive social relationships among young people and promote a sense of school unity. As the head of athletic teams, coaches should be included as members of the School Safety/School Climate Team.

Focus group feedback also called attention to the "weaponization" of HIB reporting. Focus group members reported a number of incidents in which a parent or guardian filed an HIB report against a coach in retaliation for their student's lack of playing time or role on a team. This misuse of the HIB reporting process creates barriers to successful implementation of the ABR in schools. The ABR is intended to protect all students from HIB, and all students, staff, and family members have a responsibility to treat the HIB and hazing reporting process with integrity to ensure that the law functions as intended.

The Task Force re-emphasizes that coaches, club advisors, and volunteer support staff are subject to the same roles and responsibilities as any other school or district staff member under

the ABR. That is, all coaches and athletic support personnel must receive training on bullying and must be aware of their responsibility for reporting any occurrences of HIB to designated school staff (principal and/or ABS). The Task Force also wishes to reiterate the work of the previous Task Force around hazing as coaches are often the school staff members to address hazing in the context of sports teams. The previous Task Force noted in its [January 26, 2016](#) report that “the definition of HIB in the ABR encompasses hazing, therefore an incident of hazing should trigger the same protection and thorough investigation as an incident of HIB.” Furthermore, as written in the [January 26, 2015 Task Force report](#), “The investigative and preventative measures afforded by the ABR provide an appropriate, tested, and preexisting framework for handling instances of hazing.” Districts are also encouraged to review the 2021 legislation (2C:40-3 Hazing), which requires middle and high schools to adopt anti-hazing policies.

Recommendations

1. All coaches, club advisors, and volunteer support staff receive training around HIB and hazing.
2. Coaches be included as members of School Safety/School Climate Teams.

Section VII: Resources (Funding, Training, School Climate State Coordinator)

Funding

The implementation of a proactive, high-quality, holistic anti-bullying initiative, with a focus on creating and sustaining a healthy climate and culture within schools requires the commitment of resources including funding and training. The Task Force heard from our Focus Groups repeatedly about the need for direct funding to address school climate and culture, student mental health and wellness, and effective implementation of the ABR.

In 2015, the State allocated \$1,000,000.00 in funding for the Bullying Prevention Fund. This level of funding was not enough to support the implementation of the ABR in New Jersey's 697 school districts. The Bullying Prevention Fund has received **no funding** since 2015, yet the cost of full implementation of the law continues to increase. Currently, there are no earmarked funds to support in-district implementation, staffing, training and programming for students impacted by HIB. Yet, in the 2022 amendments to the legislation, the Bullying Prevention Fund is highlighted as a way for schools to secure funding for programs that assist in responding to the needs of students involved in an HIB incident, "In the event that the necessary programs and services are not available within the district, the district may apply to the Department of Education for a grant from the "Bullying Prevention Fund" established pursuant to section 25 of *P.L.2010, c.122 (C.18A:37-28)* to support the provision of out-of-district programs and services."

The amendments clearly state, "The Legislature shall appropriate such monies as necessary to fund the position of School Climate State Coordinator established pursuant to section 5 of *P.L.2021, c.338 (C.18A:37-37.1)*, and the "Bullying Prevention Fund" established

pursuant to section 25 of *P.L. 2010, c.122* (C.18A:37-28), and such other monies as necessary to implement the provisions of this act.”

The previous Task Force made strong recommendations in this area throughout its tenure from 2012-2016, yet no funding has been added. Although New Jersey has passed one of the most prescriptive anti-bullying laws, passed amendments to that law and created a commission and two task forces to study implementation, it continues to be ignored the need for a permanent funding stream that ensures schools have what they need to be most effective in implementing the law. The current Task Force, while offering additional recommendations, emphasizes that the need for sufficient funding can no longer be ignored.

In testimony submitted to the Task Force, the Education Law Center warned that the "Adequacy Budget" computed for each school district each year does not account for the additional staffing needed for implementation of the ABR in schools, including the positions of Anti-Bullying Specialist (ABS), District Anti-Bullying Coordinator (ABC), and anti-bullying training and programs. Each district's annual Adequacy Budget is computed by the NJDOE during the spring budgeting process and is based on the resourcing model and formula contained in the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) of 2008. The Adequacy Budget generated for each district each year is not just a mechanism to determine how much state aid a given district should receive but is further intended to provide a gauge for all districts (even the wealthiest districts) of what staffing and spending is necessary to provide all students with a Thorough and Efficient Education. The Adequacy Budget is a benchmark to determine whether a district is spending enough (and on what activities), whether or not that spending is coming primarily from state aid or local taxation.

The Task Force recommends that the State undertake an in-depth review of the SFRA's

resourcing model (and further distinguishing between what's necessary at the elementary, middle and high school levels) as part of the next Educational Adequacy Report, due in early 2025, to examine whether the SFRA resourcing model and cost formula (and resulting district Adequacy Budgets) specify sufficient staff (and in what categories) to meet current state requirements for implementation of the ABR.

Schools have the responsibility to investigate and intervene in all HIB cases. This necessitates that schools have enough funding for both the appropriate level of staffing and training. Effective implementation means that schools need enough personnel to ensure they have the time to conduct investigations and provide remedial measures and proactive educational support. Post-COVID, counselors, social workers, school psychologists and other similarly trained individuals are needed to help support the growing overall mental health and wellness concerns of our students. Schools simply require more qualified staff so they can balance the need to meet investigatory requirements, while not sacrificing the critical work of providing mental health and counseling services.

Training

In order to fulfill their roles in implementing the ABR, all key staff, including Board of Education members, administrators, ABSs, ABCs, and School Safety/School Climate Team members need high-quality targeted professional learning. Training requirements are established in the law, so funding needs to be provided to support this work. In addition, the NJDOE should develop online training resources that address the specific roles of key staff charged with implementation.

Board of Education members should receive additional training on the importance of addressing school climate issues as part of a bullying prevention plan. They should also be aware

of the role of the School Climate Team in developing, fostering, and maintaining a positive school climate. Furthermore, the Task Force reinforces that all school employees and student-facing contracted service providers and volunteers, such as bus drivers/aids, coaches and athletic staff, should be receiving training on their roles and responsibilities under the ABR.

Updated resources should also be provided for parents and community members to support their understanding of the legislation. The NJDOE should develop online training for parents/guardians to help them understand the reporting and investigation process, as well as the appeal process. Careful attention should be paid to ensuring resources are available and accessible including in several languages to assist schools in ensuring all parents are well informed.

According to the PACER National Bullying Prevention Center and the Center for Disease Control (2018), a comprehensive approach to effective bullying prevention efforts involves students, parents, teachers, and community members.

- *“Multi-tiered systems of support, which includes universal programs or activities for all youth within the community or school; selective interventions for groups of youth at risk for being involved in bullying; and preventive interventions tailored for students already involved in bullying.*
- *Multicomponent programs that address multiple aspects of bullying behavior and the environments that support it. Examples include examining school rules and using behavior management techniques and social-emotional learning in the classroom and throughout the school to detect and provide consequences for bullying.*
- *School-wide prevention activities that include improving the school climate, strengthening supervision of students, and having a school-wide anti-bullying policy.*

- *Involving families and communities by helping caregivers learn how to talk about bullying and get involved with school-based prevention efforts.*
- *Developing long-term school-wide approaches that strengthen youth's social-emotional, communication, and problem-solving skills.*
- *Focusing on program fidelity by forming an implementation team to make sure the programs are carried out exactly as they were designed.”*

The Task Force heard during several Focus Groups about ongoing challenges that school staff and ABS expressed in regards to having adequate targeted professional learning opportunities around HIB and social-emotional learning. It was also reported that training opportunities around HIB and ABR that staff received were more often inadequate, self-guided, mostly delivered in an online mini-lesson format and not updated to current New Jersey standards and amendments. Participants also reported that the HIB training that they did receive in the district were mostly prescriptive, checklist based and topical and did not address or individualize HIB training to help with addressing student scenarios or in investigation procedures and methodology. The Task Force also heard from Focus Groups about school staff and ABS wanting additional ongoing intersectional HIB training, including additional inclusive student support to better address school climate and culture and student mental health and wellness.

The Task Force also heard feedback from Focus Groups that the majority of HIB/ABR training overall seemed to be compliance-driven and not entirely effective, whether that be on HIB definition, proper investigation navigation, and compliance when law enforcement is involved in an investigation, leaving many schools and staff involved with investigating struggling with supporting students and properly handling duties due to a lack of proper training.

Additionally, The Task Force noted that there needs to be a more comprehensive intersectional approach to the needs of intersecting identities across HIB training methodology.

School Climate State Coordinator

The amendments to the ABR established the role of the School Climate State Coordinator with the following responsibilities:

- A. Identifying and disseminating research and resources, including professional development resources, to promote best practices in student social-emotional learning and the development of a positive, supportive school climate in New Jersey schools;
- B. Providing information regarding the provisions and procedures of the “Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act,” *P.L.2002, c.83 (C.18A:37-13 et seq.)*, and regulations promulgated thereto, relevant provisions of the “Law Against Discrimination,” *P.L.1945, c.169 (C.10:5-1 et seq.)*, and other State and federal laws addressing harassment, intimidation, and bullying;
- C. Reviewing and reporting data collected on harassment, intimidation and bullying pursuant to section 1 of *P.L.1982, c.163 (C.18A:17-46)* to identify and report to the Department of Education any patterns of harassment, intimidation, or bullying in public schools. The department shall review the information provided by the State coordinator to develop guidance and strategies for public schools, parents, school staff, and other agencies, as appropriate;
- D. Assisting the Department of Education in creating public information programs that educate parents, educators, and the public concerning the duties of the State coordinator, the issue of harassment, intimidation, and bullying, and the resources available to address and prevent harassment, intimidation, and bullying;

- E. Working collaboratively with law enforcement, the Department of Education, the Division on Civil Rights in the Department of Law and Public Safety, and the Department of Health to develop a training program on the impact of harassment, intimidation, and bullying on students and schools, that will be available for school districts to use in local anti-bullying programs and intervention plans;
- F. Working collaboratively with law enforcement, including organizations representing school resource officers, to develop resources and training for law enforcement concerning the impact of harassment, intimidation, and bullying on students and schools, and the appropriate role of law enforcement in such matters pursuant to the Uniform Memorandum of Agreement Between Education and Law Enforcement Officials; and
- G. Annually providing to the Commissioner of Education, the State Board of Education, and pursuant to section 2 of *P.L. 1991, c. 164* (C.52:14-19.1) the Legislature, a report summarizing the activities of the State coordinator, and any specific recommendations concerning school climate best practices and procedures

Each of these responsibilities has the potential to improve the implementation of the ABR, however, they are far too extensive for a single staff member alone to accomplish. Just the task of providing information to parents/guardians, schools and districts who reach out directly on a daily basis is quite time-consuming. As noted in the training section, there is a substantial need for the NJDOE to provide up-to-date information and effective resources and training opportunities for those involved in implementation, as well as parents/guardians. The Task Force recommends that the School Climate State Coordinator lead a newly established and sufficiently staffed and funded Office of School Climate within the NJDOE, to allow all of these critical responsibilities to be carried out effectively. In addition, the standing advisory commission on

HIB, as recommended and outlined in the introduction of this report, should periodically consult with the School Climate State Coordinator (and recommended Office of School Climate) on issues related to the implementation of the ABR and the work of school climate improvement.

Recommendations

1. The Governor and Legislature fund the Bullying Prevention Fund, providing sufficient earmarked funds for the effective implementation of the ABR in all New Jersey schools.
2. The NJDOE streamline and consistently update and maintain comprehensive training and resources on the [NJDOE HIB website](#). Resources should include online training and best practice guidance on all aspects of ABR implementation. Resources should be targeted to the roles played in implementation: administrators, ABSs, ABCs and School Safety/School Climate Team members. Additional training opportunities for School Safety/School Climate Teams that focus on improving climate and culture and HIB prevention are essential to highlight the importance of creating learning environments where HIB is least likely to occur.
3. The NJDOE update and maintain parent/community resources to promote better understanding of the ABR. The NJDOE develop an on-line training for parents and caregivers. Due to the diversity in our state, materials should be available in several languages.
4. The School Climate State Coordinator lead a newly established Office of School Climate within the NJDOE and that sufficient staffing and funding be provided to support this office in carrying out the responsibilities set forth in the recent amendments to the ABR.

APPENDIX A



NJPSAFE

LEGAL ONE

GUIDING QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE IF THERE IS SUBSTANTIAL DISRUPTION

Note: New Jersey’s definition of harassment, intimidation or bullying requires a showing that the alleged behavior “substantially disrupts or interferes with the orderly operation of the school or the rights of other students.” In determining whether or not an incident has resulted in substantial disruption or interference, it is important to recognize that we need to assess the impact on the student in question and consider whether the impact has negatively impacted the rights of other students or otherwise interfered with the orderly operation of the schools.

When assessing substantial disruption for the alleged victim, it is important to recognize that not all students will respond in the same manner when they are targeted. In addition, there may be instances where a student has experienced substantial disruption, but chooses to downplay the impact when interviewed for a variety of reasons (e.g., fear of retaliation, embarrassment, etc.) The underlying issue is whether or not there has been a lasting impact on the student in question when considering that particular student’s baseline behavior or whether the incident has interfered with the rights of other students or otherwise interfered with school operations. Lasting impact involves more than a momentary annoyance, but rather entails some ongoing impact beyond the immediate response of the students involved.

This document provides tools for assessing the substantial disruption and interference component of the HIB definition. Listed below are suggestions regarding key individuals to consult with and key questions to ask in order to make this determination. Note that the suggestions below are not intended as an exhaustive list but are meant to be illustrative and to provide a common starting point and framework.

This tool will not be necessary in all investigations, but rather should be considered in those cases where substantial disruption, interference with rights of others and/or interference with the orderly operation of schools is not readily apparent and/or in those cases where the alleged victim is indicating that an event either did or did not result in substantial disruption and the alleged victim’s assertion is inconsistent with how most students would have reacted to a similar situation.

The document includes a suggested protocol for assessing substantial disruption for the alleged victim of HIB, and a second protocol for assessing potential impact on other students or interference with the orderly operation of the schools.

PROTOCOL FOR ASSESSING SUBSTANTIAL DISRUPTION

FOR ALLEGED VICTIM OF HIB

Have you consulted with:

- The student
- The student's assigned school counselor
 - Did the student's counselor meet with the student subsequent to the alleged incident and assess the student's social-emotional well-being?
- The parents/guardians
- The student's assigned teachers
- The student's coach and/or club advisor
- The student's friends
- Others who may be close to the student (explain connection to student)

Key Questions to Consider:

During and/or subsequent to the incident:

1. Did the student miss school?
2. Did the student miss class?
3. Did the student's academic performance suffer?
4. Did the student stop participating in sports or other extracurricular activities?
5. Did the student's circle of friends change?
6. Has the student been involved in disciplinary or behavioral incidents?
7. Did the student change his or her routine to avoid the alleged aggressor(s)?
8. Conversely, did the student voluntarily choose to resume positive interactions with the alleged aggressor (e.g., playing together, eating lunch together, working together on school projects, etc.)
9. Did the student change his or her routine to avoid certain locations in the school or on school grounds? • Was the student sad, upset, and/or crying? If yes, for how long? What evidence do you have to support this?
10. Did the student otherwise exhibit signs of a major change in demeanor or behavior? (e.g., withdrawn, anxious, aggressive, etc.)
11. Did the student seek support or counsel from a trusted adult? If so, who?
12. Do parents report a disruption at home (loss of appetite, lack of sleep, generally sad or upset)?
13. What is the student's status to date? Has the student returned to his/her normal routine?
14. Is the incident currently a stressor for the student? If so, in what way?
15. Does the incident involve video, social media posts and/or other electronic communications that have been viewed by multiple students and/or by others?

SUMMARY DOCUMENT

SUBSTANTIAL DISRUPTION FOR ALLEGED VICTIM OF HIB

PERSON INTERVIEWED	INTERVIEWER(S) and DATE(S)	Summary of Evidence Related to Substantial Disruption
Student		
Parent/Guardian		
Counselor		
Teacher		
Coach/Club Advisor		
Friend		
Other Family Member		
Other (specify connection to alleged victim of HIB)		

ANALYSIS OF EVIDENCE

Note that the standard to be used for this analysis is preponderance of the evidence. In other words, what is more likely than not true given the evidence involved.

CONCLUSION REACHED REGARDING SUBSTANTIAL DISRUPTION

Note that the Ant-Bullying Specialist is the lead investigator and is charged with leading the investigation and making the determination regarding whether or not an incident meets New Jersey's definition of harassment, intimidation or bullying.

PROTOCOL FOR ASSESSING SUBSTANTIAL DISRUPTION FOR OTHERS AND/OR INTERFERENCE WITH ORDERLY OPERATION OF SCHOOLS

Key Questions to Consider:

1. Does the incident involve video, social media posts and/or other electronic communications that have been viewed by multiple students and/or by others?
2. Did other students directly witness the incident(s) involved in the alleged HIB?
3. If Yes to questions 1 or 2, did any student witness seek counseling or otherwise manifest a lasting negative impact from the incident? (see questions 1 – 15 from Protocol for Assessing Substantial Disruption for the Alleged Victim to assess lasting impact)
4. Did the incident(s) adversely impact the ability of teachers to deliver planned instruction for an extended period of time because students kept diverting discussion to the incident(s) and/or their impact (e.g., beyond getting students back on track after a discussion for the first few minutes of class over one or a few days)?
5. Did the incident(s) adversely impact the ability of school officials to maintain safety in school, on school grounds and at school functions? If so, in what way?
6. Did the incident(s) adversely impact the ability of school officials to maintain the orderly operations of school (e.g., orderly transition between classes, and/or other aspects of school district operations? If so, in what way?

**INTERFERENCE WITH RIGHTS OF OTHER STUDENTS AND/OR
ORDERLY OPERATIONS OF SCHOOLS**

PERSON INTERVIEWED	INTERVIEWER(S) and DATE(S)	Summary of Evidence Related to interference with rights of others and/or orderly operations of schools
Student		
Parent/Guardian		
Counselor		
Teacher		
Coach/Club Advisor		
Friend		
Other Family Member		
Other (specify connection to alleged victim of HIB)		

ANALYSIS OF EVIDENCE

Note that the standard to be used for this analysis is preponderance of the evidence. In other words, what is more likely than not true given the evidence involved.

CONCLUSION REACHED REGARDING INTERFERENCE WITH RIGHTS OF OTHERS AND ORDERLY OPERATIONS

Note that the Ant-Bullying Specialist is the lead investigator and is charged with leading the investigation and making the determination regarding whether or not an incident meets New Jersey's definition of harassment, intimidation or bullying.

APPENDIX B

Threshold Assessment Checklist For Principals

INTRODUCTION

This document is intended to assist the school principal in responding to incidents that may potentially involve violations of New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights. It includes recommendations for determining whether the allegations, if true, would satisfy NJ's HIB definition and therefore if the matter should be referred to the Anti-Bullying Specialist (Steps 1 through 4), and next steps to consider after the initial threshold assessment is completed.

It is critical to stress that the principal should NOT use this document to do an independent review of the merits of any allegation of HIB. Instead, this document is intended to assist in determining whether the allegations, IF TRUE, rise to the level that they should be referred to the ABS. It allows for a more thoughtful initial assessment, by focusing on the substance of the allegations rather than whether or not certain loaded terms such as "harassment," "intimidation" or "bullying" have been used. It is intended to assist districts in using limited resources most effectively in order to ensure the health and safety of all students. It is important to note that determining the matter should be referred to the ABS is NOT the same as determining that HIB has actually occurred. Some allegations of HIB will satisfy the initial threshold determination for referral to the ABS, but still not meet the legal standard required for a finding of HIB.

ABR HIB DEFINITION

"Harassment, intimidation or bullying" means any gesture, any written, verbal or physical act, or any electronic communication, whether it be a single incident or a series of incidents, that is reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic, such as race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or a mental, physical or sensory disability, or by any other distinguishing characteristic, that takes place on school property, at any school-sponsored function, on a school bus, or off school grounds as provided for in section 16 of P.L.2010, c.122 (C.18A:37-15.3), that substantially disrupts or interferes with the orderly operation of the school or the rights of other students and that:

- a. a reasonable person should know, under the circumstances, will have the effect of physically or emotionally harming a student or damaging the student's property, or placing a student in reasonable fear of physical or emotional harm to his person or damage to his property; b. has the effect of insulting or demeaning any student or group of students; or
- c. creates a hostile educational environment for the student by interfering with a student's education or by severely or pervasively causing physical or emotional harm to the student.

ABTF in collaboration with David Nash, Esq., Director of LEGAL ONE/Director Legal Education, Foundation for Educational Administration

STEPS 1-3 – INITIAL REVIEW OF ALLEGED INCIDENT(S)

STEP	Required Element of HIB	Key Question	Answer (YES, NO, NOT CLEAR)	Next Step
1	Substantial Disruption or Interference with orderly operation of school or the rights of other students	Is it reasonable to believe that the alleged act or acts may result in substantial disruption or interference?		If Yes, proceed to Step 2. If No, proceed to Step 5 and review matter for appropriate response under Code of Student Conduct If Not Clear, clarify with initial reporter what the alleged disruption or interference is
2	Reasonably Perceived as Motivated by Actual or Perceived Characteristic	Is there reason to believe that the alleged act(s) were motivated by one or more actual or perceived characteristics of alleged victim?		If Yes, proceed to Step 3 If No, proceed to Step 5 and review matter for appropriate response under Code of Student Conduct If Not Clear, clarify with initial reporter if there is any alleged actual or perceived characteristic involved
3a	Physical or emotional harm to student or property	Would a reasonable person committing the alleged acts know that they may result in physical or emotional harm to student or harm to student property? Is it reasonable to believe that the alleged acts in fact did result in harm to student or property?		If Yes to ANY of the questions 3a – 3d then proceed to Step 4 If No to ALL of the questions 3a – 3d then proceed to Step 5 and review matter for appropriate response under Code of Student Conduct If Not Clear on ANY of the questions, follow up with initial reporter for additional information as needed.
3b	Reasonable fear of harm to student or property	Is there reason to believe that the alleged acts would cause a reasonable student to be in fear of harm to self or property?		
3c	Demeaning to Student/Group	Is there reason to believe that the alleged acts were demeaning to a student or student group		
3d	Created Hostile Educational Environment	Is there reason to believe that the alleged acts may have created a hostile educational environment by interfering with a student’s education OR severely or pervasively causing physical or emotional harm to alleged victim		

ABTF in collaboration with David Nash, Esq., Director of LEGAL ONE/Director Legal Education, Foundation for Educational Administration

STEPS 4-5 – NEXT STEPS AFTER INITIAL ASSESSMENT

STEP	Response to Conduct	Key Question	Answer (YES, NO)	Next Steps
4	If potential HIB after review under Steps 1-3, then Refer to Anti-Bullying Specialist	Have you assessed the potential scope of the investigation to determine what assistance is necessary for the ABS to thoroughly and completely investigate in a timely manner?		<p>If Yes, then provide additional supports as needed for ABS</p> <p>If No, review scope of allegations (number of alleged witnesses, incidents, etc.) and provide support as needed</p> <p>Also, meet with alleged victim and advise that if there are any additional incidents while investigation is ongoing or thereafter, victim should contact principal or other school staff immediately</p> <p>Also, meet with alleged perpetrator and warn against any acts of retaliation or other misconduct while investigation is ongoing</p> <p>Also, contact parents of alleged bully and victim and advise that matter is under investigation and review investigation process and rights</p>
5	Review Incident for Potential Violations of Other Provisions of Code of Student Conduct	Have you assessed the alleged incident to determine if the allegations, if true, would constitute a violation of the Code of Student Conduct?		<p>If Yes, investigate the matter and respond to violations as per Code of Student Conduct</p> <p>If during the investigation additional information reveals that issue may be HIB related, repeat Steps 1 – 4</p> <p>If No, then review alleged incident in light of code of student conduct</p>

APPENDIX C

The 14 Dimensions of School Climate Measured by the CSCI

DIMENSIONS	MAJOR INDICATORS
SAFETY	
1. Rules and Norms	Clearly communicated rules about physical violence; clearly communicated rules about verbal abuse, harassment, and teasing; clear and consistent enforcement and norms for adult intervention.
2. Sense of Physical Security	Sense that students and adults feel safe from physical harm in the school.
3. Sense of Social-Emotional Security	Sense that students feel safe from verbal abuse, teasing, and exclusion.
TEACHING AND LEARNING	
4. Support for Learning	Use of supportive teaching practices, such as: encouragement and constructive feedback; varied opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skills; support for risk-taking and independent thinking; atmosphere conducive to dialog and questioning; academic challenge; and individual attention.
5. Social and Civic Learning	Support for the development of social and civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions including: effective listening, conflict resolution, self-reflection and emotional regulation, empathy, personal responsibility, and ethical decision making.
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS	
6. Respect for Diversity	Mutual respect for individual differences (e.g. gender, race, culture, etc.) at all levels of the school—student-student; adult-student; adult-adult and overall norms for tolerance.
7. Social Support—Adults	Pattern of supportive and caring adult relationships for students, including high expectations for students' success, willingness to listen to students and to get to know them as individuals, and personal concern for students' problems.
8. Social Support—Students	Pattern of supportive peer relationships for students, including: friendships for socializing, for problems, for academic help, and for new students.
INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT	
9. School Connectedness/Engagement	Positive identification with the school and norms for broad participation in school life for students, staff, and families.
10. Physical Surroundings	Cleanliness, order, and appeal of facilities and adequate resources and materials.
11. Social Inclusion	Acceptance of students with disabilities as members of the school community, including enhanced opportunities for socialization, extracurricular activities, leadership, and decision-making.
SOCIAL MEDIA	
12. Social Media	Sense that students feel safe from physical harm, verbal abuse/teasing, gossip, and exclusion when online or on electronic devices (for example, facebook, twitter, and other social media platforms, by an email, text messaging, posting photo/video, etc.).
STAFF ONLY	
13. Leadership	Administration that creates and communicates a clear vision, and is accessible to and supportive of school staff and staff development.
14. Professional Relationships	Positive attitudes and relationships among school staff that support effectively working and learning together.

APPENDIX D

Summary of Anti-Bullying Task Force Recommendations

The Definition of Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying (HIB)

1. The State Board of Education amend the administrative code to include the concept of power differential as a method of distinguishing the motivating characteristic of the aggressor.
2. The NJDOE issue formal guidance to assist practitioners in understanding the significance of the power differential in HIB.
3. The Task Force reiterates that the definition of HIB encompasses hazing, therefore an incident of hazing should trigger the same protection and thorough investigation as an incident of HIB.
4. NJSIAA in collaboration with the NJDOE and the state education associations continue to develop professional learning opportunities that target hazing and the role that sports play in the development of a positive school climate and culture.

Reporting, Investigating, and Staff Roles

1. The NJDOE provide further support to districts to ensure that they are able to provide state HIB reporting forms and information regarding their rights under the ABR to families in their primary language.
2. The NJDOE, in consultation with the Division of Civil Rights (DCR), develop guidance and training to assist schools in navigating the HIB process with respect to the developmental age of students.
3. The NJDOE, in consultation with the School Climate State Coordinator, review and assess the effectiveness and role of school boards under administrative code and the ABR.

School Climate

1. The NJDOE revise the Self-Assessment tool to emphasize the steps SS/SCTs should be taking in order to fulfill their role, “to develop, foster and maintain a positive school climate by focusing on the on-going systemic process and practices to address school climate issues, such as harassment, intimidation and bullying.”
2. Annual training be provided to all SS/SCTs in accordance with the ABR.
3. Anti-bullying coordinators attend School Safety/School Climate Team trainings, as they can coordinate the work district-wide, providing opportunities for teams to share ideas and resources.
4. School districts reexamine their approach to year-long HIB prevention instruction and incorporate a systemic approach to teaching social and emotional learning skills that strengthen both face to face and online relationships.
5. School Safety/School Climate Teams develop annual school climate improvement plans that promote a coherent approach to social and emotional learning.
6. School Safety/School Climate Teams foster strong relationships with community organizations that represent marginalized student populations.
7. Schools develop staff and peer mentorship programs to help ensure every student is connected to another member of the school community.
8. Boards of Education review and approve annual School Climate Improvement Plans in May of each school year. An update on the current year plan’s progress be provided to the board every December.
9. The NJDOE add the development of an annual school climate improvement plan to the NJQSAC monitoring system in order to ensure that SS/SCTs in every school have developed coherent and systemic school climate improvement plans.

The Role of Social Media

1. The Task Force wishes to elevate the role of the Commission created by S-715/A-1992 and encourages the Commission to closely study both the role that social media plays in facilitating incidents of HIB in New Jersey and the impact of those incidents on young people.
2. The Task Force further recommends that the Commission utilizes its findings to develop guidance and best practices to assist schools in navigating the role of social media in bullying.
3. The State Board of Education review and update the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (social studies and media literacy) to ensure incorporation of age-appropriate media digital citizen instruction for K-12.
4. NJDOE, through the School Climate State Coordinator and related offices, offer an online portal through which school staff, parents, and caregivers can access additional resources, guidance, and professional learning opportunities around social media and young people.
5. Districts implement training to support their staff in navigating the role of social media in HIB.
6. Funding be made available through the Bullying Prevention Fund and/or other sources to assist schools in implementing training to address this issue effectively.

Coaches

1. All coaches, club advisors, and volunteer support staff receive training around HIB and hazing.
2. Coaches be included as members of School Safety/School Climate Teams.

Resources: Funding, Training, School Climate State Coordinator

1. The Governor and Legislature fund the Bullying Prevention Fund, providing sufficient earmarked funds for the effective implementation of the ABR in all New Jersey schools.
2. The NJDOE streamline and consistently updated and maintain comprehensive training and resources on the NJDOE HIB website. Resources should include online training and best practice guidance on all aspects of ABR implementation.
3. The NJDOE update and maintain parent/community resources to promote better understanding of the ABR. The NJDOE develop an on-line training for parents and caregivers. Due to the diversity in our state, materials should be available in several languages.
4. The School Climate State Coordinator lead a newly established Office of School Climate within the NJDOE and that sufficient staffing and funding be provided to support this office in carrying out the responsibilities set forth in the recent amendments to the ABR.

APPENDIX E

Resource Examples

- New Jersey Department of Education: Keeping Our Kids Safe and Healthy In School / Safe & Positive School Climates: <https://www.nj.gov/education/safety/sandp/hib/>
- U.S. Department of Education: Guiding Principles For Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive and Fair School Climates. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education: Creating and Sustaining School Discipline Policies That Support Students' Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Academic Well-Being and Success Strategies For School and District Leaders: https://t4pacercenter.ed.gov/Docs/Fact-Sheets/Supporting_Students_School_and_District_Leaders_508.pdf
- U.S. Department of Education: Strategies for Student and Teacher Support Teams: https://t4pacercenter.ed.gov/Docs/Fact-Sheets/Supporting_Students_Student_Support_Teams_508.pdf
- U.S. Office of Civil Rights: Fact Sheet Protecting Students from Discrimination Based on Shared Ancestry or Ethnic Characteristics. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/ocr-factsheet-shared-ancestry-202301.pdf>
- Center For Disease Control: Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC). <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/wsc/index.htm>
- PACER: National Bullying Prevention Center: <https://www.pacer.org/bullying/>
- Cyberbullying Research Center: <https://cyberbullying.org/>
- National School Climate Center: <https://schoolclimate.org/school-climate/>
- National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments: <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/>
- The Trevor Project: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>
- GLSEN: <https://www.glsen.org/>
- The Tyler Clementi Foundation: <https://tylerclementi.org/>
- SEL4NJ: <https://sel4nj.org/>
- SPAN Parent Advocacy Network: <https://spanadvocacy.org/>
- Garden State Equality: <https://www.gardenstateequality.org/>
- Garden State Coalition of Schools: <https://www.gscschools.org/gsc/>
- New Jersey Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention: <https://www.njbullying.org/>
- New Jersey Safe Schools Coalition: <https://www.njsafeschoolscoalition.org/>

The Task Force is only sharing resources for informational purposes only and is not an endorsement of any product, services or views expressed or represented.

APPENDIX F

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