


TO: Local Education Agency Superintendents

FROM: Carey M. Wright, Ed.D., State Superintendent of Schools 

DATE: March 6, 2025

SUBJECT: Response to Recent Federal Actions – Bias and Bullying Prevention

Recent actions by the federal government have raised questions related to K-12 schools' response to possible immigration enforcement affecting their students, as well as the legality of policies related to LGBTQIA+ students. Over the past five weeks, MSDE has provided guidance to support schools in creating safe and inclusive learning environments for all Maryland students, including our immigrant and LGBTQIA+ students. To continue supporting these student groups and the unique challenges they may face, this week's update focuses on [MSDE's Model Policy on Bullying, Harassment, or Intimidation](#) and bias prevention.

Every local education agency (LEA) must continue efforts to maintain a welcoming environment for all students that fosters a sense of belonging and security. To support this mission, Maryland law ([ED §7-424](#)) requires schools to adopt and enforce comprehensive anti-bullying, harassment, and intimidation policies related to race, national origin, ancestry, religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability status. While today's resources focus on supporting specific student populations, the strategies discussed can be used to support all students who may be faced with behaviors related to bullying, harassment, and intimidation.

How does bias and bullying in schools disproportionately impact immigrant students?

The increased focus on federal immigration policy and enforcement nationwide can significantly affect the climate in schools across Maryland. LEAs should continue to encourage schools to create safe and inclusive learning environments that discourage anti-immigrant sentiments. When anti-immigrant sentiments are prevalent in society, students and staff members may internalize these views, leading to discrimination or bullying of immigrant students based on race, ethnicity, or national origin.

How does bias and bullying in schools disproportionately impact LGBTQIA+ students?

In Maryland, a significant number of LGBTQIA+ students experience bullying, with 53% reporting verbal harassment due to their sexual orientation and 28% experiencing physical harassment or assault based on their gender identity. Of these victimized students, 64% did not report the harassment to school authorities.¹ Results examining shifts in trends from the 2021 to the 2023 U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) also provide valuable insight into the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students across the State, showing that LGBTQIA+ students continue to experience alarming rates of violence and mental health challenges, including suicidal thoughts and behaviors, when compared to their

¹ GLSEN. 2023. School Climate for LGBTQ Students in Maryland. Available at: <https://maps.glsen.org/state-research-snapshots>. % physically harassed or assaulted includes % pushed, shoved, kicked, punched, or threatened with a weapon. % who did not report harassment includes all forms of harassment, including anti-LGBTQ harassment. Findings refer to students' experiences during the 2020-21 school year.

heterosexual peers.² The data underscores the critical need for targeted interventions to support LGBTQIA+ students to create and sustain a healthy and respectful environment where all students can thrive.

Additional Resources to Support Educators in Creating Safe Spaces for LGBTQIA+ Youth:

- [GLSEN Professional Development](#)
- [GLSEN Safe Space Kit](#)
- [Supporting LGBTQ Youth of Color - GLSEN](#)
- [Creating Safe Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth - CDC](#)
- [Welcoming Students - Human Rights Campaign](#)
- [Respect Workshop - American Psychological Association](#)

How can bias towards specific student groups be reduced in the classroom?

Educators should be mindful of how discussions about current events and policies may affect students. Creating a balanced and respectful dialogue where all students are included and feel heard can prevent the marginalization of students while encouraging civic engagement.

What strategies can reduce bullying for ALL students in schools?

- Schools can ensure that all students, families, and staff members, including teachers, substitute teachers, school security employees, school resource officers, and others, are aware of LEA bullying prevention policies, guidelines, and disciplinary actions that are widely accessible and shared in a language that all parties can understand.
- Each LEA should have a process for families and students to report alleged incidents of bullying, harassment, or intimidation through the use of the [LEA Bullying Reporting Form](#). This form is also available in [Spanish](#) on MSDE's [Bullying Prevention](#) webpage.
- [Personal stories](#) can be powerful tools for increasing empathy and understanding. Consider incorporating personal stories into the classroom and [professional development](#), always taking care to respect privacy and never assuming that an individual is willing to discuss their experiences unless confirming that beforehand. Be mindful that individuals' personal stories are not used as representative examples for entire demographic groups, particularly when it comes to minoritized students or staff.
- Consider a school-wide bullying prevention campaign that students help plan and put into action.
- Consider designing lessons for students on reporting bullying, harassment, or intimidation and how to support their peers who may be targeted or vulnerable.

Bullying Reporting

- In response to reports of bullying, schools should take prompt action and provide notice to the parents of both the alleged target and the alleged perpetrator. All communications with families should address any language barriers.

² Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report. YRBS Data Summary & Trends Report. (n.d.). <https://www.cdc.gov/yrb/dstr/index.html>.

- It is important that school administrators conduct thorough and complete investigations of reports of bullying and follow up the investigation process with standard consequences and remedial actions consistent with LEA policies and procedures. (Specific guidelines can be found on page 5 of [MSDE's Model Policy](#).)

How can schools use restorative approaches to prevent bullying and to help students heal and learn after a bullying incident has occurred?

- [Restorative Approaches](#) are strategies that value healthy relationships and developmental discipline that defines accountability as healing harm rather than receiving punishment, and respect for all members of the learning community. When implemented with fidelity across the school, restorative approaches can help to prevent bullying, as the approach focuses on relationships and reconciliation.
- Through [MSDE's Restorative Collaborative](#), many LEAs are creating environments that reflect a restorative culture at all levels, demonstrated at each school and at the central offices with activities and language such as collaborative problem-solving, affective statements/questions, empathetic listening, and respect shown to all.
- Provide daily/weekly opportunities for students and staff to participate in talking circles, community building activities, or other proactive restorative practices that promote relationship-building and community.
- Include restorative interventions in all disciplinary processes to promote personal reflection and accountability for conflict resolution. If students are removed from the classroom or school due to a disciplinary infraction, create a reintegration plan that ensures the student is welcomed back and restored to the community.
- Restorative approaches are most effective when they are embedded into school culture, rather than being utilized as one-time interventions.

Resources

MSDE's course, [An Introduction to Bullying Prevention for Maryland Educators](#), covers what bullying looks like, how to prevent it, how to respond to it, and how to support students. [To register click here](#).

MSDE's six-part Bullying Prevention Webinar Series for Maryland Educators is a valuable professional learning opportunity for LEA staff members such as school-based administrators, school counselors, student services teams, and educators. Each session will focus on a critical aspect of bullying prevention and response, providing participants with deeper insights into bullying prevention strategies and intervention techniques. [To register for one or all six webinars click here](#).

[Bullying Basics](#) is a Learning for Justice resource focused on teaching tolerance.

[Bullying Basics](#) resource section from Teaching Tolerance provides an overview of the connection between bullying and bias and answers frequently asked questions about school bullying.

[Edutopia: Educator Resources to Fight Bullying and Harassment at School](#) is a guide for educators to access online information about combatting bullying.

[Responding to Hate Crimes and Bullying Related to National Origin or Ethnicity](#) (California Attorney General)

[Empowering Young People in the Aftermath of Hate](#) This Anti-Defamation League resource available in English and Spanish provides guidance for educators and family members on how to discuss hate crimes, mass shootings, and acts of terrorism with children.

[Stopbullying.gov](#) is a federal website that includes information on bullying and cyberbullying for parents, educators, community members, teens, and children. It is also available [in Spanish](#).

[Sesame Street: Elmo Talks About Bullying](#) This video from Sesame Street features a conversation about bullying between Elmo and actor Chris Colfer.

Additional Information

For more information on bullying prevention visit [MSDE's Bullying Prevention Webpage](#). Questions about bullying prevention can be directed to Brad Engel, School Climate Initiatives Specialist, at brad.engel@maryland.gov.