

Special Education

Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2011-2: Bullying Prevention and Intervention

To:

Superintendents, Charter School Leaders, Principals, Administrators of Special Education, Directors of Approved Special Education Private Schools, Directors of Educational Collaboratives, and Other Interested Parties

From:

Marcia Mittnacht, State Director of Special Education

Date:

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Introduction

The purpose of this advisory is to provide guidance to address changes to Massachusetts educational practice relating to students with disabilities stemming from enactment of the bullying prevention and intervention law. This advisory covers the following topics:

- The Massachusetts Bullying Prevention and Intervention Law
- Leadership and Schoolwide Efforts
- Evaluating Social Skills Development
- Skills and Proficiencies Students Need to Respond to Bullying, Harassment, or Teasing
- Implications for the Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- Students with Disabilities under Section 504

I. The Massachusetts Bullying Prevention and Intervention Law

In May 2010, Governor Patrick signed into law comprehensive legislation to address bullying in public and non-public schools. Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2010 ([An Act Relative to Bullying in Schools](#))¹ requires school leaders to create and implement strategies to prevent bullying, and to address bullying and retaliation promptly and effectively if they occur. Sections 7 and 8 of the law have specific implications for the IEP process and for students with disabilities.

Section 7 states: Whenever the IEP Team evaluation indicates that a student's disability affects social skills development, or when the student's disability makes him or her vulnerable to bullying, harassment, or teasing, the IEP must address the skills and proficiencies needed to avoid and respond to bullying, harassment, or teasing. (G.L. c. 71B, §3, as amended by Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2010.)

Section 8 states: For students identified with a disability on the autism spectrum, the IEP Team must consider and specifically address the skills and proficiencies needed to avoid and respond to bullying, harassment, or teasing. (G.L. c. 71B, §3, as amended by Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2010.)

In August 2010, the Department released a Model Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan² (Model Plan) for districts to use in creating their local plan. The Model Plan is organized in a format that parallels the Behavioral Health and Public Schools Framework.³ School districts are encouraged to approach the special requirements related to students with disabilities in Section 7 and Section 8 of the bullying prevention and intervention law in the same whole school context as they approach the development of their local plan for bullying prevention and intervention.

II. Leadership and Schoolwide Efforts

Strong leadership and schoolwide climate improvement efforts are essential and must go hand-in-hand with individual student supports if schools are to address effectively the prevention of bullying of students with disabilities. This integrated approach consists of schoolwide efforts, as outlined in the Model Plan, and the individual student supports provided through the IEP process that will build students' skills and proficiencies to avoid and respond to bullying. It will require communication, coordination, and cross-training between general and special education staff, and between staff and parents, to ensure that the schoolwide efforts address the needs of students with all types of disabilities.

Efforts to review bullying prevention and intervention policies with an understanding of the needs of students with disabilities and explicit ways of including all students in the schoolwide bullying prevention and intervention curriculum will foster supportive and safe school environments. These efforts also will support IEP Teams as they meet to address the needs of individual students. Additionally, an effective social skills curriculum⁴ that must be part of all schools' bullying prevention efforts will support the needs of most students with disabilities, as well as students without disabilities. By combining whole-school efforts with those taking place on behalf of individual students with disabilities, schools and districts can reduce the threat of bullying of and by this population, and continue to make progress toward school safety and the effective inclusion of all students in their school communities.

III. Evaluating Social Skills Development

Since disabilities can affect multiple aspects of a student's life, the student's individual evaluation must be comprehensive in order to identify areas affected by the disability and to allow for appropriate supports to ensure student success. During the evaluation process, the IEP Team must gather relevant data and information related to the student's social skill development. Massachusetts regulations require initial evaluations to include: "an assessment of the student's attention skills, participation behaviors, communication skills, memory, and **social relations with group, peers, and adults.**"⁵ Similarly, federal IDEA regulation 34 CFR 300.304 (c)(4) requires that "the child is assessed in all areas related to the suspected disability, including, if appropriate, health, vision, hearing, **social and emotional status**, general intelligence, academic performance, communicative status, and motor abilities." (Emphasis added.) Generally speaking, this means that well planned evaluations will contain the information that IEP Teams need to address the special requirements of the bullying prevention and intervention law for students with disabilities.

Sections 7 and 8 of the bullying intervention and prevention law refer to three groups:

Students with disabilities

- on the autism spectrum;
- when the disability affects social skills development; and
- when the disability may result in a vulnerability to bullying, harassment, and teasing.

The Department recommends that IEP Teams for these students carefully consider the supports needed to build each student's social skills and proficiencies to avoid and respond to bullying, harassment, or teasing.

IV. Skills and Proficiencies for Students

The Department reviewed a wide range of information on available skill building programs and offers this list from The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).⁶ CASEL has reviewed current research and identified specific skills and proficiencies needed to avoid or respond to bullying, harassment, and teasing. The skills and proficiencies that a school district may incorporate into its general curriculum, or that an IEP Team may identify in the student's IEP, may include but are not limited to the following core categories identified by CASEL:

- **Self-Awareness:** accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths/abilities, and maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence.
- **Self-Management:** regulating one's emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; setting personal and academic goals and then monitoring one's progress toward achieving them; and expressing emotions constructively.
- **Social Awareness:** taking the perspective of and empathizing with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; identifying and following societal standards of conduct; and recognizing and using family, school, and community resources.
- **Relationship Skills:** establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; and seeking help when needed.
- **Responsible Decision-making:** making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate standards of conduct, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; and contributing to the well-being of one's school and community.

V. Implications for the Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Because the IEP serves as a vehicle for improving the educational experience and achievements of a student with disabilities, the IEP Team uses a variety of information sources, including evaluations, assessment information, and its discussions of the student's present level of educational performance and social acumen, to inform the development of the IEP. The IEP Team's discussion focuses comprehensively on the student's educational needs and on the student's overall involvement in the school, including participation in the general curriculum and in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities. In this process, the IEP Team considers the student's disability and the impact of the disability on the student's interaction and communication with others.

- For all three groups of students with disabilities named in the bullying prevention and intervention law, the IEP Team must consider how the student's disability affects his/her learning the skills and proficiencies needed to avoid and respond to bullying, harassment, or teasing. Many students will receive support in developing appropriate skills and proficiencies through general instruction. In such cases, the Team should include in the IEP any supports the student needs to learn the needed skills through the existing curriculum. As appropriate, the Team should include in the IEP needed accommodations to the general education program, or goals and objectives and special education services related to student's learning the necessary skills.
- Because of the nature of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), progress in positive social skill development is already a likely focus within the IEP of every student with ASD. Social skills instruction should be at the student's skill level and appropriate for his/her age. The focus of the IEP in relation to the bullying intervention and prevention law will be to aid the student in accessing social and emotional learning to handle more effectively challenges in his/her academic, social, and communication realms.
- IEP Teams should consider ways that the age-appropriate instruction on bullying prevention and intervention incorporated into the school's general curriculum already assists a student with a disability in these areas and should reflect this discussion in the IEP. As noted earlier, the IEP should address those skills and proficiencies that the Team has determined the student would be unlikely to learn solely within the general curricular program, or any supports the student needs to make learning possible in the general curricular program.
- IEP Teams should consider whether modifications or services are needed for students with all types and severities of disabilities to be involved and progress in the school's or district's bullying prevention and intervention program that is incorporated into the school's or district's general curriculum. Also, Teams should ensure that students can participate fully in all procedures related to the reporting and investigation of bullying incidents. The district must ensure that the IEP Team includes a member of the school's staff who is knowledgeable about the school's bullying prevention and intervention general education curriculum when those issues are discussed at a Team meeting.
- Incorporated within the Team meeting process and the Team's discussion of a student's skills and proficiencies to respond to bullying, harassment, or teasing may also be education for families about the district's bullying prevention and intervention plan, the general education curriculum the school is using to instruct all students about bullying prevention and intervention, and the reporting mechanisms that are in place within the school.

School districts are not required to reconvene IEP Team meetings for currently eligible students solely to discuss the law's new requirements for bullying prevention or intervention. However, each time the IEP Team convenes, the Team should consider whether the student has been involved in any bullying incident, and use that information to inform its discussion of the student's needs. Additionally, the district should convene the IEP Team if the parent or any staff member believes that the student is at risk of being bullied or is exhibiting bullying behavior and such risk or behavior is directly tied to the student's disability. In many cases, effective school special education practices will have already identified social skills instruction and other bullying prevention measures in eligible students' IEPs.

The following are sample considerations that the Team may include in a student's IEP, as appropriate:

- Provide instructional personnel or supplementary aids and services during identified periods of the school day (e.g., lunch, recess, study hall, bus) when the student requires additional support.
- Identify a "safe" adult to whom the student can go for support when feeling vulnerable or targeted.
- Provide additional counseling for skill-building supports to prevent or respond to bullying.

- Provide a communication skills/social pragmatics skills group.
- Provide a Functional Behavioral Analysis and develop a Behavioral Intervention Plan that identifies target or aggressor behaviors, identifies antecedents to these behaviors, and proposes interventions for teaching the student to reduce and/or avoid these behaviors.
- Teach appropriate responses to bullying, harassment, and teasing.
- Provide opportunities for the student to develop and practice a safety action plan.
- Identify skills or accommodations necessary for school success - educationally and socially.

These considerations are illustrative of several ways that the Team may address a student's identified needs. Teams must consider the individual circumstances and needs of each student in order to ensure that the skills and proficiencies needed to address and respond to bullying, harassment, and teasing are supported in the IEP. IEP Teams cannot prevent or respond to bullying alone; the Team's efforts to help individual students develop the necessary skills and proficiencies to prevent or respond to bullying must also be supported and informed by the broader bullying prevention and intervention initiatives taking place at the school and district level.

A Department resource document entitled "[Addressing the Needs of Students with Disabilities in the IEP and in School Bullying Prevention and Intervention Efforts](#)" is available for IEP Teams and districts to consult as they serve Massachusetts students with disabilities. In addition, the Department publishes links to other bullying prevention and intervention resources on its website at [Bullying Prevention and Intervention Resources webpage](#).

VI. Students with Disabilities under Section 504

Students with disabilities who are eligible for aids and services under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, must have access to bullying prevention and intervention programs, activities, and protections.⁷ Pursuant to Section 504, no student with a disability may be excluded from participation in, denied the benefits of, or otherwise subjected to discrimination under any of a school's programs.⁸ This includes the district or schoolwide bullying prevention and intervention curricula, programs, services, or initiatives. Under Section 504, schools must ensure that any 504-eligible student, regardless of the nature or severity of the student's disability, receives a free appropriate public education. Schools must provide services and/or accommodations in academic, non-academic, and extra-curricular programs and activities in such a manner as is necessary to afford the student equal access and opportunity.⁹

Closing

In closing, the Department acknowledges the challenges faced by schools and families when dealing with the issues of bullying, harassment, and teasing of all students and, most particularly, students with disabilities. The Department is continuing to develop resources for schools to use to implement the requirements of the bullying prevention and intervention law, and to support districts' and schools' comprehensive efforts to ensure safe and supportive learning environments for all students. Resources focusing on bullying prevention and intervention are available on the Department's website at [Bullying Prevention and Intervention Resources webpage](#). Working together, we can help to ensure that all students are able to access a free and appropriate education in a safe, civil, and supportive learning environment.

1 [Session Laws: Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2010](#)

2 [Model Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan](#)

3 [Behavioral Health and Public Schools Self-Assessment Tool for Schools website](#)

4 The bullying prevention and intervention law requires the Department to publish guidelines for implementing social and emotional learning curricula by June 30, 2011. This timeline is contained in Section 16 of the [bullying prevention and intervention law](#).

5 603 CMR 28.04 (2)(a)(2)(ii) (emphasis added).

6 [The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#) is an organization formed in 1994 that provides national and international leadership to enhance scientific research on social and emotional learning (SEL) and to expand the effective practice of SEL in schools. SEL is defined by CASEL and in the bullying prevention and intervention law (Section 16), as the process by which children acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and constructively handle challenging social situations.

7 Sections 7 and 8 of the bullying prevention and intervention law do not apply to a student identified as a student with a disability under Section 504, because Sections 7 and 8 apply solely to students eligible for special education services under c. 71B.

8 Section 504 applies to programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance. 34 CFR 104.4.

9 Bullying conduct may also constitute harassment under Section 504 and violate a student's civil rights. For more information, see [October 26, 2010 Dear Colleague letter](#) from U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights.