

# Students

## Bullying Behavior in the Schools

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In accordance with the state law, it is the policy of the Vernon Board of Education that any form of bullying behavior, whether in the classroom, on school property or at school-sponsored events, is expressly forbidden.

As provided by statute, such regulations shall:

1. enable students to anonymously report acts of bullying to teachers and school administrators, and require that students be notified annually of the process by which they may make anonymous reports of bullying to teachers and school administrators;
2. enable the parents or guardians of students to file written reports of suspected bullying;
3. require teachers and other school staff who witness acts of bullying or receive student reports of bullying to notify school administrators;
4. require school administrators to investigate any written reports filed pursuant to subdivision (2) and to review any anonymous reports;
5. include intervention and prevention strategies for school staff to deal with bullying;
6. provide for the inclusion of language in student codes of conduct concerning bullying;
7. require school administrators to notify both the parents or guardians of students who commit any verified acts of bullying and the parents or guardians of students against whom such acts were directed, and;
8. require each school within the district to maintain a list of the number of verified acts of bullying in such school and make such list available for public inspection.

The notification required pursuant to subdivision (7) shall include a description of the response of school staff to such acts and any consequences that may result from the commission of further acts of bullying. Any information provided under this policy shall be provided in accordance with the confidentiality restrictions imposed under the Family Educational Rights Privacy Act (FERPA) and the district's Confidentiality and Access to Student Information policy and regulations.

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For purposes of this policy, “**Bullying**” shall mean any overt acts by a student or group of students directed against any student(s) with the intent to ridicule, harass, humiliate, or intimidate any student(s) while on school grounds, at a school-sponsored activity, or on any school transportation vehicle, and which acts are repeated against any student(s) over time.

For purposes of this policy, “**School-Sponsored Activity**” shall mean any activity conducted on or off school property (including school buses and other school-related vehicles) that is sponsored, recognized, or authorized by the Board of Education.

Students who engage in bullying behavior shall be subject to school discipline up to and including expulsion in accordance with the Board’s policy on student discipline.

### Legal References:

Public Act No. 02-119

Connecticut General Statutes Sections 10-233a through 10-233f

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### Administrative Regulations

The following sets forth the procedures to implement Board Policy #5131.911 concerning the prohibition against bullying in the Vernon Public Schools. Bullying behavior is strictly prohibited, and students who are determined to have engaged in such behavior are subject to disciplinary action, which may include suspension or expulsion from school. The district's commitment to addressing bullying behavior, however, involves a multi-faceted approach, which includes education and the promotion of a school atmosphere in which bullying will not be tolerated by students or staff.

It is imperative that bullying be identified only when the specific elements of the definition are met, because the designation of conduct as bullying carries with it special statutory obligations. Any misconduct by one student against any student(s), whether or not appropriately defined as bullying, however, will result in appropriate disciplinary consequences for the perpetrator.

#### I. Definition:

In accordance with state law and Board policy, "bullying" means any overt acts by a student or a group of students directed against any student(s) with the intent to ridicule, harass, humiliate or intimidate any student(s) while on school grounds, at a school-sponsored activity, or on any school transportation vehicle, and which acts are repeated against any student(s) over time.

In accordance with this definition, the following factors should be considered before identifying conduct by a student or group of students as bullying in violation of Board policy. The determination that conduct does not constitute bullying under state law and Board policy, however, does not restrict the right of the Administration and of the Board of Education to impose appropriate disciplinary consequences for student misconduct.

\* Location: Bullying behavior in violation of Board policy must occur on school grounds or at a school-sponsored activity (which by Board policy includes transportation services). Conduct that occurs off-campus (e.g. harassment over the Internet, physical intimidation in the community) is not bullying under this Policy and Regulation.

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While not considered bullying under state law and Board policy, conduct that would otherwise be considered bullying occurring off-campus (and outside of any school-sponsored activity) may subject the perpetrator to disciplinary action. Discipline for such conduct may be imposed if such conduct violates a publicized policy of the Board and is seriously disruptive of the educational process. Unless such conduct triggers a mandatory expulsion under Conn. Gen. Statute. § 10-233d(a), however, school officials are authorized to impose discipline for such off-campus conduct only if such conduct markedly interrupts or severely impedes the day-to-day operation of the school.

\* Repeated misconduct: Bullying behavior in violation of Board policy must be “repeated against any student(s) over time.” An isolated incident, however egregious, is not “bullying” under state law and Board policy. Numerous acts of misconduct against different students constitutes “bullying” under state law and Board policy.

\* Ridicule, harassment, humiliation, and/or intimidation: Bullying behavior is more than misconduct. Such behavior is marked by the intent to ridicule, harass, humiliate, or intimidate the victim. In evaluating whether conduct constitutes bullying, special attention should be paid to the words chosen or actions taken, whether such conduct occurred in front of others or was communicated to others, how the perpetrator interacted with the victim, and the motivation, either admitted or appropriately inferred, of the perpetrator.

\* Types of conduct: Bullying can take many forms and can include many different behaviors having the overt intent to ridicule, humiliate, or intimidate another student. Examples of conduct that could constitute bullying include:

1. Physical violence and/or attacks;
2. Verbal taunts, name-calling and put-downs, including taunts based on ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or other protected and/or individual characteristics;
3. Threats and intimidation (through words and/or gestures);
4. Extortion or stealing of money and/or possessions.

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### II. Complaint processes

#### A. Publication of the prohibition against bullying and related procedures

The prohibition against bullying shall be publicized by including the following statement in the student handbook of each of the district schools:

“Bullying behavior by any student in the Vernon Public Schools is strictly prohibited, and such conduct may result in disciplinary action, including suspension and/or expulsion from school. “Bullying” means any overt acts by a student or a group of students directed against any student(s) with the intent to ridicule, harass, humiliate, or intimidate any student(s) while on school grounds, at a school-sponsored activity, or on any school transportation vehicle, and which acts are repeated against any student(s) over time. Students and parents or guardians may file verbal or written complaints concerning suspected bullying behavior, and students shall be permitted to anonymously report acts of bullying to teachers and school administrators. Any report of suspected bullying behavior will be promptly investigated. If acts of bullying are verified, prompt disciplinary action may be taken against the perpetrator, consistent with his/her rights of due process. Board policy and regulation #5131.911 set forth this prohibition and the related procedures in detail, and are available to students and their parents/guardians upon request.”

#### B. Formal complaints

Students and/or their parents or guardians may file written reports of conduct that they consider to be bullying. Such written reports shall be reasonably specific as to the actions giving rise to the suspicion of bullying, including time and place of the conduct alleged, the number of such incidents, the target of such suspected bullying, and the names of any potential student or staff witnesses. Such reports may be filed with any teacher or administrator, and they shall be promptly forwarded to the building principal for investigation and action in accordance with Section IV below.

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### C. Informal complaints

Students may make informal complaints of conduct that they consider to be bullying by verbal report to a teacher or administrator. Such informal complaints shall be reasonably specific as to the actions giving rise to the suspicion of bullying, including time and place of the conduct alleged, the number of such incidents, the target of such suspected bullying, and the names of any potential student or staff witnesses. A teacher, other professional employee, or administrator who receives an informal complaint shall promptly reduce the complaint to writing, including the information provided. Such written report by the teacher, other professional employee, and/or administrator shall be promptly forwarded to the building principal for investigation and action in accordance with Section IV below.

### D. Anonymous complaints

Students who make informal complaints as set forth above may request that their name be maintained in confidence by the teacher(s) and administrator(s) who receive the complaint. Should anonymity be requested, the principal or his/her designee shall meet with the student to review the request for anonymity and the impact that maintaining anonymity of the complaint may have on the investigation of the complaint and/or possible remedial action. At such meeting, the student shall be given the choice as to whether to maintain the anonymity of the complaint. All anonymous complaints shall be investigated and reasonable action will be taken to address the situation, to the extent such action may be taken that:

1. does not disclose the source of the complaint
2. is consistent with the due process rights of the student(s) alleged to have committed acts of bullying.

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### III. Staff responsibilities including Prevention and Intervention Strategies

#### A. Teachers and other staff

Teachers and other school staff, who witness acts of bullying or receive reports of bullying, as defined above, shall promptly notify the building principal and/or his/her designee of the events observed, and shall promptly file a written incident report concerning the events witnessed. Teachers and other school staff who receive student or parent reports of suspected bullying shall promptly notify the building principal and/or his/her designee of such reports(s). If the report is a formal, written complaint, such complaint shall be forwarded promptly (no later than the next school day) to the building principal or his/her designee. If the report is an informal complaint by a student that is received by a teacher or other professional employee, he or she shall prepare a succinct written report of the informal complaint, which shall be forwarded promptly (no later than the next school day) to the building principal or his/her designee. If the report is an informal complaint by a student that is received by other school staff, this employee shall verbally report the matter to the principal and/or his designee promptly (no later than the next school day).

In addition to addressing both informal and formal complaints, teachers and other professional staff members are encouraged to address the issue of bullying in other interactions with students. Teachers and other professionals may find opportunities to educate students about bullying and help eliminate bullying behavior through class discussions, counseling, and reinforcement of socially-appropriate behavior. Teachers and other professional employees should intervene promptly whenever they observe student conduct that has the purpose or effect of ridiculing, humiliating or intimidating any student(s), even if such conduct does not meet the formal definition of "bullying."

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### B. Administrator responsibilities

#### 1. Investigation

The principal (or other responsible program administrator) shall be promptly notified of any formal or informal complaint of suspected bullying received by any building administrator, teacher, or other professional employee. Under the direction of the building principal or his/her designee, all such complaints shall be investigated promptly. A written report of the investigation shall be prepared when the investigation is complete. Such report shall include findings of fact, a determination of whether acts of bullying were verified, and when acts of bullying are verified, a recommendation for intervention, including disciplinary action. Where appropriate, written witness statements shall be attached to the report.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, when a student making an informal complaint has requested anonymity, the investigation of such complaint shall be limited as is appropriate in view of the anonymity of the complainant. Such limitation of investigation may include restricting action to a simple review of the complaint (with or without discussing it with the alleged perpetrator), subject to receipt of further information and/or the withdrawal by the complaining student of the condition that his/her report be anonymous.

#### 2. Remedial actions

Verified acts of bullying shall result in intervention by the building principal or his/her designee that is intended to assure that the prohibition against bullying behavior is enforced, with the goal that any such bullying behavior will end as a result.

Bullying behavior can take many forms and can vary dramatically in how serious it is, and what impact it has on the victim and other students. Accordingly, there is no one prescribed response to verified acts of bullying. While conduct that rises to the level of "bullying" as defined above will generally warrant disciplinary action against the perpetrator of such bullying, whether and to what extent to impose disciplinary action (detention, in-school suspension, suspension, or expulsion) is a matter for the professional discretion of the building principal.

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### 3. Possible Interventions for Enforcement of this Policy

#### a. Non-disciplinary Interventions

When verified acts of bullying are identified early and/or when such verified acts of bullying do not reasonably require a disciplinary response, students may be counseled as to the definition of bullying, its prohibition, and their duty to avoid any conduct that could be considered bullying.

If a complaint arises out of conflict between students or groups of students, peer mediation may be considered. Special care, however, is warranted in referring such cases to peer mediation. A power imbalance may make the process intimidating for the victim and therefore inappropriate. The victim's communication and assertiveness skills may be low and could be further eroded by fear resulting from past intimidation and fear of future intimidation. In such cases, the victim should be given additional support. Alternatively, peer mediation may be deemed inappropriate to address the concern.

#### b. Disciplinary Interventions

When acts of bullying are verified and a disciplinary response is warranted, students are subject to the full range of disciplinary consequences. Anonymous complaints that are not otherwise verified, however, shall not be the basis for disciplinary action.

In-school suspension and suspension may be imposed only after informing the accused perpetrator of the reasons for the proposed suspension and giving him/her an opportunity to explain the situation.

Expulsion may be imposed only after a hearing before the Board of Education, a committee of the Board or an impartial hearing officer designated by the Board of Education in accordance with Board policy. This consequence shall be reserved for serious incidents of bullying and/or when past interventions have not been successful in eliminating bullying behavior.

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### c. General Intervention Strategies

In addition to the prompt investigation of complaints of bullying and direct intervention when acts of bullying are verified, other district actions may ameliorate any potential problem with bullying in school or at school-sponsored activities. While no specific action is required and school needs for such interventions may vary from time to time, the following list of potential intervention strategies shall serve as a resource for administrators, teachers, and other professional staff members in each school:

1. Respectful responses to bullying concerns raised by students, parents or staff;
2. Planned professional development programs addressing bully/victim problems;
3. Data collection to document bully/victim problems to determine the nature and scope of the problem;
4. Use of peers to help ameliorate the plight of victims and include them in group activities;
5. Avoidance of sex-role stereotyping (e.g., males need to be strong and tough);
6. Awareness and involvement on the part of staff and parents with regards to bully/victim problems;
7. A curriculum that promotes communication, friendship, assertiveness skills, and character education;
8. Modeling by teachers of positive, respectful, and supportive behavior toward students;
9. Creating a school atmosphere of team spirit and collaboration that promotes appropriate social behavior by students in support of others;
10. Employing classroom strategies that instruct students how to work together in a collaborative and supportive atmosphere.

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### 4. General Prevention Strategies

Each school shall implement prevention strategies which may include, but not be limited to:

- a. A school survey to determine the prevalence of bullying.
- b. Establishing a bullying prevention coordinating committee.
- c. School rules that prohibit bullying, harassment and intimidation and contain appropriate consequences for violators.
- d. Adequate adult supervision of areas where bullying is likely to occur, such as the lunchroom, hallways, and outdoor areas.
- e. Grade-appropriate bullying prevention curricula from kindergarten through high school.
- f. Individual interventions with the bully, parents, and school staff as well as the victim, parents and school staff.
- g. School wide training related to safe school climate.
- h. Promotion of parental involvement in bullying prevention through individual or team participation in meetings, trainings, and individual interventions.

### IV. Reporting obligations

#### A. Report to the parent or guardian of the perpetrator

If after investigation, acts of bullying by a specific student are verified, the building principal or his/her designee shall notify the parent or guardian of the perpetrator in writing of that finding. If disciplinary consequences are imposed against such student, a description of such discipline shall be included in such notification.

#### B. Reports to the victim and his/her parent or guardian

If after investigation, acts of bullying against a specific student are verified, the building principal or his/her designee shall notify the parent or guardian of the victim of such finding. In providing such notification, care must be taken to respect the statutory privacy rights of the perpetrator of such bullying. The specific disciplinary consequences imposed on the perpetrator, as reflected in the student's educational records, shall not be disclosed to the parents or guardian of the victim, except as provided by law.

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### C. List of verified acts of bullying

The principal of each school shall maintain a list of the number of verified acts of bullying in the school, and this list shall be available for public inspection upon request. Given that any determination of bullying involves repeated acts over time, each report prepared in accordance with Section III (1) above that includes verified acts of bullying shall be tallied as one verified act of bullying unless the specific actions that are the subject of the report involve separate and distinct acts of bullying. The list shall be limited to the number of such verified acts of bullying in the school, and it shall not set out the particulars of each verified act, including but not limited to any personally identifiable student information, which is confidential information by law.

Each principal must report the number of verified acts of bullying to the State Department of Education in a manner prescribed by the commissioner.

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