



Managing the Challenges of the Political Season: Bullying Prevention & Response

A Resource For
School
Administrators



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The Iowa Bullying Prevention Council created this manual.

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Introduction

As we begin the school year, we should be aware of the impact this year's election may have on our Pre-K12 schools. Regardless of one's politics, heated political rhetoric has the potential to increase levels of fear and anxiety among students of all ages, especially among ethnic, racial and linguistic minorities, children with disabilities, and LGBTQ youth. Heated political discussion, fear and anxiety are not limited to home, but according to recent reports comes with children to school and may be identified as bullying, harassment or discrimination (Costello, 2016). Such behavior violates Iowa's Anti-Bullying and Anti-Harassment law and may violate federal protections provided by Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Title II of the 1990 ADA Act, Section 504, 1973 Rehabilitation Act and Title IX, enforced by the U.S. Department of Education's [Office for Civil Rights](#).

As educators, you are critically important to modeling behavior and providing instruction to your fellow educators, students, families and communities on how to create safe and supportive environments in which *all* students can learn and engage in civic dialogue in a responsible manner. The following information and resources may be shared with your school board, administrators, colleagues, students, families and community members.

This political season is different.

This political season is impacting young people in a manner we have not seen in previous election years.

"Teachers report an increase in anger and 'acting out' among students and a decreased ability to engage in civil discourse. Discussions turn into shouting matches, verbal hostility and sometimes-even fights... 'Students have become very hostile to opposing points of view, regardless of the topic. Any division now elicits anger and personal attacks' a Jefferson, Georgia High School Teacher wrote, 'Any division now elicits anger and personal attacks.'"

- Southern Poverty Law Center Study, 2016

"Our history is littered with examples of political bullying. Political candidates are constantly given a free pass to act in a way that we would never tolerate in our own children."

- Jenn Savedge, 2016

"Regardless of one's politics, the impact of this year's political rhetoric on K 12 schools is huge. It has produced increasing levels of fear and anxiety among students of all ages. Fear levels are becoming especially high among ethnic, racial and linguistic minority, and LGBTQ youth. Perception is reality. Skin color, clothing, accent, religious beliefs, perceived sexual orientation or identity all play into rhetoric-based "reality". Many students have been targeted; many, regardless of their place of birth, are worried about being deported. Teachers have noted an increase in incidents of harassment, intimidation and/or bullying directed at students whose backgrounds are targeted by the rhetoric."

- Mike Donlin, School Safety Center, WA

"Iowa is not devoid of issues in schools and communities during this political season. One [story from central Iowa](#) focuses on student language and behaviors at a sporting event. This story ended when administration, and students directly reached out to make amends and heal the harm. At another community in western Iowa students and community [protested the use of their high school](#) by a presidential candidate they felt had [caused racial issues with his political rhetoric](#). In a third instance [remarks by an Iowa US Representative](#) at the national political convention led to a document published in the Des Moines Register, ["A Teachable Moment."](#) 100 Iowa Social Studies educators signed the document. Very recently a small town in western Iowa hosted a parade where a [float depicted a presidential candidate in prison garb and in a cage](#). Those attending the parade were handed water filled balloons to throw at the person in the cage. It is entirely possible you will experience repercussions from these events as the political season continues to heat up."

- Penny Bisignano, Iowa Bullying Prevention Specialist

Before School Begins: Find and Review

Actions to ensure all students feel safe at school may begin before the first bell rings. Prior to the start of the school year, it is recommended that schools review district policies as well as state and federal guidance on the issues of bullying, harassment and discrimination.

Bullying, Harassment and Civil Rights





The Office for Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education provides "significant guidance" through publication of "Dear Colleague Letters." Many of these letters address school district's responsibility for maintaining a safe learning environment for all students. For example:

October 26, 2010

Dear Colleague:

In recent years, many state departments of education and local school districts have taken steps to reduce bullying in schools. The U.S. Department of Education (Department) fully supports these efforts. Bullying fosters a climate of fear and disrespect that can seriously impair the physical and psychological health of its victims and create conditions that negatively affect learning, thereby undermining the ability of students to achieve their full potential. The movement to adopt anti-bullying policies reflects schools' appreciation of their important responsibility to maintain a safe learning environment for all students. I am writing to remind you, however, that some student misconduct that falls under a school's anti-bullying policy also may trigger responsibilities under one or more of the federal antidiscrimination laws enforced by the Department's Office for Civil Rights (OCR). As discussed in more detail below, by limiting its response to a specific application of its anti-bullying disciplinary policy, a school may fail to properly consider whether the student misconduct also results in discriminatory harassment.

For more information the State of Iowa's policies and practices regarding bullying and harassment and Federal guidance on schools' obligations to respond to harassment, please see the following:

- Iowa Department of Education, [Anti-Bullying/Anti-Harassment Webpage](#)
- U.S. Department of Education, [Dear Colleague Letter on Harassment Based on Race, Religion, and National Origin](#)  (2015)
- Bullying, Harassment, and Civil Rights [Video](#) - Overview of School Districts' Federal Obligation to Respond to Harassment
- Summary of [Laws and Policies](#) regarding schools' obligations to address bullying and harassment
- U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, [Dear Colleague Letter on Bullying of Students with Disabilities](#)  (2014)
- U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, [Dear Colleague Letter on Harassment and Bullying](#)  (2010)
- U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, [Checklist for a Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Harassment](#) 
- U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, [Harassment Fact Sheet](#)

Bullying/Harassment Policy - Review your district/agency policy for bullying/harassment as it relates to adult-to-adult behavior, as it relates to student-to-student behavior and as it relates to adult and student behavior. Remember, when staff know or should have known about a bullying/harassment incident the staff member is obligated to follow the reporting policy. Best practice guidelines compel staff to follow-up with the student who engaged in bullying behavior and with the student who was the target of bullying behavior. (When bullying behaviors occur or are reported safety plans need to be developed, followed and reviewed!)

Public Conduct on Agency Premises Policy - Some schools/agencies have policies to cover the behavior of everyone on the school campus/agency property. Review your district/agency policies regarding the behavior of guests on the premises.

School Expectations - Review your school/district culture/climate expectations/rules. Schools implementing PBIS, Character Counts, Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and other similar programs have established common expectations and common language. Review the expectations and be prepared to use the common language when interacting with colleagues and students.

Conclusion

Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination are behaviors have been documented for years. While these types of behaviors do not originate in the heated political rhetoric of an election year, they may be amplified. The “bully pulpit” of politics is no longer reserved for ideologies and issues; and instead has taken aim at individuals and identities. As students repeat and reinforce behaviors modeled to them in the political arena, educators must be prepared to help students understand how the bad behaviors of politicians fit – or don’t - into the school rules and scope of civic discourse; ensuring all students and school staff have a safe learning environment.

Please refer to the manual for Educators and Students for more resources on this important topic.

If you have questions or would like further resources, please contact:

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