
Some schools' antibullying plans incomplete

By Sarah Schweitzer

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More than a third of Massachusetts school districts failed to submit complete antibullying plans last year as required by a new state law, according to figures released by the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

In 13 percent of the plans submitted, at least a quarter of the required elements were not clearly addressed.

That means many of the plans failed to outline disciplinary actions for students who make false accusations of bullying or detail methods to inform parents about the dynamics of bullying.

The compliance figures drew criticism yesterday from lawmakers who helped craft the law, which Governor Deval Patrick signed last year to protect students in the classroom and beyond.

"This suggests that many schools put their plans together quickly to comply with the deadline and didn't do the hard work of using the plans to begin changing school climates, the only way to prevent bullying," said state Representative Marty Walz, a Back Bay Democrat and the bill's chief author.

Under the law, school districts were required to submit comprehensive plans to combat bullying to the state by Dec. 31, a deadline that many schools raced to meet.

State Representative John Scibak said some school administrators last year complained that submitting antibullying plans to the state amounted to make-work, because they said they were already doing what the law required. But now, Scibak said, the failure of many schools to submit complete plans throws doubt on that supposition.

"If they are already doing it, then why are compliance rates so low?" said Scibak, a Democrat from South Hadley, where 15-year-old Phoebe Prince committed suicide following a spate of bullying by classmates, a tragedy credited with spurring the creation of Massachusetts' antibullying law.

Yet Elizabeth Englander, the director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University who helped shape the law, said she was not dispirited by how many districts had yet to file complete plans.

"This was always going to be a work in progress," she said. "I think I was operating on the assumption that maybe half of the schools would really get it right the first time."

State education officials declined yesterday to release the names of schools whose antibullying plans failed to meet state requirements. JC Considine, a Department of Education spokesman, said the figures reflect only an initial review of the plans, with a more comprehensive review expected to be undertaken in the coming weeks, after which, he said, the schools' names will be released.

Considine declined to comment on the compliance rates.

Many school districts submitted their antibullying plans within days of the Dec. 31 deadline. Two weeks before the deadline, just 60 percent of schools had complied with the mandate. By the deadline, 99 percent of schools had complied; six schools had not. Those six have since submitted plans, according to the state.

Private schools, with the exception of schools for special education students, were not required to submit plans.

School districts were required to include in their antibullying plans a number of things, including clear procedures for reporting and investigating bullying, the range of punishments that could be used against a bully, procedures for prompt notification of parents or guardians of the subjects of bullying and bullies themselves, and provisions for staff training.

Districts were required to consider input for their plans from school staff, teachers, volunteers, parents, students, residents, and law enforcement. In many cases, school committees approved plans before submitting them to the Department of Education.

Patrick Clark, principal of Barnstable High School, said he initially questioned the necessity of an antibullying plan for a school like his. He said he had already been working aggressively to combat suicide by screening for depression, a critical component, he said, of an antibullying program.

"We were already three-fourths of the way there," he said. "So some of it was a little repetitive for us."

But ultimately, the exercise of crafting a districtwide antibullying plan ended up being a useful one, he said.

"It forced us to go back and reevaluate the practices we had and tweak our practices," he said.

The antibullying legislation lays out no penalty for schools that fail to comply with the law. But Walz said school board members in districts that fail to comply should face the punishment of voters.

"School board members are elected," she said. "And the public has the responsibility to hold them accountable."

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