

Cyberbullying and Social Media Abuse: Successful Management in Connecticut School Districts



Implementation of Public Act 11-232



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Management in Connecticut's School Districts:
Implementation of Public Act 11-232**

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CYBERBULLYING AND SOCIAL MEDIA ABUSE: SUCCESSFUL MANAGEMENT BY CONNECTICUT SCHOOL DISTRICTS

I. INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report aims to ensure optimal implementation of Connecticut's Public Act 11-232, An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws (hereafter "PA 11-232" and attached as an Appendix), and thereby maximize the ability of public school children to learn. Based on interviews with school administrators, principals, teachers and other educational professionals, this report will showcase initiatives, strategies and training protocols that Connecticut school districts and schools have used to successfully address cyberbullying and social media abuse.

Connecticut Appleseed is a statewide, non-partisan 501(c)(3) organization that mobilizes the skills and resources of pro bono lawyers and other professionals to enhance social and economic justice by improving access to education, health care, financial and other services in our state. The Governor's Prevention Partnership, whose initiatives include giving schools the tools to create positive school climates and bully-free communities, collaborated on this project by providing the interview questions used in our research and helping to train our team of volunteer interviewers. Both organizations benefited tremendously from the enthusiastic and capable pro bono involvement in developing this report by The Hartford's Law Department.

PA 11-232 expanded pre-existing public school responsibilities for anti-bullying protection to cyberbullying. It also requires that districts' safe school climate plans prohibit bullying and/or cyberbullying outside of the school setting if such bullying (1) creates a hostile environment for the targeted student, (2) infringes on the rights of the targeted student, or (3) substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of the school. The net effect is that districts must respond to cyberbullying that occurs either within or outside school facilities if it impacts a child's ability to learn by substantially disrupting "the education process."

Our project's goal is to showcase strategies school districts are using to successfully prevent and minimize cyberbullying and social media abuse - not to find failings or fault. We intend only to highlight successful "best practice" interventions that schools have implemented in recent years to improve school climate and which can be brought to scale across the state. The Hartford's volunteers interviewed 65 teachers, principals, administrators and other specialized education professionals across 15 Connecticut districts to search for effective anti-cyberbullying programs.

Without providing financial resources, PA 11-232 requires that public schools manage and minimize behavior that they cannot fully control, as the majority of cyberbullying incidents seem to occur outside of school and beyond school boundaries. While this report will not attempt to enumerate all the challenges that social media presents, interviewees shared that ever-changing tools available to cyberbullies range from fleeting imagery designed to disappear, accounts with multiple or hidden passwords, fake and/or anonymous accounts and frightening distributional capability.

The good news is that age-appropriate Social and Emotional Learning (“SEL”) and “restorative practices” have proved instrumental in reducing harm to victims and preventing further bullying. There is resounding support among school personnel for proactivity to minimize cyberbullying, build a sense of community and assure mutual respect.

Proactivity initiatives at all school levels takes dozens of forms. Proactivity in elementary grades takes the form of reinforcing character development, identification of common language that points out bully-like behavior, providing internet safety training and ensuring “digital literacy.” In addition, restorative practice programs in elementary grades help students develop empathy, self-control and anger management, avoiding aggression through greater mutual understanding. In middle school, issuance of Chrome Books is accompanied by “Gaggle” to scan devices for improper use. “GoGuardian” filters preclude or document mean behavior and alert administrators if a search is explicit or related to self-harm.

Partnering more closely with parents is also universally supported. Some parents are extremely busy, others are in denial and others yet distrust public school educators because their own schooling experience was negative. Getting and maintaining parents’ attention before their child’s education is affected is a daunting challenge, although districts valiantly try with newsletters, dinners, open houses and workshops. Rather than school-issued laptops, cell phones used outside of school are the most common vehicle for cyber mischief. As a result, parents’ monitoring and involvement is a greatly-needed but often-missing part of the answer.

This report neither suggests further statutory changes nor salutes school use of basic and essential communication tools like Student Handbooks, Codes of Conduct, Board of Education Policies, Safe School Climate Plans or Acceptable Use (“AU”)/Responsible Use Policies. Close attention to even regularly-updated AUs is surely warranted to preclude misuse of in-school laptops, but this is hardly a Best Practice, as student awareness may be superficial, whether or not their signatures are required. Similarly, neither a compliant school climate plan nor a Student Code of Conduct requiring students to let staff know about bullying - whether occurring at school, on the way to or from school, or in the community - are properly considered to be Best Practices.

Our larger culture has become increasingly coarse, seemingly allowing exchanges of insults that were unthinkable in even the recent past. Continuously-evolving technology amplifies our fraying cultural fabric, forcing public schools to protect and heal. Scarily graphic texting has, unfortunately, become normalized. But Connecticut educators unable to reverse our broader civic decline during school are doing remarkably well at protecting children’s right to learn.

There is no silver bullet. But we found that support professionals - guidance counselors, social workers, library media specialists and behavior technicians - are invaluable in protecting school children from cyberbullying. Teachers trained to focus on connecting positively with students, communicating shared expectations, and working with school administrators and parents to intervene early are similarly key. The pivotal role played by School Resource Officers (SROs) also underscores the financial implications of cyberbullying and social media abuse. Adequate school funding therefore remains one of the largest elephants in this room.

II. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report could not have been undertaken without the cooperation of fifteen public school district superintendents who agreed to open their districts up as laboratories and allow their staff to be interviewed. We similarly thank the interviewees who so generously gave of their time. Since our intent is to publicize successful responses to PA 11-232 rather than evaluate or compare schools, we list participating districts below and only provide generalized attributions.

Amity (Region 5)	Coventry	Hamden	Southington
ACES	East Granby	Plainville	Wallingford
Bloomfield	East Hartford	Preston	West Hartford
Bristol	Farmington	Simsbury	

Embrace of this project by The Hartford's Law Department was equally critical. Their volunteers interviewed 2-7 professionals in participating districts, using sets of questions drafted by Celine Provini of the Governor's Prevention Partnership. Our questions benefited from Hamden Director of Technology & Communication Karen Kaplan's review, while Bloomfield Assistant Superintendent Bethany Silver lifted district participation. Our volunteer interviewers also benefited from expert training by the Governor's Prevention Partnership's Liza Makuch.

Connecticut Appleseed will distribute copies of this report to the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education ("CABE"), the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents ("CAPSS"), the Connecticut Department of Education and state legislators.

III. BACKGROUND

While Connecticut Appleseed's report entitled "Bullying in Connecticut's Public Schools: Implementation of Public Act 08-160," was in process, the state passed PA 11-232 to expand and clarify school district responsibilities. This related but distinct project updates our 2012 report to feature educators' strategies to respond to newer technologies and social media.

Under Connecticut's 2008 amendments, bullying was defined simply as "overt acts...with the intent to ridicule, harass, humiliate or intimidate." With PA 11-232, bullying is now defined as "written, oral or electronic communication, such as cyberbullying...or a physical act or gesture...that causes physical or emotional harm" and other negative consequences. While defining cyberbullying as "any act of bullying using the internet, interactive and digital technologies, cellular mobile telephone or other mobile electronic devices, or any electronic communications"), PA 11-232 also changed the statute's focus from intent to impact.

Since PA 11-232 increased responsibilities assigned to public schools to provide a safe learning environment, "bullying" has become an increasingly sensitive, time-consuming, challenging and costly subject. However, consensus among our participating districts is that both the broadened definition and the shift to impact are, on balance, timely improvements, as intent was more difficult to prove. While varied sensitivity among children may complicate diagnosis of impact, consensus is that the 2011 amendments were nevertheless "the right thing to do."

IV. FINDINGS

A. INNOVATIVE PRACTICES THAT PROACTIVELY FOSTER POSITIVE BEHAVIOR AND IMPROVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

The emergence and maturity of SEL is the most hopeful tool to mitigate the risks that social media pose to the education of school children. Significant and increasing emphasis on SEL is universally underway among the participating districts and applied at every educational level. SEL means focusing on the social and emotional pieces of behavior to try to orient, and if necessary, recondition student thinking.

Mutual respect and mindfulness of how children affect each other lie at the heart of a positive school climate. SEL encourages students to express themselves responsibly, sharing feelings but only in a respectful manner. Children who can recognize, understand, express and label their emotions are more able to regulate themselves.

Elementary schools lay the foundation to prevent bullying by teaching both self-regulation and etiquette regarding the networks within which they learn (“netiquette”). Curriculum units in the earliest grade school years teach students how to safely navigate the internet and caution them about the longevity of their digital “footprint.” Lessons in “Digital Literacy and Citizenship” progress toward 5th and 6th grade, where students are taught “if bullied, don’t engage,” and if it continues, seek help from an adult.

Two participating districts specifically credited Dr. Marc Brackett and Yale’s Center for Emotional Intelligence for helping to guide their SEL initiatives. Other districts attribute their success to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (“CASEL”, at www.casel.org). SEL enhances students’ ability to recognize bullying and dissect troublemaking by developing child competence in:

- Self-Awareness (identify feelings)
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationships Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

The following initiatives and formal programs are examples of SEL’s newly-found prominence:

- 1) The “RULER” program (for Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating emotions) has been implemented throughout all schools in one large suburban district to create community and enhance relationships. RULER is a social/emotional learning program that tries to foster “emotionally literate schools” and will also be rolled out next year in a midsize central Connecticut district. RULER intends to give students tools to better understand their emotions so that they are able to regulate them. For example, students who can understand and express their sadness are less likely to express it as anger. RULER also helps increase student use of the services of school psychologists by familiarizing students with these skilled on-site professionals.

- 2) Weekly school-wide SEL sessions in an elementary school in one midsize district in central Connecticut, facilitated by social workers, reinforce the need for all students to be respectful to one another in how they talk and listen. The principal believes the SEL sessions and restorative justice techniques have helped qualitatively improve the school community and thereby eliminate suspensions. The sessions also help staff anticipate and intervene early when mean-spirited behavior surfaces, and then remediate the situation before it escalates.
- 3) Elementary schools in one suburban district's "Character Education" initiative asks each grade level to adopt a character theme each month, and then recognizes with a sailboat students who demonstrate that trait. Every 6th grader is a "captain" charged with messaging and leading assemblies. Younger students are alerted to risks in unsupervised situations like bathrooms, lunch and recess. The district employs data analytics to improve the program and rebooted it when statistics reflected an increase in incidents.
- 4) "Second Step" (www.secondstep.org) in the elementary schools of three substantially different districts "has been huge" in helping to teach empathy and kindness and instill character. Second Step is a program rooted in SEL that helps elementary and middle school students know better how to act, react, make good decisions and resolve conflicts.

Curriculum units teach why writing something on the internet could be hurtful and provide emotional support to make the right choices and refrain from bullying. Age-appropriate components include restorative circles at the beginning of every day and conflict resolution discussions led by guidance counselors. The program emphasizes common language: "Be safe, be respectful and be responsible."

- 5) One rural district focuses on kindness and positivity. Its "therapeutic method" asks teachers to take "first level" ownership of disciplinary actions with regard to mean behavior, with consultation and discussion with administrators and support staff as appropriate. The impact is increased effectiveness of the teacher-student relationship, as well as fostering a problem-solving environment without punishment. Addressing mean behavior on a "tiered basis" is intended to prevent its escalation to bullying.
- 6) One suburban district uses restorative circles in which each classroom picks particular themes or goals that promote peer interaction and a sense of community. In order to better meet emotional needs, a regional district also employs restorative circles that may include guidance counselors and even parents.

All assistant principals, social workers and guidance counselors in a midsize district in central Connecticut are trained to facilitate restorative circles designed to give everyone an equal opportunity to speak and listen without judgment. Staff trained in restorative circles strive to promote understanding, repair any harm and prevent future incidents by keeping communication positive and balanced.

- 7) Third graders and parents in a midsize central Connecticut district started “KIND” (Kids Involved in Nice Deeds), a club that meets after school once a month and which has grown to 40-50 students.
- 8) An elementary school in a suburban district devotes 2 weeks to a “Look for the Good” campaign that teaches about gratitude and how to express it. Students post sticky notes on a wall every day about things for which they’re grateful.
- 9) The “Choosing Kindness” theme at one middle school in a midsize district prompted formation of the “Kindness Squad” club. If bullying inflicts and aggravates “the pain of exclusion,” emphasizing kindness is an important lesson.
- 10) “Mixing-it-up” in a rural district encourages students to step out of their comfort zones by encouraging them to change lunch tables. Since children are heavily influenced by their peers, this student-run program is particularly effective.
- 11) An elementary school in a midsize central Connecticut district uses components of both Positive Behavior Intervention & Support (“PBIS”) and “Responsive Classroom.” Its “ROCKS” (Respect, Ownership, Community, Kindness, Safety) program establishes a positive and inclusive school climate and sets consistent expectations. Shamrocks and school pencils are awarded to students exhibiting ROCKS who are named on local TV.

“Responsive Classroom” strives to meet emotional needs using principles that include:

- a. The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.
- b. How children learn is as important as what they learn.
- c. The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.
- d. To be successful academically and socially, the set of social skills children need includes cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy and self-control.

This approach includes ten classroom practices in which staff is trained, including:

- a. Morning Meeting – gathering the class each morning to greet one another, as well as to assess moods and share feelings;
- b. Rule Creation – helping students create their own classroom rules that allow class members to meet their learning goals;
- c. Interactive Modeling – teaching children to notice expected behaviors - and make them an integral part of their own behavior - through modeling; and
- d. Logical Consequences – responding to misbehavior in a way that allows children to fix and learn from their mistakes while preserving their dignity.

“PBIS” is focused on providing a school-wide system of support that includes programs to define, encourage, and reinforce appropriate student behavior. Programs that reinforce positive behavior with rewards and recognition help form a foundation for success while also deterring poor behavior.

Many school districts acknowledge their continued use of PBIS in their schools and some train their entire staff in PBIS.

12) Library media programs in the elementary schools of one large suburban district lay the foundation for network etiquette and digital literacy, offering second-graders a unit from Common Sense Media (www.common Sense Media.org) on “netiquette.” Each library class in one of the district’s elementary schools creates a “Class Charter” on how students should act and expect to be treated. Typical components include:

- a. Positiveness, Respectfulness
- b. Act Responsibly
- c. Care for Others
- d. Keep Safe

13) A Student Leadership Institute in the high school of one midsize district in central Connecticut invites roughly one quarter of its incoming Freshman Class to participate in a 2-week summer cohort whose purpose is to facilitate a positive school environment.

14) Age-appropriate assemblies with distinguished speakers are commonly used to discuss empathy, respect, kindness, making good choices and citizenship. (Note: Interviewees emphasized making assemblies about positive character traits like respect, honor and responsibility rather than specifically about bullying. Connecticut Dept. of Education consultant Jo Ann Freiburg reportedly advises that assemblies on bullying can be counterproductive and can actually cause spikes in bullying.) Assembly examples include:

- a. An SRO gives a program on social media to Grades 5 and 6.
- b. Internet Safety Program taught in one small rural district by a former FBI Agent about dangers associated with technology.
- c. State troopers.
- d. The father of a child who committed suicide.

B. TRUST-BUILDING PRACTICES THAT HELP TO PREVENT CYBERBULLYING AND ENCOURAGE INCIDENT REPORTING

Establishing trust within the student body is a priority so that students know they can get help and feel they can trust adults enough to come forward and tell them about cyberbullying. More importantly, trusting students concerned about themselves or a friend divulge “more than 95% of what one district knows to be going on.” A trusting student will speak out, if solicited or coerced to sext (e.g., “send me something”). Accordingly, one suburban district strives to build trust between students and teachers/administrators so that students know they can come forward.

A trusting student will report to administrators that “my friend posted a pic” or I’m “worried that a friend of mine may be suicidal.” In short, the kind of “caring, collaborative school culture” to

which a suburban city district aspires can pay off much more concretely than simply improving school climate.

When relationships among students, teachers, administrators, counselors and SROs are established and trusting, even a first “mistake” is likely to be a one-time “last” mistake once the student sees the impact on his/her reputation and understands the consequences. When students become convinced that teachers and administrators care about them, they are better capable of internalizing their school’s expectations. Since “punishment doesn’t seem to work except for those students who rarely encounter it,” Connecticut schools are increasingly investing energy and training time to establish and improve relationships rather than emphasizing discipline.

Initiatives that enhance trust, build a sense of community, encourage incident reporting and improve communications among all school community members include:

- 1) The Connect Program in one suburban district offers a series of classes in Health that sets norms for behavior, digital citizenship, and “how to treat each other.” Some classes also address sexting, dating violence and its consequences, and more generally “what makes a good relationship.” Health class units offered in middle and high school on self-image, self-esteem and depression contribute not only to physical, emotional and mental well-being but help to bolster student defenses and fend off any sense of isolation. More broadly, health classes connect bullying, substance abuse, mental health and stress to general wellness and identify available resources.
- 2) One small rural district’s “Making Connections” program, which was designed to improve connections between students and staff. Making Connections randomly selects and pairs up students with teachers to address and assist with personal and social issues. The district’s “Youth Action Council” comprised of sophomores and juniors is also helpful in connecting students and sharing resources.
- 3) A suburban district features “connection periods” twice a week in middle school and high school during Advisory Periods, while one district believes small conversations in “morning meetings” are also effective at the elementary school level. Similarly, a large suburban district’s Advisory Program discusses online behavior in a relatively small, conversational setting.

Students remain in the same “Advisory” for their full high school experience. When a student can meet every other week with a faculty member who is not teaching them an academic subject, Advisory offers less hierarchical relationships and an informal avenue to discuss issues ranging from the Student Handbook to personal behavioral matters. Accordingly, a rural district designed its Advisory to give students a chance to address problems they may encounter during the school day.

The same large suburban district’s combination of Advisory with “Linkcrew,” which connects upper and lower-classmen, attempts to build a stronger sense of

school community. Once students learn they are part of a community and can make a difference, they should feel more comfortable in coming forward about cyberbullying. Coupling Advisory with Linkcrew improves the school community's awareness of bullying and encourages students to speak up.

- 4) After hearing a district beyond those participating in this report describe its student commitment about "bystanding" (students agree to sign a pledge that they will not stand by when bullying or cyberbullying is occurring), a large suburban district is considering introducing such a pledge to encourage its students to embrace this greater degree of responsibility.
- 5) The middle school's active PBIS teams, extensive SEL curriculum and a Restorative Practices Reference Guide in a midsize central Connecticut district portray relationships as the centerpiece, and then focus on repairing harm to establish a healthy and positive environment.
- 6) Numerous schools ask police officers to come in and give training to administrators and teachers with regard to common social media apps used by students. Some IT Departments run scans on school-issued Chrome Books and iPads to ensure that those apps are not downloaded.
- 7) Students at one school in a suburban city are given the principal's cell # and encouraged to text him with either specific warnings or broader concerns about social media issues.
- 8) Parents are valuable sources of information, particularly when calling in to say they heard something from their child. As a result, school programs try to encourage parents to "Start looking at what your kids are doing online" and "Get to know these apps and websites." Since parents are so busy that getting turnout for informational programs is difficult, some educators suggested placing high quality short videos on the district's website so that parents could access the information as their schedules permit.

Despite the absence of statutory mention, students sometimes receive a request to send explicit photos. Administrators hearing of such a request understandably would like to contact the recipient's parents and ask them to look at their child's phone. A parent/school relationship sufficiently strong to withstand such strain may enable the school to pre-emptively confront the student making the request and clarify that doing so is punishable.

The following are examples from participating districts of relationship-building efforts to help prompt parents to monitor more closely what their children are doing:

- a. Family Community Dinners in one large suburban district structure family nights by topic.

- b. One middle school principal personally writes a newsletter for parents about internet use.
- c. A suburban district uses Open Houses, letters home and Curriculum Night to partner with parents to describe schools' expectations and technology's impact. One of the district's elementary schools employs "A Better Choice" slips from the principal to help students think through and reflect on how their behavior was inappropriate. Students are then expected to get the slip signed by a parent.
- d. The "Tiered Program" in a small rural district explains clearly to both students and parents the set of consequences that will follow if the poor behavior continues. By making warnings explicit, the program helps students make informed choices.
- e. One suburban city district reports that they try particularly hard to build relationships with parents of trouble-prone students and repeat offenders.

C. BEST PRACTICES TO VERIFY AND INVESTIGATE AN INCIDENT

Required investigations, let alone verifications, are both challenging and time-consuming. That these investigations can be a "rabbit hole" is the most compelling argument supporting investment in SEL, prevention and trust-building.

Unfortunately, bullying is a catch-all phrase all too commonly used by parents to describe mean behavior, forcing busy educators to investigate incidents that may just reflect "peer to peer conflict" or "directed disrespect." However, both such types of behavior fall short of PA 11-232's definition of bullying. For example, an investigation may be prompted because a student who simply fails to get what they want may be able to convince their parents that other students are tormenting them. Rather than suggesting that bullying is overreported or exaggerated, the point is that perceived "impact" does not always reflect malicious intent.

The most typical in-school procedure is for teachers to escalate incidents that may constitute cyberbullying to administrators. Administrative protocols may involve needed clinicians and other school personnel, SROs, and reaching out to parents of all involved students. One district recommends that administrators immediately let parents know when the school is looking into something. Unsurprisingly, many verified cyberbullying incidents resulted from pressure by parents who are not convinced that it will stop and therefore want to establish a formal record.

Sometimes it's easier to verify cyberbullying than bullying because there is usually a digital trail, even if such a trail is not immediately apparent. One suburban district tries to start investigations immediately, before the student goes home and erases or clears the evidence. Clear-cut evidence on cell phones, either screenshots or text trails, is occasionally available.

Investigation is very difficult without a downloaded copy of a text, so interviewing students aside from the target and perpetrator occasionally helps yield documentation. Unfortunately, it is

not unusual for some parents to simply refuse to produce the texting proof needed for verification. One district understandably reported that it considers “hearsay” alone to be sufficient to investigate possible sexting or cyberbullying.

Some districts expressed anxiety about pressure to do everything “perfectly” to avoid personal liability. Involvement by multiple staff members with multiple “sets of ears” was recommended by one district because parents sometimes lack trust in the school personnel. More positively, strong and trusting relationships established between administrators, staff, students and SROs can be particularly helpful to investigate and verify cyberbullying or sexting.

The middle school in one midsize central Connecticut district takes full advantage of their SRO to assist in verifying either bullying or cyberbullying outside the school, while complimenting their “SROs’ great attention to detail and thorough, objective investigations.” Sometimes information needed for verification is offered by students who feel comfortable enough to discuss sensitive issues like cyberbullying with teachers. Anonymous tip lines are also frequently made available to enable students willing to share information that may help verify an incident. In line with that effort, another midsize central Connecticut district places “Let Us Know” (LUK) boxes throughout their buildings.

Since investigation into possible sexting is constrained by the risk that school personnel may unintentionally view child pornography, administrators typically hand off investigations into possible sexting to SROs. While gender-appropriate guidance counselors may also be consulted, SROs usually assume the lead to initiate any sexting-related investigations involving students’ personal devices. One suburban district values the availability of their SROs to take a look at phones where sexting is suspected. SROs engage the police department (if appropriate) and coordinate with school staff to fulfill any obligation to report to the CT Dept. of Children and Families (DCF).

Improper use of school-issued devices (e.g., Chromebook) is a minor source of incident verification. Despite installation of filters that limit some access, teachers occasionally catch students on a bad website, and then may ask tech staff to be the fact-finder. Close examination by tech specialists may reveal that one student used another’s unlocked device to reach blocked sites. Such tech specialists occasionally receive formal requests for thorough forensic investigations from administrators, SROs or police departments.

One investigative advantage for districts using Google Classroom and providing Google accounts is that they allow students an electronic - and more comfortable - means to share a tip with counselors or administrators. A student who can report cyberbullying without being seen walking into a school professional’s office, or without being seen dropping a note into a “tip” box, is more likely to report.

D. BEST PRACTICES IN SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICER (SRO) COLLABORATION

One district states it very simply: “having an SRO in the building, allowing the school to develop a positive relationship with police department personnel through unlimited consultation, is the best practice.” Since SROs are professional police officers who are typically borrowed from municipal departments, they offer an avenue to their respective departments. SROs in one large suburban district do a 4-year “tour” of duty, becoming familiar and trusted adults for the student body, while more frequent rotation is more typical at most school districts.

SROs are not only the experts about whether any incident may constitute a crime, but they also play the critical investigative role in possible or proven sexting incidents, as school personnel must avoid any risk of viewing child pornography. SROs typically assume the lead, if not full responsibility, in any sexting-related cyberbullying involving students’ personal devices. But successful administrative/SRO collaboration also means that SROs are part of the education process.

For example, numerous interviews revealed that SROs offer lessons on cyberbullying to sixth graders, lecturing on sexting and the “digital footprint” in their Health classes and speaking frequently at student assemblies. SROs and their respective police departments also collaborate with Safe School Climate committees to develop plans and communication strategies.

Police departments therefore place SROs in school settings who are capable of establishing rapport with students, communicating effectively, and who truly want to be in that setting. Schools understandably value their SROs highly for teaching students that the police are trusted adults.

Interviewees shared the following about their collaborations with SROs and police departments:

- 1) One midsize district believes it has a “great relationship” with the local police department. District personnel check in with the department regularly, even when they don’t need their services, just to keep the connection active. By doing so, the school district and police department keep each other abreast on social media issues.

Notably, the town’s police force dedicates a special division to youth services, which has in-depth familiarity with cyberbullying situations. That division works with families as needed and gives presentations at schools.

- 2) A suburban district reported excellent relationships with their SROs. High school administrators feel “on the same page” as the police and suggest that a best practices approach would be to train administrators and SROs together. The district’s middle school SROs give presentations to students on cyberbullying and social media, explain when and how they will be asked to get involved in the context of a sexting incident and teach a Health unit to Freshmen.

The same district's middle school also offers a program in which police officers mentor students with the expectation that the officer will continue mentorship as the student advances in school. Counselors can suggest to parents that their student might benefit from such mentorship, but parental consent is required.

- 3) Schools in a regional district work directly through the SRO to the police and have excellent relationships, so that most issues are ironed out "fairly easily."
- 4) Each year in a rural district a state trooper comes into school and does a very effective and grade-appropriate presentation on health, safety, well-being, etc., including a discussion of sexting and the legal ramifications.
- 5) The police department in a midsize central Connecticut district presents to parents each year on cyberbullying in an effort to prompt family conversation. Administrators encourage these presentations because parents who are unaware of current websites and apps, or hidden passwords and hiding places within devices, cannot effectively monitor their children's screens. The town's police officers also walk through school buildings on a regular basis, which seems to help students feel more comfortable.
- 6) The high school in a small rural district maintains an excellent relationship with resident state troopers. The school collaborates with them regularly, while also utilizing other resources like the Juvenile Resource Board (JRB). JRB panels of community volunteers hear "cases" and offer a balanced and restorative justice solution to victims while typically providing the offender with counseling.

The town's resident state troopers are visible and on-site beginning at the elementary level each morning. Administrators believe that their visibility alone is of tremendous benefit. Similarly, another small rural district relies on constant contact with their resident state troopers who both respond to particular issues and teach faculty and students alike.

- 7) The SRO in a suburban district gives his own lesson to 5th and 6th graders on the impact of social media, clarifying in particular that children must be 13 years of age to establish accounts.
- 8) The SROs in the high school in a midsize central Connecticut district "relate really well to the students and staff and forge a positive bridge between the school and community." Rapport is essential! More broadly, the district attributes much of its success in reducing school-based arrests and student referrals to the JRB and to its Memo of Understanding with the town's Police Department.
- 9) SROs are dedicated to each school building in one suburban city district, while another large suburban district has SROs in both its middle school and high school.

E. CONDUCTING MEETINGS WITH PARENTS AND FOLLOW-UP: COMPONENTS OF SAFETY SUPPORT PLANS

All too often, a cyberbullying incident is but the visible tip of an iceberg. It can be difficult or even impossible to find an “origin” by unraveling a long, complex chain of events. Unfortunately, mean behavior is often mutual, has a history and “goes both ways.” Ideally, the result is two “sides” shaking hands after figuring out how to coexist and establish better boundaries. Empathy toward both parties and parents can help focus the discussion on “what do we all have to do to get back?” and on how to put structure in place that meets the needs of everyone (although discipline may be a component).

Districts report that while there is no single best way for administrators to conduct meetings to address a cyberbullying incident, the majority of parents are willing to go along with suggestions from a well-orchestrated meeting. A variety of meeting scenarios may be appropriate. Some districts like to contact parents on both sides of the issue in order to open a dialogue in the belief that all parties will mend fences and reach common ground. Other districts prefer separate meetings with the victim and perpetrator.

Meetings with both targets and perpetrators seem to work best if there is primarily a misunderstanding that can be resolved. In this instance, bringing the involved students together as soon as possible and offering mediation (if appropriate) may be sufficient. Some targets want more to simply stop the bullying rather than insisting on revenge, while others want to see the perpetrator at least formally acknowledge their wrongdoing.

One suburban district likes to gather all the parties involved at the earliest opportunity, before bullying gets out of hand, and then show everyone the initial, available evidence so parents fully understand what seems to have happened. One high school employs staff trained in facilitating restorative circles and PBIS to mediate, to reach a mutual understanding, reduce and repair harm and prevent repeat incidents.

Unfortunately, while some parents look to the meetings for solutions, others are just looking where to place blame. This may explain why a small rural district prefers convening only the student parties to an incident first and involving the parents only after the bullying behavior continues. Some parents need to be moved beyond denial by hearing everything school personnel have learned about an incident. One district’s middle school requires that at least two school personnel participate in every meeting to avoid misrepresentation or false claims by students or parents.

Whether structured confrontation alone or significant restitution is required, a “restorative justice” approach seems to work best with respect to all cyberbullying instances, including sexting.

- 1) Use of restorative practices was cited in certain districts. With this approach, the perpetrator is generally forced to sit down face to face with the accuser to address the issues, without necessarily or automatically resulting in consequences for either side.

“Many times” while reading messages out loud or showing pictures to each other, the perpetrators will learn very quickly how seriously wrong their sexting has been.

Rather than assigning blame for the rule that was broken or rushing to impose punishment for bad behavior, restorative justice’s immediate focus is on the harm that was caused by the student and what can be done to restore mutual respect. Often the approach is to have a restorative encounter between the victim and the offender, with trained professionals and other involved parties in an incident (parents, students, teachers and administrators). Broadening the one-on-one conversation between the victim and the bully appears to help both parties move empathetically toward mutual understanding.

This encounter takes place in a safe environment where they discuss the behavioral issue, who was harmed, how that behavior made the harmed person feel and then work to figure out a way to remedy the inflicted harm. The usual purpose is much less to assign guilt than to hold the perpetrator accountable for his or her actions, and to understand the consequences of his or her actions and how it affects others, while building a community of support around the victim. Such “understanding” is frequently advanced by requiring the students to write reflective essays that help them process their role in what has taken place.

- 2) For more serious incidents where both restitution and protection are necessary, remedial “Safety Plans” can help prevent repetitive behavior and restore a healthy school environment. Safety Plans must of course assure the victim of protection but may also try to address the reason the perpetrator is acting out.

Safety Plans should be developed collaboratively after conversation so everyone is on the same page and buys in. District representatives want both students and families to feel that the Safety Plans are made with them, not to them. If the perpetrator has been suspended following a serious incident, a Safety and Re-Entry Meeting involving parents, teachers, administrators and counselors might result in a jointly devised plan to allow a smooth post-incident transition when the perpetrator returns to school.

Successful Safety Plans can run the entire spectrum from seemingly relaxed to rigorous in terms of both discipline and separation of targets from perpetrators. Perhaps a victim may simply be asked to touch base occasionally with a teacher or counselor, while a perpetrator may be told to enter regular counseling. Safety Plans can be developed even if there is no verified incident.

Typical Safety Plan components ensure careful and frequent monitoring and include:

- a. Increased oversight by teachers and support staff to put “lots of eyes” on the situation before it escalates further (this may include distribution of photos of both students to familiarize all school staff members with both parties);
- b. Maintaining separation of the two students through scheduling changes to prevent their interaction (e.g., prevent overlapping bathroom use);

- c. Long-term daily “check-ins” with counselors/psychologists, including questions such as “how do you feel today?” or “what’s happening?” Victims are typically given the name of a single trusted adult with whom they can check in regularly;
- d. Connecting the perpetrator with counseling to address their challenges (e.g., in one suburban city district, satellite health centers in six schools provide individual behavioral health services and serve as links to other community services, while Youth Services in a small rural district provides counseling inside or out of school, or even in surrounding towns);
- e. Issuance of “AnyTime” passes that instantly excuse students from classrooms to go to the counseling office;
- f. Instructing the target about exactly who to contact if there is a reoccurrence; and
- g. The full range of disciplinary options.

V. REINFORCING BEST PRACTICES THROUGH STAFF TRAINING AND CONTINUING BEHAVIORAL SUPPORTS

Interviewed school district personnel seem to feel well-educated on procedures and policies related to cyberbullying. In general, districts mandate professional development every year for teachers, whether in units lasting as little as one hour or as much as a full day workshop that may be video-based. One purpose is to help educators recognize the warning signs that students are in pain or need help and familiarize everyone with the available sources of social support (e.g., guidance counselors, school psychologists, etc.). Behavioral consultants are occasionally engaged to further develop capacity/skill in teachers so they can be more supportive of students and their families. One district uses an annual or semi-annual school climate survey to identify a single aspect or aspects of cyberbullying as a goal to work on in the subsequent year.

Below are a few training suggestions and examples shared by our interviewees:

- A. High school teachers in a midsize central Connecticut district receive a full-day presentation from outside experts, followed by monthly half-day planning sessions for staff to develop content for their Restorative Practices and SEL programs. All assistant principals, social workers and guidance counselors in the district are trained to facilitate restorative circles designed to give everyone an opportunity to speak and listen without judgment. The purpose of this focus is to prevent bullying by responding quickly to defuse tensions and avoid escalation, remediating appropriately and avoiding the need for excessive punishment.
- B. At the beginning of each school year, personnel in a suburban district discuss mandated reporting, while guidance counselors alert teachers to the latest technological threats.

(Note: This suburban district’s Teacher Handbook specifies both their system for internal reporting and the protocol and timeframe for addressing behavioral incidents.)

- C. In addition to rating the suitability of all types of media for students at each grade level, Common Sense Media (www.common Sense Media.org) helps teachers instruct students how to think critically and conduct themselves safely in the digital world. Common Sense Media certifies teachers for completing its Digital Citizenship Curriculum and similarly recognizes districts for implementing district-wide “digital citizenship.” Certification by Common Sense Media requires that teachers have successfully completed at least three components of its curriculum.
- D. To keep everyone updated on the latest technologies that may enable cyberbullying or social media abuse, one regional district disseminates training down through multiple channels: their Tech Council (which meets 4 times a year, including once a year with legal counsel), school-specific Leadership Teams and the district’s Professional Learning Community. This regional district informs its staff during training sessions about results from their annual “Speak Up” surveys of grades 3-12 on the types of social media students use and how often they use it.
- E. One midsize district suggested “train the trainer” professional development whereby a single faculty member takes a detailed course in Responsive Classroom and then shares what they learned with other teachers who have just had the foundational course.

VI. LOOKING FORWARD

Teachers, administrators and support professionals are evolving away from discipline and toward improved understanding about proactive approaches to behavior management and supports. Increasingly, our schools are undertaking inventive multi-disciplinary approaches to behavior management, including full integration of teachers, administrators, social workers, psychologists, counselors, special education teachers and SROs.

This report offers cautious optimism that Connecticut’s school districts can satisfy the responsibilities assigned by PA 11-232. Our interviews found that extensive use of SEL programs, PBIS strategies and restorative justice practices by school and district personnel have proved increasingly effective in reducing poor behavior, bullying and cyberbullying.

Such effectiveness has been confirmed by schools’ continuing and substantial reductions in both in-school and out-of-school suspensions over the last several years. At the same time, the cyber age unquestionably offers more avenues for the bully and more tools by which a perpetrator can evade detection.

Connecticut Applesed and the Governor’s Prevention Partnership respectfully submit this report to help promote a safe and rewarding learning environment for all students.



Substitute Senate Bill No. 1138

Public Act No. 11-232

AN ACT CONCERNING THE STRENGTHENING OF SCHOOL BULLYING LAWS.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Assembly convened:

Section 1. Section 10-222d of the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (*Effective July 1, 2011*):

(a) As used in this section and sections 10-222g, as amended by this act, 10-222h, as amended by this act, and sections 4 and 9 of this act:

(1) "Bullying" means (A) the repeated use by one or more students of a written, oral or electronic communication, such as cyberbullying, directed at or referring to another student attending school in the same school district, or (B) a physical act or gesture by one or more students repeatedly directed at another student attending school in the same school district, that: (i) Causes physical or emotional harm to such student or damage to such student's property, (ii) places such student in reasonable fear of harm to himself or herself, or of damage to his or her property, (iii) creates a hostile environment at school for such student, (iv) infringes on the rights of such student at school, or (v) substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school. Bullying shall include, but not be limited to, a written, oral or electronic communication or physical act or gesture based on any actual or perceived differentiating characteristic, such as race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, socioeconomic status, academic status, physical appearance, or mental, physical, developmental or sensory disability, or by association with an individual or group who has or is perceived to have one or more of such characteristics;

(2) "Cyberbullying" means any act of bullying through the use of the Internet, interactive and digital technologies, cellular mobile telephone or other mobile electronic devices or any electronic communications;

(3) "Mobile electronic device" means any hand-held or other portable electronic equipment capable of providing data communication between two or more individuals, including, but not limited to, a text messaging device, a paging device, a personal digital assistant, a laptop computer, equipment that is capable of playing a video game or a digital video disk, or equipment on which digital images are taken or transmitted;

(4) "Electronic communication" means any transfer of signs, signals, writing, images, sounds, data or intelligence of any nature transmitted in whole or in part by a wire, radio, electromagnetic, photoelectronic or photo-optical system;

(5) "Hostile environment" means a situation in which bullying among students is sufficiently severe or pervasive to alter the conditions of the school climate;

(6) "Outside of the school setting" means at a location, activity or program that is not school related, or through the use of an electronic device or a mobile electronic device that is not owned, leased or used by a local or regional board of education;

(Z) "School employee" means (A) a teacher, substitute teacher, school administrator, school superintendent, guidance counselor, psychologist, social worker, nurse, physician, school paraprofessional or coach employed by a local or regional board of education or working in a public elementary, middle or high school; or (B) any other individual who, in the performance of his or her duties, has regular contact with students and who provides services to or on behalf of students enrolled in a public elementary, middle or high school, pursuant to a contract with the local or regional board of education; and

(8) "School climate" means the quality and character of school life with a particular focus on the quality of the relationships within the school community between and among students and adults.

(b) Each local and regional board of education shall develop and implement a [policy] safe school climate plan to address the existence of bullying in its schools. Such [policy] plan shall: (1) Enable students to anonymously report acts of bullying to [teachers and school administrators] school employees and require students and the parents or guardians of students to be notified annually of the process by which [they] students may make such reports, (2) enable the parents or guardians of students to file written reports of suspected bullying, (3) require [teachers and other school staff] school employees who witness acts of bullying or receive [student] reports of bullying to orally notify [school administrators in writing] the safe school climate specialist, described in section 9 of this act, or another school administrator if the safe school climate specialist is unavailable, not later than one school day after such school employee witnesses or receives a report of bullying, and to file a written report not later than two school days after making such oral report, (4) require [school administrators to investigate any] the safe school climate specialist to investigate or supervise the investigation of all reports of bullying and ensure that such investigation is completed promptly after receipt of any written reports made under this section, [and] (5) require the safe school climate specialist to review any anonymous reports, except that no disciplinary action shall be taken solely on the basis of an anonymous report, [(5)] (6) include a prevention and intervention strategy, as defined by section 10-222g, as amended by this act, for school [staff] employees to deal with bullying, [(6)] (7) provide for the inclusion of language in student codes of conduct concerning bullying, [(7)] (8) require each school to notify 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 invite them to attend at least one meeting, (8) require each school] not later than forty-eight hours after the completion of the investigation described in subdivision (4) of this subsection, (9) require each school to invite the parents or guardians of a student who commits any verified act of bullying and the parents or guardians of the student against whom such act was directed to a meeting to communicate to such parents or guardians the measures being taken by the school to ensure the safety of the student against whom such act was directed and to prevent further acts of bullying, (10) establish a procedure for each school to document and maintain records relating to reports and investigations of bullying in such school and to maintain a list of the number of verified acts of bullying in such school and make such list available for public inspection, and [, within available appropriations,] annually report such number to the Department of Education, [annually] and in such manner as prescribed by the Commissioner of Education, [(9)] (11) direct the development of case-by-case interventions for addressing repeated incidents of bullying against a single individual or recurrently perpetrated bullying incidents by the same individual that may include both counseling and discipline, [and (10) identify the appropriate school personnel, which may include, but shall not be limited to, pupil services personnel, responsible for taking a bullying report and investigating the complaint] (12) prohibit discrimination and retaliation against an individual who reports or assists in the investigation of an act of bullying, (13) direct the development of student safety support plans for students against whom an act of bullying was directed that address safety measures the school will

take to protect such students against further acts of bullying, (14) require the principal of a school, or the principal's designee, to notify the appropriate local law enforcement agency when such principal, or the principal's designee, believes that any acts of bullying constitute criminal conduct, (15) prohibit bullying (A) on school grounds, at a school-sponsored or school-related activity, function or program whether on or off school grounds, at a school bus stop, on a school bus or other vehicle owned, leased or used by a local or regional board of education, or through the use of an electronic device or an electronic mobile device owned, leased or used by the local or regional board of education, and (B) outside of the school setting if such bullying (i) creates a hostile environment at school for the student against whom such bullying was directed, (ii) infringes on the rights of the student against whom such bullying was directed at school, or (iii) substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school, (16) require, at the beginning of each school year, each school to provide all school employees with a written or electronic copy of the school district's safe school climate plan, and (17) require that all school employees annually complete the training described in section 10-220a, as amended by this act, or section 6 of this act. The notification required pursuant to subdivision [(7)] (8) of this subsection and the invitation required pursuant to subdivision (9) of this [section] subsection shall include a description of the response of school [staff] employees to such acts and any consequences that may result from the commission of further acts of bullying. [For purposes of this section, "bullying" means any overt acts by a student or a group of students directed against another student with the intent to ridicule, harass, humiliate or intimidate the other student while on school grounds, at a school-sponsored activity or on a school bus, which acts are committed more than once against any student during the school year. Such policies may include provisions addressing bullying outside of the school setting if it has a direct and negative impact on a student's academic performance or safety in school.]

(c) Not later than [February 1, 2009] January 1, 2012, each local and regional board of education shall [submit the policy] approve the safe school climate plan developed pursuant to this section and submit such plan to the Department of Education. Not later than [July 1, 2009, each] thirty calendar days after approval of such plan by the local or regional board of education, the board shall make such plan available on the board's and each individual school in the school district's Internet web site and ensure that [the policy] such plan is included in the school district's publication of the rules, procedures and standards of conduct for schools and in all student handbooks.

(d) On and after July 1, 2012, and biennially thereafter, each local and regional board of education shall require each school in the district to complete an assessment using the school climate assessment instruments, including surveys, approved and disseminated by the Department of Education pursuant to section 10-222h, as amended by this act. Each local and regional board of education shall collect the school climate assessments for each school in the district and submit such school climate assessments to the department.

Sec. 2. Section 10-222g of the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (*Effective July 1, 2011*):

For the purposes of section 10-222d, as amended by this act, the term "prevention and intervention strategy" may include, but is not limited to, (1) implementation of a positive behavioral interventions and supports process or another evidence-based model approach for safe school climate or for the prevention of bullying identified by the Department of Education, (2) [a school survey to determine the prevalence of bullying, (3) establishment of a bullying prevention coordinating committee with broad representation to review the survey results and implement the strategy, (4)] school rules prohibiting bullying, harassment and intimidation and establishing appropriate consequences for

those who engage in such acts, [(5)] (3) adequate adult supervision of outdoor areas, hallways, the lunchroom and other specific areas where bullying is likely to occur, [(6)] (4) inclusion of grade-appropriate bullying [education and prevention curricula](#) in kindergarten through high school, [(7)] (5) individual interventions with the bully, parents and school [\[staff\] employees](#), and interventions with the bullied child, parents and school [\[staff\] employees](#), [(8)] (6) school-wide training related to safe school climate, (7) [student peer training, education and support](#), and [(9)] (8) promotion of parent involvement in bullying prevention through individual or team participation in meetings, trainings and individual interventions.

Sec. 3. Section 10-222h of the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (*Effective July 1, 2011*):

(a) The Department of Education shall, within available appropriations, (1) [\[review and analyze the policies submitted to the department pursuant to section 10-222d, \(2\) examine the relationship between bullying, school climate and student outcomes, \(3\)\]](#) document school districts' articulated needs for technical assistance and training related to safe learning and bullying, [(4)] (2) collect information on the prevention and intervention strategies used by schools to reduce the incidence of bullying, improve school climate and improve reporting outcomes, [\[and \(5\)\] \(3\) develop or recommend a model \[policies\] safe school climate plan for grades kindergarten to twelve, inclusive, \[for the prevention of bullying\] and \(4\) in collaboration with the Connecticut Association of Schools, disseminate to all public schools grade-level appropriate school climate assessment instruments approved by the department, including surveys, to be used by local and regional boards of education for the purposes of collecting information described in subdivision \(2\) of this subsection so that the department can monitor bullying prevention efforts over time and compare each district's progress to state trends.](#) On or before February 1, 2010, [and biennially thereafter](#), the department shall, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a, submit a report on the status of its efforts pursuant to this section [including, but not limited to, the number of verified acts of bullying in the state, an analysis of the responsive action taken by school districts](#) and any recommendations it may have regarding additional activities or funding to prevent bullying in schools and improve school climate to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to education and to the select committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to children.

(b) The department may accept private donations for the purposes of this section.

Sec. 4. (NEW) (*Effective July 1, 2011*) (a) The Department of Education, in consultation with the State Education Resource Center, the Governor's Prevention Partnership and the Commission on Children, shall establish, within available appropriations, a state-wide safe school climate resource network for the identification, prevention and education of school bullying in the state. Such state-wide safe school climate resource network shall make available to all schools information, training opportunities and resource materials to improve the school climate to diminish bullying.

(b) The department may seek federal, state and municipal funding and may accept private donations for the administration of the state-wide safe school climate resource network.

Sec. 5. Subsection (a) of section 10-220a of the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (*Effective July 1, 2011*):

(a) Each local or regional board of education shall provide an in-service training program for its teachers, administrators and pupil personnel who hold the initial educator, provisional educator or