Rhode Island Safe Schools Act – Statewide Bullying Policy

Effective June 30, 2012

The Statewide Bullying Policy, known as the Safe Schools Act, was promulgated pursuant to the authority set forth in §16-21-34 of the General Laws of Rhode Island. The purpose of the Policy is to ensure a consistent and unified statewide approach to the prohibition of bullying at school.

Summary of the new RI Statewide Bullying Policy:

• Applies to all schools approved by the RI Department of Education (school districts, charter schools, career and technical schools, approved private day or residential schools and collaborative schools).

• Definition and descriptions expanded
  o Bullying expanded to include cyber-bullying.
  o Enumeration of classes (Race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression or mental, physical, or sensory disability, intellectual ability or by any other distinguishing characteristic).
  o Language aligned with US Department of Justice definition
  o Expanded definition of “at school.”

• School Climate: Provides measures that schools have to take to prevent bullying.
  o May include professional development, prevention activities, parental workshops, student assemblies.
  o Staff, students, and families model courteous behavior at school and school sponsored events.

• Clear policy guidelines on oversight and responsibility
  o The school principal, director, or head of school shall be responsible for the implementation and oversight of this bullying policy.
  o For public schools, the prevention of bullying shall be part of the school district strategic plan (§ 16-7.1-2(e)) and school safety plan (§16-21-24).
• Expansion of information dissemination of the statewide policy
  o Distributed annually to students, staff, volunteers, and parents/legal guardians.
  o Included in student codes of conduct, disciplinary policies, and student handbooks.
  o Prominently posted link on the home page of the school /district website.

• Clear requirements and procedures for students, staff, parents and guardians to report bullying, retaliation, and anonymous reporting.

• Investigation/ Response:
  o Prompt investigation of allegations.
  o When appropriate, assessment by school psychologist/social worker for victim and/or perpetrator.
  o Mandates immediate interventions in serious situations.

• Disciplinary Action – provides a range of disciplinary actions that may be taken.
  o Determined by the school/district appropriate authority.
  o Shall balance the need for accountability with the need to teach appropriate behavior.
  o Severity of the disciplinary action shall be aligned to the severity of the bullying behavior.
  o No student shall be suspended from school unless it is deemed to be a necessary consequence of the violation of this Policy.

• Social Networking - Students prohibited from accessing social networking sites in school, except for educational or instructional purposes and with the prior approval from school administration.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: When does the new statewide bullying policy take effect?
A: The RI Statewide Bullying Policy is effective June 30, 2012.

Q: Are residential schools required to adopt the Statewide Bullying Policy?
A: Yes. All school districts, charter schools, career and technical schools, approved private day or residential schools and collaborative schools are required to adopt the Statewide Bullying Policy.

Q: Can we use our existing district bullying policy?
A: All RI schools approved by the RI Department of Education must adopt the RI Statewide Bullying Policy. School districts or schools may use an existing bullying policy ONLY if your district/school policy includes all sections and language of the Statewide Bullying Policy.
Q: Do we need to adopt this policy in addition to any other school/district policies regarding bullying and harassment?
A: Yes, all school districts and schools must adopt the Statewide Bullying Policy by June 30, 2012. Section 16-21-26 of the General Laws in Chapter 16-21 entitled "Health and Safety of Pupils" was repealed upon passage of the Safe Schools Act.

Q: Is there any funding associated with this law in terms of paying teachers etc. to work on teams to make safety plans etc.?
A: No. The Safe Schools Act has no provisions for funding school safety plans. See § 16-21-24 Requirements of school safety plans, school emergency response plans, and school crisis response plans for additional information.

Q: Are school districts and schools required to provide professional development and training to students, faculty, and staff on the Statewide Bullying Policy and Internet Safety?
A: No. All school districts and schools are encouraged to provide in-service training.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Midge Sabatini, Manager, Coordinated School Health, Office of School, Community and Academic Supports, at 401-222-8952 or at Midge.Sabatini@ride.ri.gov.