

Everything you need to know about implementing the new anti-bullying law

Written by Naomi Drew

“They call me names every day and make me feel like I don’t belong. It never stops.” Her face dissolved in sobs, then the words I feared most: “I can’t face another day. Those kids who committed suicide . . . well, that’s what I’m ready to do.” This beautiful child, filled with promise, pushed to the brink by bullying at the tender age of 10.

“Shawna,” with help from her school counselor, is weathering the storm. But countless other kids are lost in despair due to bullying. According to the White House, 13 million kids are bullied each year, about a third of all students. Yet it’s not only bullied kids who suffer. *All* kids lose when bullying happens. Those who bully are more likely to end up incarcerated by age 30, according to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#). Bystanders are harmed too. “People who simply watch their peers get verbally or physically abused experience just as much, if not more, psychological distress as the actual bullying victim,” says *School Psychology Quarterly*. For these reasons and more, the Centers for Disease Control calls bullying “a major public health problem” and reports that 13.8 percent of students in grades 9-12 seriously considered suicide in the previous 12 months.

Yet many teachers don’t actually see bullying happening. It often flies under the radar, taking place in hallways, schoolyards, cafeterias, on school buses, in cyberspace, and other venues beyond the earshot of adults. Its presence is insidious, impeding learning and creating a climate of fear that can lead to depression and suicide. New Jersey still mourns the death of Rutgers freshman Tyler Clementi, whose suicide was instrumental in the drive to strengthen our pre-existing anti-bullying law. [The updated law](#), considered the toughest in the nation, was created to prevent another tragedy of this kind. It engages every member of the school community in being part of the solution, sending a strong signal to students that bullying will not be tolerated.

Students want change, too

In spite of all the mean behavior we see -- or perhaps because of it -- students also want solutions. In a survey I ran of over 2,100 students, many expressed feeling overwhelmed by the meanness of their peers, while 73 percent said kids were somewhat to very mean. They voiced a strong desire for solutions, with 80 percent saying they wanted to learn ways to end bullying, avoid fights, and get along better with peers. The vision behind the new law is to create anti-bullying climates in schools and classrooms via swift responses to bullying, plus activities, discussions, and an unwavering expectation of respect.

Implementing the new law

In this article, you'll find free anti-bullying strategies and activities you can use in your classrooms, many focused on fostering respect, which, according to Maurice Elias, director of the Social-Emotional Learning Lab at Rutgers, "is the absolute number one factor that determines the amount of bullying that goes in a school." The more respect you model, teach, expect, and reinforce, the more you'll prevent bullying and decrease the undercurrent of meanness that often disrupts learning. Doing so will hopefully make your job easier and your students' lives better.

Defining bullying

As defined by the law, harassment, intimidation or bullying (HIB) means any gesture, any written, verbal or physical act, or any electronic communication, whether it be a single incident or a series of incidents, that is reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic, such as race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. It also may be motivated by a mental, physical or sensory disability, or by any other distinguishing characteristic that takes place on school property, at any school-sponsored function, on a school bus, or off school grounds that substantially disrupts or interferes with the orderly operation of the school or the rights of other students and that:

- A reasonable person should know, under the circumstances, will have the effect of physically or emotionally harming a student or damaging the student's property, or placing a student in reasonable fear of physical or emotional harm to his person or damage to his property
- Has the effect of insulting or demeaning any student or group of students; or
- Creates a hostile educational environment for the student by interfering with a student's education or by severely or pervasively causing physical or emotional harm to the student.

Reporting bullying

The new law says that acts of harassment, intimidation, or bullying *must* be reported verbally within 24 hours, and in writing within 48. All parents must be contacted by the school, and the incident investigated by the principal or "designee" within one school day of the verbal report. Interventions and consequences are to follow, thereby showing kids that bullying will be met with a swift response. Additionally, harassment, intimidation, and bullying can warrant suspension or expulsion according to the new law.

What Schools Are Required To Do Now

The anti-bullying law requires that every N.J. school do the following starting as of Sept. 1, 2011:

- **Have an Anti-Bullying Specialist.** Principals are required to appoint a staff member for this position. It can be the guidance counselor, psychologist, or other staff member. The Anti-Bullying Specialist will head the school safety team and may also help investigate reports of bullying. Professional development training for this position will be provided by the State Department of Education.
- **Create a School Safety Team.** The purpose is to develop, foster, and maintain a positive school climate. Headed by the anti-bullying specialist, the school safety team will include the principal (or a designee), a teacher, a parent of a student, and other members determined by the principal. Professional development will be provided for members of the team.
- **Observed a “Week of Respect.”** The first Monday in October will be the beginning of every school’s Week of Respect. Age-appropriate instruction focusing on preventing harassment, intimidation, or bullying will be taught during the Week of Respect and continue throughout the school year,
- **Provide training on harassment, intimidation, bullying,** and suicide prevention to all staff members.
- **Have a clearly-defined policy that outlines consequences** and appropriate remedial actions for students who commit acts of harassment, intimidation, or bullying.
- **Have a clearly-defined policy on false reporting of HIB,** and appropriate consequences/ remedial actions should false reporting occur.
- **Report the number and nature of all incidences of HIB** for the State School Report Card data.

What teachers are required to do

It is clear in that adults have clear responsibilities that are mandated by law. They are:

- **Discuss with students the district’s harassment, intimidation, bullying policy,** stressing that bullying of any kind will not be tolerated and will be immediately reported.
- **Report any incidents of harassment intimidation, or bullying that come to your attention.**
- Refer to the definition of HIB in the accompanying sidebar to see exactly what constitutes bullying, but when it doubt, report. That way the incident can be investigated, and a determination can be made.
- **Teach bullying-prevention in your class,** something your school chooses, or something of your own choosing that fosters anti-bullying behaviors (respect, acceptance, compassion, personal responsibility). Weave the concepts into your curriculum on a regular basis so the climate in your classroom becomes antithetical to bullying.
- **Complete at least two hours of instruction** on harassment, intimidation, and bullying prevention, and two hours of suicide prevention, in each professional development period.
- **Listen to kids who say they’re being bullied, or see someone being bullied.** Many kids don’t report bullying because they believe they won’t be supported.

Yet, when kids know they'll be backed up by school staff, they feel safer reporting.

- **Take seriously and report incidences of bullying that take place off school grounds** but affect the well-being, safety, or performance of kids when they're in school. Cyberbullying is a prime example of bullying that may be initiated off school grounds yet affects kids in school.

Preventing bullying all year long

Throughout the school year the school district must provide ongoing age-appropriate instruction on preventing HIB in accordance with the core curriculum content standards. Below are some strategies to use in your classroom. Visit njea.org and click on "Issues and Political Action" for online anti-bullying resources.

Suggested strategies for elementary educators

- Start each day with a focus on respect and kindness. Have your kids say an anti-bullying pledge.
- Catch them in the act of doing things right as often as you can. Acknowledge even the smallest acts of kindness, helpfulness, consideration, plus times when kids refrain from joining in mean behavior.
- Take 20 minutes twice a week to teach lessons in compassion, respect, kindness, personal responsibility – all the character-builders, and reinforce these concepts throughout the week.
- Look for positive examples in story characters, videos, novels, and more. Talk about the choices people made – were they kind, or unkind? What was their impact on others?
- Create class projects that promote compassion, respect, and kindness.
- Have your kids role play being "upstanders" for people who are picked on. Create an anti-bullying club that anyone can join. Have members come up with school-wide activities to promote kindness and respect.
- Have your kids create poems, songs, posters about kindness, respect, and anti-bullying. Plaster your walls and hallways with them.

Suggested strategies for middle and high school educators

- As a staff, determine where and when anti-bullying will be taught: during home-room, health, or during designated time periods in other classes. Choose a time and stick with it.
- Create an anti-bullying club. One group I worked with called their club "STOP" (Stop Tormenting Other People). They created school-wide activities that helped shift the atmosphere in their large middle school from cruel to kind. If you start a club, try to get as many kids on board as possible, and seek out kids with high

social capital. Invite students who are “negative leaders” too. Acknowledge their leadership qualities and let them know the school needs their help in creating a more respectful environment. Have the group brainstorm schoolwide activities month by month.

- Create acknowledgement systems for positive behavior: bulletin boards, awards, privileges, or lunch with the principal – anything that motivates kids to be more respectful and compassionate.
- Have students role play being “upstanders” for people who are picked on.
- Have students create banners, posters, raps, poems, songs, and public service announcements that foster respect, disavow meanness.
- Use technology to promote respect. Songs and skits can be posted on YouTube, for example. For an excellent student-created anti-bullying video, go to [youtube.com/watch?v=7-X3Pu20w24](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-X3Pu20w24).

Strategies for every grade level to foster a climate of respect

- Model respect under all circumstances, including when angry.
- Call kids on put-downs and mean words.
- Never use the word “gay” in a pejorative way, and never allow kids to do this.
- Never look the other way when bullying takes place.
- Acknowledge acts of kindness and respect.
- Point out, and ask kids to point out acts of respect, compassion, and “upstander” behavior in the news, in books, in videos, and in their own lives.
- Encourage students to use put-ups, instead of put-downs. Use them yourself.
- Find ways to help kids see that it’s cooler to be kind.
- Be in touch with other schools. Share ideas. See what others are doing to create atmospheres of kindness.

A culture free of bullying

The anti-bullying law was created to help students and teachers alike. Making it work will take the commitment of all of us. Now, with so many people coming down hard on teachers, it’s critically important to remember the life-changing nature of our work. In the words of author/educator Mary Rose O’Reilly, “Second only to what happens between parent and child, what happens in the classroom determines the shape of culture and evolution of consciousness.” Imagine a culture free of bullying. What we model and teach each day can move us closer to that goal.

- [Six concepts to teach and model](#)
- [Anti-bullying resources](#)

Naomi Drew is recognized around the world for her work in conflict resolution and peacemaking. She is the award-winning author of six widely used books, and her seventh, [No Kidding About Bullying](#), was just released. Her landmark book, [Learning the Skills of](#)

[Peacemaking](#) was one of the first to introduce peacemaking into public education. The New Jersey resident's work has been featured in magazines and newspapers across the United States, including *Time*, *Parents*, and *The New York Times*. She has been a guest on syndicated radio and national TV, and has served as a parenting expert for "Classroom Close-up, NJ," NJEA's Emmy-winning public television show. Her parenting books, [Peaceful Parents, Peaceful Kids](#) and [Hope and Healing: Peaceful Parenting in an Uncertain World](#), have helped bring the skills of peacemaking to families throughout and beyond the United States. "Peaceful Parents," Drew's online newsletter has broad international readership, and her website, [LearningPeace.com](#) is a valuable resource to families and educators worldwide. Contact Drew at Naomi@LearningPeace.com.

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