

Safe School Climate Plans: Additional Bullying Requirements Due

By [Melanie Dunn](#) on Tue, Jan 17, 2012 @ 07:01 AM

It is now past the January 1, 2012 deadline for all Connecticut boards of education to approve their individual districts' Safe School Climate Plans, the comprehensive procedures to address school bullying that were imposed by last year's legislative session. The major focus of [Public Act No. 11-232, An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws](#), was to require each district to implement a Safe School Climate Plan in lieu of their formerly required bullying policies. The act defines "school climate" as "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."

While the act provided that the [State Department of Education](#) would adopt a model Safe School Climate Plan to assist districts in devising their own such plans, this has yet to happen.



The following is a review of the key components of the amended bullying laws, including additional requirements for the Safe School Climate Plans that must be in place by July 1, 2012:

- **Definition of "Bullying."** The key is repeated conduct, shown by: (A) either the repeated use by one or more students of a communication that is directed at, or refers to, another student, or (B) an act or gesture by one or more students repeatedly directed at another student that (i) causes harm or damage to property, (ii) places the student in reasonable fear of such harm or damage, (iii), creates a hostile environment at school, (iv) infringes on the student's rights at school, or (v) substantially disrupts the education process or orderly operation of the school.

- **Complaint Investigation Procedures.** Any student, parent or guardian may make a written report of bullying to any school employee (defined by the Act; see below). Once received, the Safe School Climate Specialist must supervise the investigation of the report, to be completed promptly. Within 48 hours of completion, if a verified act of bullying is found, the school must invite the parents or guardians of the student who committed the act to meet with the parents or guardians of the victim, at which the school will inform them of the measures being taken to ensure the victim's safety and to prevent further bullying. The school must document and maintain records of each such investigation report, along with a list of the number of verified acts of bullying, which shall constitute a public record. The district shall protect from retaliation any person who makes or investigates a bullying report.

Updates to Safe School Climate Plans (Due July 1, 2012)

- **Safe School Climate Coordinator.** This person should be identified in your Safe School Climate Plan as a district-wide administrator with responsibility for overseeing the Safe School Climate Specialist at each individual school.
- **Safe School Climate Specialist.** This person must be the school principal (or designee) at each school in the district, and is responsible for supervising the processing of bullying complaints
- **Safe School Climate Committee.** This committee is established by the Safe School Climate Specialist at each school, and must include at least one parent/guardian of a student enrolled in the school. The committee must receive copies of completed investigation reports, identify and address patterns of bullying, review and amend relevant school policies, make recommendations concerning the Safe School Climate Plan, provide education on bullying, and assist with data collection pertaining to bullying incidents. The act includes an exception prohibiting the parent/guardian member of this committee from taking part in any activity that may compromise student confidentiality.
- **New Responsibilities for School Employees.** Any person who has regular contact with public school students in the performance of his or her employment duties (broadly defined to include substitute teachers and contracted service providers), and who witnesses bullying or receives a report of bullying, must orally notify the Safe School Climate Specialist within 1 school day, with a written report within 2 school days. Any such person making a good faith report of bullying shall be indemnified by the board of education for any action arising from the making of such report. School employees must also attend annual training on bullying prevention strategies, including related topics such as Internet safety and youth suicide prevention.
- **Criminal Conduct.** The Safe School Climate Specialist must notify law enforcement of any bullying incidents that he or she believes may constitute "criminal conduct."

- **Cyberbullying.** The law defines cyberbullying as “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.” A mobile device, as defined by the statute, is broad enough to include video gaming devices and cameras. It’s a smart idea to have a detailed cyberbullying policy that complements your student discipline policies, as well as those policies pertaining to acceptable electronic network and equipment use by both students and staff.

Bottom Line for Educators

The deadline for amending the Safe School Climate Plans to incorporate the new bullying requirements is fast approaching. Please contact Siegel O'Connor's [Education Law attorneys](#) for specific guidance on the new school bullying laws and related issues.

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