

Columbia Public Schools (CPS)

Frequently Asked Questions about Bullying

1. *What is this new bullying law I keep hearing about?*

Bullying is not new and the goal to have schools be a safe place for all students is not new. Working with students and families when misconduct occurs has been and remains important. What is new is the updated statute RSMo 160.775, which requires school districts to have anti-bullying policies and a very specific investigation procedure in place.

To comply with the new law, CPS revised its existing Board Policy JFCF to include a broader definition of “bullying,” “cyberbullying,” and “hazing.” Additionally, the law and CPS require employees to report any instance of bullying to the principal. Although CPS has always worked to investigate bullying, the process and reporting has now been standardized across the district.

2. *What should I tell my child about bullying?*

Schools should be a safe place for everyone. Your principal, teachers and other adults at school want you to feel safe all the time. When you see bullying or feel bullied, you should know what to say, what to do and who to tell.

What to say? Stop it. I don't like this and this isn't right.

What to do? Get out of the situation as quickly as you can and go to the closest available adult.

Who to tell? You can tell the principal, a counselor, or any adult in the school you know with whom you feel comfortable reporting an uncomfortable or unsafe situation.

3. *What can I do if someone is bullying my child?*

You should contact the building principal to discuss the specifics of the situation. You may want to do this with your student as appropriate for the age of your child and the situation. You may also complete a Bullying Report Form to email or give to the building principal, which is available on the Columbia Public Schools website. During these conversations, ask what is or will be done to ensure your student is safe and supported and how you may assist at home.

4. *What happens if my child is accused of bullying?*

The school will do an investigation by working with a variety of individuals in order to have input from multiple perspectives to help reach a determination as to whether an instance of bullying occurred and whether further information is necessary. Bullying

reports are and remain internal to CPS only and unless there is a law violation that merits a report to law enforcement. As with any situation of potential misconduct, informing parents is important. Although the investigation should move ahead without interference, being partners with families to facilitate positive and productive results from any review is essential. In some cases, the student alleged to be bullying is unaware of the situation and sometimes a report of bullying is not true. Administrators use professional judgement about if and when to contact parents.

5. *What is the district doing to ensure that all students are fairly treated?*

For many reasons, some families and students are concerned that the updated law increases opportunities for unfair treatment and potentially harsh consequences. CPS has taken efforts to address these concerns. For several years, CPS has and will continue to work for fair treatment for all students. CPS is in its sixth year of Equity Training and currently has 31 Equity trainers. Every first through third year teacher is provided Equity training through the Teacher Induction program. The school district is moving toward Restorative Practices to teach students and repair relationships when misconduct occurs. These efforts are reflected in the out-of-school suspension (OSS) numbers. CPS decreased OSS from 4,253 to 1,413 per year within a five-year period. Additionally, since 2015, CPS has had an agreement with law enforcement agencies and the juvenile justice department, which has decreased referrals to law enforcement by allowing the school to address matters internally. The culture of dignity and respect for all students and families is reflected in the changing data and CPS does not expect the new law to reverse this trend.

In addition, CPS is also focused on education and prevention. CPS has anti-bullying lessons on how to be a respectful student and friend in its curriculum. There are lessons for all students as well as individual and group interventions for students as needed. Additionally, CPS is partnering with Dr. Chad Rose from the University of Missouri, whose research area is bullying, to review our processes and help us implement additional curriculum to support prosocial behavior among all students. Resources are also available through the district's U Matter program at www.umatter.us

6. *So CPS has responded to the bullying law. What about the impact of the new harassment statute?*

There has been a fear widely reported in the media that the Safe Schools Act requires incidents of assault in the third degree and first degree harassment to be reported to law enforcement, and those offenses are now felonies. For assault in the third degree, however, the new statute should have only a small effect on felony charges for students, and it should actually decrease what schools have to report to law enforcement. As noted above, the amended criminal code did make third degree assault a felony, but it changed the definition of the offense to include only more serious incidents with tangible injuries. Additionally, CPS met with law enforcement, the juvenile division and the prosecutor's office to reach an agreement regarding the reporting burden to mitigate the potential for felony charges. The form developed

indicates the steps the school is taking with the student and family to address the situation. Prosecutors have discretion in choosing whether charges are filed, and if so, which charges. Our meetings with these multiple agencies resulted in a collective agreement and commitment, which will help us manage the risks associated with the new harassment statute.

7. *What has been the experience under the law to date?*

School leaders are completing the reports and sending them to the school district's central office for review. They continue to work with students and families to educate and support situations. Families may find reassurance that there has not been any significant increase in referrals to law enforcement under the new law, in part due to the efforts to support, educate, and positively serve students.

8. *How can I stay informed?*

The best source of information is your school building administrator. However, you may also visit with Carla London, Chief Equity Officer, who may be contacted at the Aslin Administration Offices at (573) 214-3413 or clondon@cpsk12.org.