



Main story

The documentation work

In the U.S., more than one out of every five students report being bullied, according to [National Center for Educational Statistics 2016](#).

The Columbia Public School District revised its anti-bullying policy in September in response to an [updated state law](#) that requires districts to have an anti-bullying policy in place. CPS' revision improves documentation to make the process of addressing bullying incidents more consistent and systematic.

Parents, students and school staff can easily find the link to submit [an online reporting form](#) on the top left side of the official website of the district. The form asks for basic contact information of the reporter and the description of the incident, and will be sent straight to the principal of the building. According to [the new policy](#), once a report is made, it has to be investigated within 10 days. The policy document and [an FAQ section](#) concerning anti-bullying are also published on the website.

The principal of each school is designated to receive and investigate reports, and each principal must designate another professional employee to assist him.

“It’s one of the first to provide you with those types of things,” Matt Ross, the assistant principal of the Hickman High School, said.

“It gives our staff and students a more direct and streamlined way to report these incidents,” Ross said.

The policy mandates the school to communicate with both parents of a victim and parents of an offender, Ross said. By continually receiving reports and interacting with families and teachers in the investigation, Ross said he felt the school is really taking concrete steps to fight bullying.

The district started to collect the reports from February in 2017, before the whole update process of documentation finished in September. According to Carla London, chief equity officer of the district, from February to June, 434 incidents were reported, 181 of which were determined to be policy-violations; for the fall semester through Nov. 2, 101 incidents were reported, with 37 of those being determined to be policy violations.

Looking at the big initial reports number after the implementation of the paperwork, it seems that bullying has become more severe in recent years. However, London thinks of the number in a positive way: The bigger number means increasing consistency and transparency of anti-bullying system.

“Schools have already always taken bullying very seriously and conducted those investigations, but they may not have reported those numbers to us if they got the situation resolved. Now even if they get it resolved, there’s still a paperwork trail. So it will look like a larger number initially,” London said.

London said the number also indicates students’ increasing awareness of defending themselves and the willingness to step in for victims.

For investigation’s convenience, the policy defined the act of bullying, so as to provide a clear guide to determine an incident. Every school uses the same criteria.

“There are definitions that are given as far as bullying and cyberbullying and harassment, so that they don’t have to guess,” London said.

Once an incident is defined as bullying, a team of all perspectives are brought in to conduct the investigation and make the final decision, so that the result is clear and fair.

London said the biggest difficulty, and also the most important thing in the investigation, is to get all of the facts.

“Make sure that you get the whole story and hear all of the sides,” London said, “Because again, there may be more to it than what we are initially aware of.”

London said they found many times that the person who is doing the bullying had been bullied before.

Usually the bullying is just a conversation piece; the offenders don’t know how to make friends and how to use kind language with others, London added.

London said figuring out the whole story, along with providing students with some proper tools to advocate themselves and communicate with each other, is what anti-bullying is all about.

Jennifer Rukstad, the principal of Rock Bridge High School, attributes the biggest difficulty of anti-bullying to “human nature.”

“Especially in adolescence, their brains are not fully developed yet and they often respond to situations in inappropriate ways. There’s a variety of issues that feed into the psyche of a young person and especially in a group, people tend to be mean to each other,” Rukstad said. “And our biggest hurdle is to continue to educate students to treat people with kindness and respect.”

The final paperwork of an incident can be 4-5 pages besides the initial online reporting form. Parents and students will get feedback in flexible ways throughout the whole process, depending on what way they prefer, Ross said.

However, the revised policy also has been criticized because there is no specific budget to implement it.

“The system the state mandates to record and address the bullying complaints is complex and costly for the district,” said Paul Cushing, a member of Columbia Board of Education.

“The state provides no additional funds, so funding must come from other programs,” Cushing said.

Sidebar story

The cooperation of dealing with bullying

Although a new reporting and investigation system is in place, anti-bullying efforts cannot merely rely on the system. It still requires teamwork, said Carla London, the equity chief officer of the Columbia Public Schools.

“We want to get parents to partner with us,” London said.

“Parents have trusted us with their children and we are going to keep them safe, but we also need their help: If you notice that your child or teachers contacted you to say your child has a problem and is possibly bullying other kids, we need you to also have that conversation at home with him,” London said.

With the prevalence of social media, cyberbullying has been the biggest factor in bullying incidents in schools in recent years, London said. And features of social media have increased the difficulty of dealing with bullying because schools can only respond during the school day.

“It used to be that you had to have some face-to-face contact with someone, but now it can be 24 hours a day that students are calling names or just really being hateful online,” London said. “So we do ask for a partnership with parents monitor social media if your child is letting you know something that they haven’t let us know,” London added.

What’s more, teachers should still try to help students if they see a problem, said Karen Cottrell, an English-language-learner teacher at Douglass High School.

Cottrell said it is necessary to have a reporting system, but teachers should also pay more attention to students in daily life because students are likely to keep bullying incidents to themselves.

“They often hide their feelings,” Cottrell said. “What I usually need to do is to observe their expressions and body language myself, then pull them over in person, and ask them what happened.”

“Usually after I find out a bullying policy is going on, I will tell the teachers around so we can unite to help certain students,” Cottrell added.

Cottrell said she will also report to the principal if necessary, but before that she likes to have personal talk with students to see if the incident can be solved more quickly.

Students also play a part in fighting bullying.

“If I am bullied, I will tell adults like my teacher or parents at once; and if my friend is bullied, I would like to help submit the report,” said Joe Pulickal, a 17-year-old student at Rock Bridge High School.

Interview video link:

<https://youtu.be/EOIv7ZiJAd8>