

Report on Act 129 of 2012

Section 12: Secretary of Education's Advisory Council

REPORT
March 2014

**Report/Recommendations to the House
and Senate Committees on Education**

Submitted by Secretary of Education

Rebecca Holcombe



Background

Act No. 129 of 2012 directed the Secretary of the Agency of Education (AOE) to establish an advisory council to “review and coordinate school and statewide activities relating to the prevention of and response to harassment, hazing and bullying.” The council is tasked with reporting on their progress annually in January to the House and Senate Education Committees.

By statute, the council must include members from the Vermont Principals’ Association; the Vermont School Boards Association; the Vermont Superintendents Association; the Vermont National Education Association; the Vermont Human Rights Commission; the Vermont Independent Schools Association and other members selected by the Secretary, at least one of whom is a current secondary school student who has witnessed or experienced harassment, hazing or bullying in the school environment. With respect to student members, two students from Washington County were appointed (Montpelier High School, U-32 High School) for the 2013-2014 academic year. In addition to Secretary Rebecca Holcombe, the current membership of the Council is as follows:

Chair, Tracey Tsugawa, Civil Rights Investigator, VT Human Rights Commission

Statutorily designated members:

Ken Page, Executive Director, VT Principals’ Association

Nicole Mace, Associate Director for Legal Services, VT School Boards Association

Jeff Francis, Executive Director, VT Superintendents Association

Jeff Fannon, General Counsel, VT-NEA

Mill Moore, Executive Director, VT Independent Schools Association

Tomás Rogel, Montpelier High School

Alayna Badeau, U-32 High School

Additional Secretary appointments:

Dr. Charles E. Memusi Johnson, Safe Schools Coordinator, VT Department of Education

Kim Brittenham, Community Access Coordinator, VT Center for Independent Living

Kathy Johnson, Independent Consultant

Dana Kaplan, Education & Statewide Field Manager, Outright Vermont

Curtiss Reed, Jr., Executive Director, VT Partnerships for Fairness and Diversity

Henri Sparks, Equity Director, Burlington School District

Lucie Garand, Parent, Government Relations Specialist, Downs Rachlin Martin PLLC

Vision/Values Statement

The Harassment, Hazing, and Bullying Advisory Council envisions inclusive, healthy, and collaborative learning environments for all Vermont schools that are free of bullying, hazing, and harassment. We value multicultural learning environments and school communities free of prejudice and discrimination where all students and adults feel welcome, respected, safe, and empowered to promote fairness and equality on behalf of themselves and others.

Work of the Council during 2013

The council meets every other month with additional work group meetings and activities in between full council meetings. Minutes and audiotapes of the councils meetings are posted on the Agency's [website](#).

Listening Tour 2013:

In order to make well-informed recommendations, the council felt it was crucial to gather information and feedback from students from around the state about what is happening in schools, what is working and not working in terms of current strategies to address hazing, harassment, and bullying, and what adults can do differently to improve how we respond to and address these kinds of incidents. To that end, a Listening Tour was conducted in October 2013, with groups of council members traveling to five schools in Winooski, Newport, Hartford, Brattleboro, and Brandon to meet with and hear from middle and high school students.

The event provided insight into student experiences and perspectives on bullying and harassment in Vermont schools. The council hopes to repeat this activity on an annual basis, with a new set of schools each year, and hopes to engage in a similar activity to gather information and feedback from school staff. Some key findings and issues are included at the end of this report.

Data collection work group:

After reviewing data from recent national surveys and examining the limited data collected in Vermont, the data collection work group emphasized the need to develop a more **comprehensive method for collecting information about the prevalence of hazing, harassment, and bullying incidents as well as about school climate issues** in

our schools, how schools respond to these incidents and issues, and what strategies are most effective.

In addition, the data collection work group noted the need for a **centralized, accessible source of contact information for every Designated Employee in every Vermont school**. Currently, no resources are available to build and maintain this kind of database.

Finally, this work group began discussions about exploring how the state currently investigates and collects and distributes information about **teen suicides**.

Student leadership work group:

The student leadership work group focused its attention on preparing for the Vermont Youth Congress, which took place on November 7, 2013. **The Youth Congress was a one-day, statewide conference on bullying and harassment** supported by the Anti-Defamation League and the Agency of Education. The event was very successful. Over 435 students and educators representing more than 40 Vermont schools attended the conference, which included 28 youth-lead workshops on a range of topics related to bullying and harassment in schools.

Staff development work group:

The staff development work group focused its efforts in three areas:

- **Training for school bus drivers:** In conjunction with the Department of Motor Vehicles (which is responsible for training provided to bus drivers), the work group provided information and feedback on the bus driver training manual and curriculum, provided a workshop for trainers who train bus drivers throughout the state, and drafted bus contract language (in conjunction with VSBIT) about requiring training for school bus drivers about responding to and reporting incidents of bullying and harassment on school buses. Work group members have been invited back to conduct the training for trainers on an annual basis.
- **Teacher education program requirements and curriculum:** To ensure specific requirements related to bullying and harassment are included in teacher education programs, the work group met with Agency of Education staff to review and provide feedback on the ROPA (Results Oriented Program Approval) standards and evaluation rubric, which

govern professional development standards. Work group members also met with faculty in the teacher education program at UVM to begin conversations about including bullying and harassment prevention information into the curriculum and providing professional development for UVM faculty on this topic; presentations about bullying and harassment in teacher education courses started in the fall of 2013 and the goal is to eventually provide the same kind of support for all teacher education and administrator licensure programs in Vermont.

- **In-service training for school staff:** Given the dearth of trainers available statewide to work in schools to provide in-service training, work group members began exploring the development of a **train-the-trainer program** to build a cadre of school personnel throughout the state who could provide basic bullying and harassment training to students, staff, and parents.

General recommendations:

The Advisory Council has no specific recommendations for the legislature at this time other than to note the ongoing need for funding to support continuing statewide efforts to provide resources and training for schools.

This report is preliminary, and cannot be used on its own for drawing conclusions with regard to collective action. However, the charge of this report, e.g., “to gather information and feedback from students from around the state” is a useful step toward understanding the dynamics of bullying, hazing, and harassment.

In addition, teachers, staff, families, and community are key players in a whole school climate framework, and need to be included to attain the results we desire in changing negative behavior.

More schools and students need to be included to reflect the differences among schools and communities throughout Vermont.

Possible advisory council outcomes/products over time:

- Legislative recommendations
- Creation of an information and resource clearinghouse for schools

- Recommendations related to the implementation of a consistent collection mechanism and analysis of information about bullying, harassment, and school climate in Vermont schools
- Recommendations related to the development of additional pre-service and in-service professional development opportunities and resources for schools

Addendum:

Listening Tour summary notes of key issues raised by students

Bullying and harassment in general:

- Bullying and harassment are occurring in classrooms, in the hallways, in the lunchroom, on school buses, online, in athletic settings, off campus in the community.
- Levels of safety varied from school to school: some schools had a lot of physical violence, some schools had very little physical violence; students were able to identify distinct safe places and safe adults in their schools, but not all students felt they had a safe adult to go to; some areas of schools need more adult supervision.
- The majority of students experience or witness cyberbullying and this seems to happen more than in-person bullying and harassment now.
- Student knowledge of to whom to report incidents varied from school-to-school.

Adults are perceived as not being fair or responsive:

- Adults have favorites and some students (perpetrators who are favorites) get off with little to no consequences while others (non-favorites) are punished more harshly.
- Some students also felt adults were too quick to judge either because they did not get all sides of the story or because a student had an older sibling or a friend with a reputation (guilt by association).
- Some adults are bullies and are judgmental, make unkind remarks and are disrespectful towards students.
- Some adults simply do not respond and ignore incidents; some adults want to but do not know how to respond effectively.
- Many students believe that often there is little to no follow-up to incidents, consequences are ineffective, and then things get worse.

What does not work or help:

- Restorative justice when adults run the program. Students want to be held accountable by their peers.
- Out of schools suspensions and detentions, written “plans”. Students don’t learn anything and behaviors do not change.
- Having to sit down and talk with the perpetrator in the guidance counselor’s office.
- Telling students to talk it out or walk away.
- Forcing students into counseling, especially if the student doesn’t have a relation of trust with the counselor.

What does work or help; suggestions for change:

- **Teacher advisory groups** are helpful (when the teacher knows how to run them; provide training for teachers about how to run effective advisory groups).
- It helps when teachers take the time to reach out and **develop caring relationships with students**; this fosters trust and a sense of safety for students.
- Teachers who **intervene and stop bullying immediately** and **check in with targets** after an incident occurs make a difference; provide training for teachers to learn how to effectively, fairly, and consistently intervene in bullying and harassment.
- It helps when teachers set **clear, consistent behavioral expectations** in class and then hold students accountable to those expectations.
- Provide **help and support for bullies**, understand why they are bullying other students.
- **Smaller classes**; students feel safer in smaller classrooms.
- Put more **adults in trouble spots**: hallways, cafeteria, etc.
- Use **social consequences** (e.g., a student can’t go to a dance, has to sit out of practice and/or games, etc.) vs. detentions or suspensions; give students an educational assignment related to bullying or harassment as a consequence.
- Work on developing **a sense of overall community in the school** by mixing up students across grades and differences and pay more attention to all students, not just the ones who are doing well; all students need to know they are valuable.

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- Teaching **peer ally behavior** and creating **peer mentoring relationships** between students are very helpful.

** END **