Howard County
Public School System

BOARD OF EDUCATION OF HOWARD COUNTY
MEETING AGENDA ITEM

TITLE:	Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Harassment Report	**DATE:**	April 25, 2019
PRESENTER(S):	Lisa J. Davis, Director of Program Innovation & Student Well-Being James LeMon, Executive Director of Community, Parent, & School Outreach		

Strategic Call To Action Alignment: Inclusive Relationships: Students' mental health and social-emotional learning are nurtured through skill development, collaborative dialogue and a restorative culture in our classrooms and communities.

OVERVIEW:

As part of its commitment to school community building and restorative justice, the HCPSS has put in place data-driven policies and procedures to identify and eliminate bullying in schools and address the harm that bullying has already caused. Continuous improvement is always needed, however, and the HCPSS will be enhancing its bullying identification and prevention systems with new, more consistent and user-friendly reporting and data analysis. HCPSS will also engage in ongoing administrator and staff professional development, continue incorporation of social-emotional learning (SEL) at all grade levels, strongly emphasize student voice and agency, and strengthen partnerships with family and community members to reduce bullying and the harms it engenders.

~~RECOMMENDATION~~/FUTURE DIRECTION:

Next steps focus on continuing to expand restorative justice, school-based mental health services, and quality SEL first instruction, with an additional focus on professional learning. HCPSS will continue also continue to partner with families and community members and include student voice in discussion of bullying and supportive school environments.

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Overview

The Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) *Strategic Call to Action* states that the mission of HCPSS is to ensure "academic success and social-emotional well-being for each student in an inclusive and nurturing environment that closes opportunity gaps." Crucial to ensuring student success and well-being is the eradication of bullying in Howard County Public Schools. Per Policy 1060: Bullying, Cyberbullying, Harassment or Intimidation, "The Board of Education is committed to providing a safe, engaging, and supportive school and work environment that values diversity and commonality. The Board is also committed to fostering a climate where individuals are valued and their safety and rights are protected. The Board prohibits acts of bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, or intimidation because they compromise the learning environment and well-being of students, employees, and community."

As part of its commitment to school community building and restorative justice, the HCPSS has put in place data-driven policies and procedures to identify and eliminate bullying in schools and address the harm that bullying has already caused. Continuous improvement is always needed, however, and the HCPSS will be enhancing its bullying identification and prevention systems with new, more consistent and user-friendly reporting and data analysis. HCPSS will also engage in ongoing administrator and staff professional development, continue incorporation of social emotional learning (SEL) at all grade levels, strongly emphasize student voice and agency, and strengthen partnerships with family and community members to reduce bullying and the harms it engenders.

Review of Bullying Policy & Data

A recently published report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association Pediatrics* presented chilling data. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 10 to 18 year olds. Doctors Burstein, Agostino, and Greenfield (2019) analyzed 2007 to 2015 reports from the National Hospital Ambulatory Medical Care Survey (NHAMCS) Emergency Department (ED) database and found a significant increase in the rate at which children aged five to 18 have been treated for suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. In 2007, the percentage of all pediatric ED visits which met the criteria for suicidal ideation or suicide attempt was 2.17%; this climbed to 3.5% by 2015, a 61% increase. These results support earlier findings that the number of ED visits for attempted suicide and self-inflicted injury at all ages more than doubled from 1993-1996 (244,000) to 2005-2008 (538,000), with visits most common in patients aged 15-19 years (Ting et al., 2012).

While the authors did not specifically identify bullying as a reason for this sharp increase, legislators have linked the two in an effort to save student lives. In Maryland, the Safe Schools Reporting Act of 2005 requires all county boards of education and the Baltimore City Board of

School Commissioners to report incidents of harassment or intimidation against public school students. On February 24, 2009 the Maryland State Board of Education formally adopted a model anti-bullying policy. All twenty-four Maryland local education agencies (LEAs) were required to submit copies of their own anti-bullying policies by July 1, 2009. In October 2013, the State of Maryland enacted Grace's Law which recognized the rise in cyber-bullying, and made repeated, malicious cyber-abuse of a minor a criminal offense punishable by fine and/or imprisonment.

Since the implementation of the Safe Schools Reporting Act, Maryland has compiled LEA bullying incidents in an annual report. The 2018 report covered school year 2016-2017 and showed a statewide increase in reports of bullying incidents of 32.75% over school year 2015-2016. The number of reported incidents per 1,000 students in Howard County increased from 5.2 in 2014-2015 to 6.7 in 2015-2016 to 9.7 in 2016-2017, mirroring trends in many other school systems (e.g., Montgomery, Prince George's, Anne Arundel, Baltimore City). Among all 24 LEAs, HCPSS had the 14th highest incidents per 1,000 students in SY14-15, the 12th highest in SY15-16, and the 6th highest in SY16-17.

Two significant caveats must go along with this data, however. The first is that increased attention paid to bullying, especially paired with calls to report all bullying incidents where one is a victim or a bystander may cause a marked increase in reported incidents that does not reflect an actual increase in bullying behavior. This would be true across all LEAs that have emphasized reporting and is likely one cause for the statewide increase in reported incidents. Second, in responding to County Council and Board inquiries concerning bullying data, HCPSS staff have found inconsistencies in how bullying data was aggregated and reported through Synergy. In some instances this likely led to misreporting incidents in certain categories and incidents overall. It is thought that these data problems have existed for several years, unfortunately leading to inaccurate data being reported to the state and reflected in the annual reports. This is especially true for the data used to determine the percentage of incident reports that were found to be false allegations. The most recent state report states that the HCPSS had a 42.6% false reporting rate in 2014-2015, a 34.7% rate in 2015-2016, and a 34.5% rate in 2016-2017. These rates are drastically higher than the average 5-10% rate reported by other LEAs. Initial analysis of the raw data from SY16-17 to SY18-19 suggests a rate of 7-10.5% is much more likely, and in line with other counties' reports. Staff are currently conducting a careful review of this data and working to determine why Synergy aggregated incidents incorrectly. Lessons learned from this analysis will be used by staff from Data Warehouse, Communications, and Program and Innovation and Student Well-Being in the development of a new bullying reporting system to ensure accurate reporting going forward.

When this school year's data is examined, data which seems to be free from prior systemic errors, one finds that from 9/5/18 through 4/1/19, 884 incidents of bullying, harassment, or

intimidation have been reported in the HCPSS. Eighty-nine (89), or approximately 10%, of these incidents were determined to be false allegations. Broken down by grade bands:
- Elementary Schools had a total of 298 reported incidents
- Middle Schools had 350 reported incidents
- High Schools had 221 reported incidents
- Homewood had 15 reported incidents.

Using the September 30, 2018 official enrollment numbers, the number of incidents equates to approximately 1.12 incidents per 100 elementary school students, 2.61 incidents per 100 middle school students, and 1.25 incidents per 100 high school students. Broken down by category:
- 195 (22%) of all incidents involved teasing, name-calling, making critical remarks, or threatening, in person or by other means
- 144 (16%) involved any bullying, harassment, or intimidation that involves physical aggression
- 114 (13%) involved demeaning and making the victim of jokes

Looking specifically at incidents that are also violations of Policy 1010 - Anti-Discrimination, one finds that:
- 10 (1.13%) were categorized as racial harassment
- 12 (1.36%) were related to a student's perceived sexual orientation
- 15 (1.70%) were related to a student's disability.

While these represent only a small portion of all reported incidents, that presence of bullying related to race, sexual orientation, or disability is disappointing. However, these represent significant decreases from prior school years, with the SY18-19 number of incidents related to a student's perceived sexual orientation likely to be half that of the prior school year (approximately 15 projected for all of SY18-19 vs. 30 for SY17-18).

While an emphasis on reporting all incidents of bullying, harassment, or intimidation will lead to an increase in reported incidents it is critical in addressing the causes and characteristics of bullying behavior and increasing safety and well-being for all students.

Reporting and Investigation

Sprigeo/Online Reporting Form
Sprigeo is an online application that allows stakeholders to report incidents of bullying or unsafe activities confidentially or anonymously. Students, families, staff, and community members can access Sprigeo from their website or an iphone, ipad, or android app to report an unsafe situation.

Three central office staff members have Sprigeo accounts. They receive the notifications each time a Sprigeo report is entered. One staff member sends the Sprigeo report to the school

principal with the following note: "This is a Sprigeo report. Please be sure to follow up on this report of alleged bullying, cyberbullying, harassment or intimidation as outlined in Policy 1060. The information from this report and the investigation information should be entered in Synergy as you would if it was a hard copy of the bullying report."

While Sprigeo has proven to be a popular way for stakeholders to report bullying and other incidents, and while it has provided some useful data (e.g., March is the month with the most submissions, a plurality of incidents (41.3%) occur at the middle school level), Sprigeo does not provide HCPSS with all the information essential for conducting an investigation, nor does it conform to State reporting standards. Staff from the HCPSS Multimedia Communications office have begun the process of gathering feedback and putting together the specifications for a new online bullying form that will reside on the HCPSS website. This new form will feature a user-friendly interface, and will allow for confidential and anonymous reporting of bullying incidents. Creating the new form in-house will ensure that HCPSS is able to capture relevant details critical for investigations, and to more accurately report data to the State. The new form will also be able to be translated into multiple languages, offering more students and families the ability to report bullying incidents. The privacy of any user completing the form will be safeguarded. Information collected will flow to the Synergy application, and will be purged from the HCPSS website. Connecting the form to Synergy will better enable staff to ensure validity of data for analysis and reporting and increase efficiency for principals who are required to complete separate bullying forms within that application.

Investigation & Response

When an incident occurs students, families, and/or staff should submit a completed form to a school administrator in person, by mail or electronically by email, or report through Sprigeo (or its replacement online reporting form). Please note, that the processes detailing the use of the replacement online reporting form will be communicated with all stakeholders and the Board. Upon receipt of a BHI reporting form or any other report of bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, or intimidation, the Principal/Designee will begin the investigation process within two school days and implement corrective actions aligned with the BHI Incident School Investigation Form and the Student Code of Conduct, as needed. Every effort will be made to notify the parent of the possible target/victim of the report immediately, but no later than within one school day. Parents of the accused will be notified of the investigation process as soon as is practical given the nature of the investigation. All information, known or suspected, is entered into the HCPSS data management system. The school administrator will conduct an investigation of the complaint, which may include interviewing the complainant and witnesses along with the opportunity to present witnesses and other evidence.

The school administrator will provide notice to both sets of parents in writing of the outcome of the complaint and the basis for the decision within thirty (30) calendar days of receipt of

complaint by the school administrator, excluding extenuating circumstances. Due to confidentiality, specific disciplinary corrective measures are not to be discussed. After the school administrator finishes investigating the alleged incident, if bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, and/or intimidation has been found, appropriate steps will be taken to try to preclude such action from occurring again. The most common corrective actions that are taken are a conference between school administrative or instructional staff or Student Support Services personnel and the offending student, a phone call to parents to discuss the incident, a warning to the student to cease such behavior, a conference between school staff and Student Support Services and the offending student's family, a letter to the parents documented the incident, the development of a support plan that includes a "go to" adult in the school, separation of the student from their victim to include transfer or change in schedule, school counseling, and detention. Out-of-school suspensions are reserved for only the most serious incidents to guarantee the safety of students.

In addition to these more immediate consequences, staff will continue to work with involved students to restore the relationship. Separate conferences with the target/victim and offender will occur within two weeks after the investigation to determine whether the bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, or intimidation has continued and whether additional consequences need to be implemented. A Student Support Services staff member will provide appropriate counseling support to the target/victim and accused within two weeks. If during the counseling session(s) it is determined that the bullying, cyberbullying, harassment or intimidation continues, it will be reported to the school administrator. As needed, schools will collaborate with community and mental health resources to assist students who continue to be involved in bullying behaviors as perpetrators, targets/victims, or witnesses, and whose mental or physical health, safety, or academic performance has been impaired. Communication with the parents of the target/victim and offender will continue until the issue is resolved.

HCPSS's Plan to Eradicate Bullying

The HCPSS is committed to establishing and maintaining a positive, safe, and inclusive learning environment for all children. While procedures are in place to fairly and consistently address bullying incidents, the most effective approach is to prevent such instances from occurring in the first place. To this end, HCPSS is leveraging existing professional learning, restorative justice, school-based mental health, and SEL initiatives to create safe and nurturing environments and strong school communities where bullying has no place. HCPSS is joined in these efforts by its students, families, and community partners to ensure students are supported both inside and outside the classroom.

Professional Development & Curriculum

Each summer, staff in School Management and Instructional Leadership (SMIL) update all school administrators on HCPSS Policy 1060 - Bullying, Cyberbullying, Harassment, or Intimidation, and remind administrators of how the policy is central to creating safe and nurturing learning environments. Throughout the school year, SMIL staff provide technical assistance to their area's school administrators on matters related to bullying and discipline.

To ensure that strategic and intentional steps are being taken throughout the school system that addresses bullying and other behavior concerns, all 77 HCPSS schools develop and implement a school improvement plan (SIP) that addressed student behavior and discipline. A central component of each school's SIP is identifying root causes and developing specific strategies to address the causes. Additionally, school administrative teams assess the fidelity of implementation of identified strategies as well as use quantitative data to measure progress toward the identified targets. Central office leaders work closely with school-based administrators regarding all phases of the school improvement plan including development, implementation, and refinement. The strategies identified in school improvement planning follow a multi-tiered system of supports, where all students need some support and some students need more support.

All school-based and central office staff are required annually to review the Safe Schools module on bullying. Elementary teachers of record and secondary health teachers are provided additional professional learning on integrating anti-bullying lessons into the health curriculum. Lessons on preventing and intervening in bullying are provided to all students in pre-kindergarten through grade. Below are a sample of the health education objectives specifically related to bullying prevention:

Elementary Objectives:

- Explore effective communication skills
- Describe and demonstrate the difference between telling and tattling
- Identify and describe human social needs
- Identify appropriate behaviors for potentially dangerous situations (including internet safety)
- Identify teasing and bullying as harassment
- Examine the effects of teasing and bullying from the perspective of the bully and the victim

Middle School Objectives:

- Apply prevention and intervention strategies to situations that involve bullying and teasing to include cyber bullying
- Differentiate between healthy and unhealthy use of technology through internet, email, websites, instant messaging, and telephone/cell phone use
- Examine the impact of bullying on the individual, family, and community
- Choose conflict resolution skills to prevent violence
- Critique strategies for prevention and intervention of safety issues

High School Objectives:

- Analyze factors that influence violent behaviors – Bullying, child abuse, date rape, dating violence, cyber-bullying, gangs, sexual harassment
- Differentiate between healthy and unhealthy use of technology through internet, email, websites, instant messaging, and telephone/cell phone use
- Assess conflict resolution strategies that promote and sustain interpersonal relationships.
- Practice assertive communication in relation to personal safety
- Apply strategies to prevent injuries and violence

Elementary classroom teachers have also received professional learning how bullying can be reduced through the social-emotional learning (SEL) program that has been implemented this year. This program supports direct instruction that helps students to develop social-emotional learning competencies. Increased student mastery of such skills correlates with increased academic and personal success. These skills include:

- Self-Awareness: accurately identifying one's own thoughts and feelings, strengths and limitations, and motivating values and recognizing how they influence choices and actions.
- Social Awareness: identifying and understanding the thoughts and feelings of others, being able to understand and empathize with others from different backgrounds, respecting rights, and understanding the strength of diversity.
- Self-Management: establishing and working toward short- and long-term goals, and regulating one's own thoughts, emotions, and behaviors so that they support rather than interfere with efforts to achieve academic, personal, and professional goals.
- Responsible Decision Making: generating, implementing, and evaluating informed solutions to problems based on ethical standards and motivating values, and assuming responsibility for personal decisions and behaviors and their consequences.
- Relationship Skills: communication, listening, and negotiation skills used to establish and maintain healthy and positive connections with diverse individuals and groups and to negotiate conflict in a constructive fashion.

Restorative Practices

Restorative justice is a philosophy that emphasizes leveraging the relationships among community members to address inappropriate behavior. Restorative practices build healthy relationships between students and staff, as well as among adults within the school community. In schools that embrace restorative justice, educators greet students, ensure they are invested partners in the learning community, and are regularly seen having restorative conversations as the primary response to behavior which negatively impacts community relationships. These practices help prevent bullying behavior and help restore relationships if bullying has occurred.

Community-building is given high priority. The tone and voice-levels of educators should reflect a caring and supportive environment where staff and students are educational partners. All

members of the school community need to be comfortable discussing the impact race, ethnicity, and other characteristics have in decision-making and conflict. Students, their families, and educators have a voice in school policies and procedures, which are designed in response to student needs.

Mental Health Supports

HCPSS promotes the mental health and wellness of each student to help develop their unique strengths, abilities, and characteristics and move them towards academic and career success and personal well-being. A student who feels connected to adults and peers in their school is more likely to have healthy outcomes and is more likely to ask for help when they are experiencing mental health issues. Howard County Public School System has expanded mental health services through adding social workers and community providers expanding increase mental health coverage to 28 schools this year. Additionally, community relationships are developed to further support students and families.

Community Engagement

Principals ensure that collaboration occurs with families and the community by informing parents about the prevalence, causes and consequences of bullying and its impact on public health. This information can be communicated through newsletters, PTA presentations, parent information nights, and other school activities. Administrators can also support and nurture student-based anti-bullying initiatives, such as the Atholton High School Bully-Free Forever Club which uses peer support to reduce bullying and to assist those who have been harmed by such behavior.

During the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school year, the HCPSS partnered with the Community Advisory Council, PTA Council of Howard County, Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee, the Council of Elders and the NAACP of Howard County to hold four community forums to discuss effective school discipline. Discussion focused on discipline practices and disparities in assigning consequences for prohibited behavior. Bullying, intimidation, and harassment were part of the larger conversation about how to reduce bias in addressing behavior concerns. Working with the community to support student well-being and effective discipline is a key part of the work of the HCPSS.

Next Steps

A team representing the Division of Communication, Community & Workforce Engagement, Program Innovation and Student Well-Being, Community, Parent and School Outreach, and Information Technology has begun work on the new online bullying reporting form and correcting and expanding data reporting through Synergy. Staff will be aligning the online form with the Bullying Harassment or Intimidation (BHI) Reporting form and will be updating both

forms to provide information that allows administrators to more effective investigate reported incidents. Once the revised paper and online forms are complete, staff will receive training on data entry and report generation through the new system.

Staff in School Management and Instructional Leadership will continue to work with school administrators to increase fidelity in reporting and consistency in school responses to bullying incidents. School administrators and Student Services staff will strengthen community partnerships to ensure that student concerns around bullying are taken seriously and effectively addressed both within schools and without.

Conclusion

The Howard County Public School System is committed to ensuring that every student achieves academic excellence in an inspiring, engaging, and supportive environment. But, the school system cannot do this work alone. The HCPSS depends on students, parents/guardians, families, and community partners to support expectations that no child is bullied, intimidated, or harassed. By necessity, a supportive school environment is one where bullying, intimidation, and harassment behaviors are reduced and eventually eradicated. HCPSS is leveraging existing initiatives and developing new tools to prevent and address bullying in all 77 schools to create safe and nurturing learning experiences for all students.

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