

New school safety rules

By Jane Whiting

The topic of school bullying is currently a hot-button issue in Ottawa. With the knowledge that an estimated one in every three students are victims of bullying and harassment at school, which can affect their health, mental well-being and academic success, the Ontario government has put new rules into effect to make schools safer and help students achieve their full potential.

What are the new safety rules about? In February, Ontario became the first province in Canada to require all school staff to report serious student incidents, including bullying, to the principal. As part of the province's Keeping Our Kids Safe at School Act, school principals are also required to contact the parents of victims and aggressors in these situations.

How does this ruling improve the existing Act? According to the Ministry of Education, the new reporting and responding requirements of the Act build on the safe schools' strategy in the ongoing efforts to make schools safer for students and staff. The legislation explains what must happen when students are involved in a serious incident or inappropriate student behaviour, and clarifies how all school board employees must handle it. It addresses the reporting gap between principals, teachers and parents and requires school staff to respond to inappropriate, disrespectful behaviour among students, as well as activities which can lead to suspension and expulsion.

What does the new rule mean for students? It will help provide a positive school climate with a safe learning and teaching environment, which is essential for student success in school. The school staff are required to deal directly with cases that involve unacceptable student behaviour such as racist, sexual, sexist or homophobic comments, uttering threats and slurs, jokes and graffiti, as well as activities that could lead to suspension and expulsion. Such cases must be reported to the principal, and the school must ensure that victims receive the support they need, such as counselling or referral to child and youth services.

How does this help parents? It ensures that parents are kept informed about serious incidents that affect their children, and they will know if their child is a victim of disrespectful behaviour or bullying. Parents should feel more secure

knowing that schools must respond to such cases and the principal will be involved in all situations that have a negative impact on school staff and students.

What is involved in the reporting process? In the fact sheet, Keeping our Kids Safe at School: Reporting and Responding to Incidents, the ministry explains the new legislation in more detail. It states that all school board employees, including vice-principals, teachers and educational assistants, and all non-teaching staff, such as administrative, custodial staff and school bus drivers, are required to report in writing to their principal any behaviour that can lead to suspension or expulsion that occurs at school, at school-related activities or off school property where it has a negative impact on school climate. The principal determines what disciplinary action, if any, is required and will inform the parents or guardian of a suspended student, an aggressor and/or a victim.

How will school staff respond to an incident? All school staff are expected to identify inappropriate behaviour and ask for it to stop. They should explain why it is not acceptable and make it clear what behaviour is required to create an environment where all students feel safe and welcome. Staff must respond to all incidents, unless doing so would cause immediate physical harm to themselves, a student or any other person. In these cases they are expected to report the incident to the principal as soon as it is safe to do so.

What kind of support do students receive? School staff who work directly with students are required to support all students, including those who either instigate or are victims of serious student incidents. They will provide contact information about professional supports – such as public health units, child and youth workers, help-phone lines – or other community agencies that offer the appropriate type of confidential support. This could include, for example, a sexual assault centre, Kids Help Phone or the Lesbian Gay Bi Trans Youth Offers Line. They will also provide those students wishing to discuss such issues as healthy relationships, gender identity and sexuality with contact information about professional supports available in their community.

To learn more about the Keeping Our Kids Safe at School Act, and the new school safety rules, visit www.ontario.ca/safeschools. For more specific information, contact your school principal or school board.

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