

Narratives for Change: Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Practice

An Analysis of Bullying, Hazing and Harassment in Vermont Schools



A Policy Brief

The Challenge

Every student deserves to feel safe at school. Yet statewide data and student narratives reveal that bullying and harassment remain persistent realities for many Vermont students. While Vermont has established policies to address these issues, students continue to report inconsistent responses, barriers to reporting, and environments where harm often goes unaddressed until it has already escalated.

The findings suggest that Vermont's challenge is not simply the existence of bullying. It is the gap between policy and practice, and the continued reliance on systems that respond after harm occurs rather than preventing it.

At a Glance

EVIDENCE	WHAT WE LEARNED	WHAT VERMONT CAN DO
21% of Vermont high school students reported being bullied.	Bullying and harassment are systemic, not isolated incidents.	Strengthen statewide accountability and oversight.
34% reported poor mental health.	Current systems often emphasize compliance over prevention.	Invest in prevention, mental health, and school climate.
1,260 harassment incidents were reported in 2024.	Students frequently describe inconsistent responses and fear retaliation after reporting.	Improve reporting systems, transparency, and implementation.

Key Finding

This report combines statewide administrative data, student surveys, and firsthand narratives to examine not only **how often** bullying occurs, but **how students experience institutional responses**.

Across every source of evidence, one conclusion emerges:

Bullying and harassment are not simply student discipline issues. They are indicators of broader challenges involving school climate, institutional capacity, accountability, and prevention.

Why It Matters

The consequences extend beyond individual incidents. Students describe anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, declining academic engagement, and school avoidance. For many, reporting bullying does not restore safety. It often reinforces the belief that seeking help will not change the outcome.

The report also finds that Vermont already has examples of schools successfully improving climate through prevention-focused approaches. The challenge is ensuring that these practices become the statewide standard rather than isolated successes.

The Path Forward

The report recommends a coordinated statewide strategy that:

- ▶ **Strengthens accountability** through H.130, statewide leadership, and independent review.
- ▶ **Improves transparency** through stronger data systems and implementation standards.
- ▶ **Invests in prevention** by expanding restorative practices, school climate initiatives, and school-based mental health supports.
- ▶ **Builds trust** through safe reporting systems and protections against retaliation.
- ▶ **Centers students and families** as partners in shaping school safety policy.

The Bottom Line

Vermont already has the knowledge and many of the tools needed to improve school safety.

The question is no longer whether bullying and harassment require attention.

The question is whether Vermont is prepared to move from reacting to harm toward preventing it.