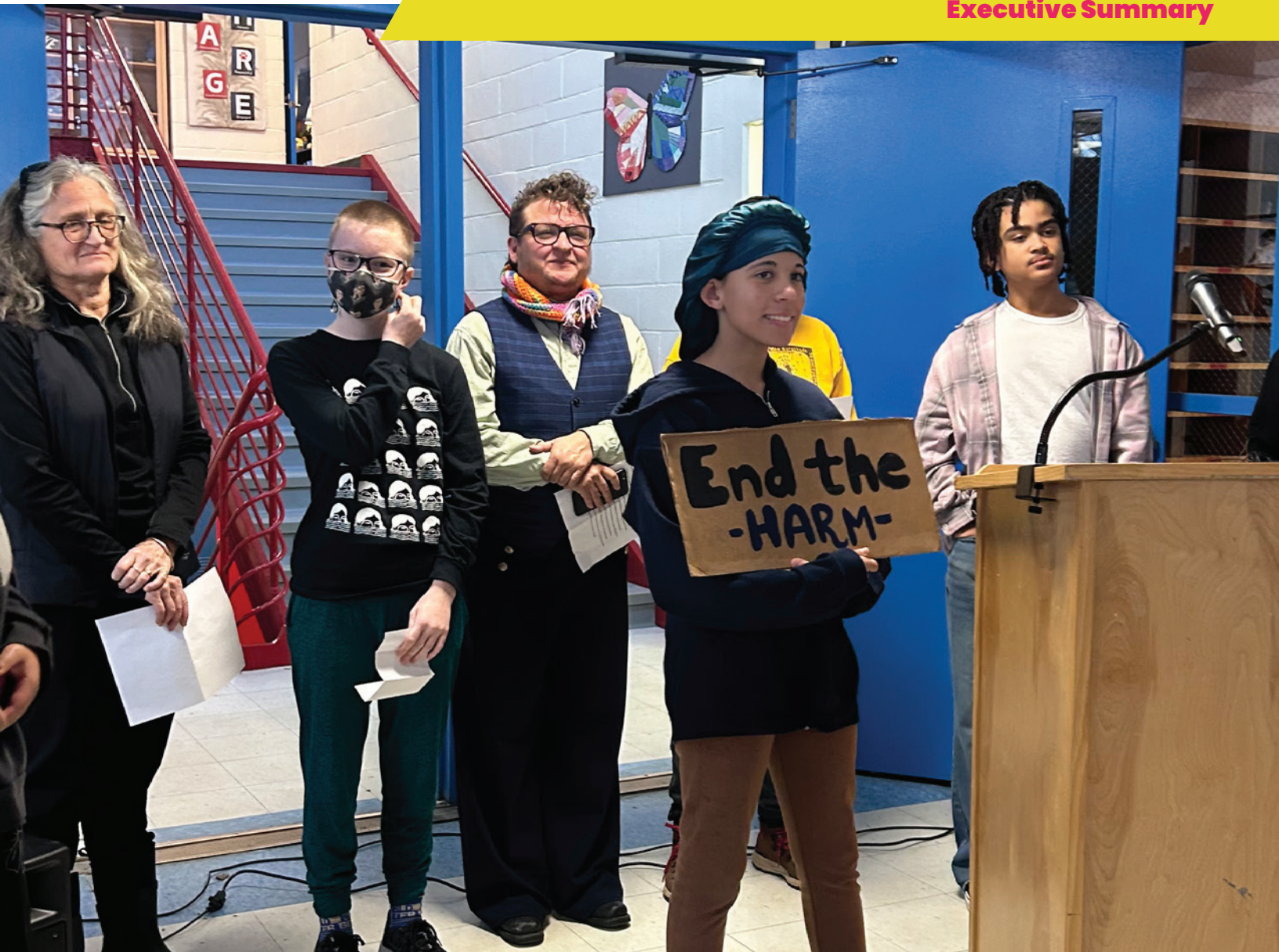


Narratives for Change: Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Practice

An Analysis of Bullying, Hazing and
Harassment in Vermont Schools



Executive Summary



Policy Imperative

Every student deserves to attend school without fear of harassment, intimidation, or exclusion. Yet for too many students in Vermont, that expectation remains unmet.

Vermont has established policies to address hazing, harassment, and bullying, but the evidence presented in this report reveals a persistent gap between policy and practice. Students continue to experience identity-based harassment, inconsistent school responses, barriers to reporting, and inadequate support after harm occurs. Existing systems often rely on investigation, documentation, and procedural compliance after an incident has already happened rather than identifying patterns, strengthening school climate, and preventing future harm.

Vermont now faces an important choice. It can continue relying on a predominantly reactive system, or it can build a coordinated, prevention-centered approach that strengthens accountability, supports educators, protects students, and creates safer learning environments across the state.

Purpose of the Report

Produced by the **Coalition for Transforming School Safety** through the **Narratives for Change** initiative, this report examines the prevalence, patterns, and impacts of bullying and harassment in Vermont schools while evaluating how effectively current systems respond to those experiences.

The report asks a broader question than whether bullying occurs. It examines how students experience school responses, where current systems fall short, and what policy changes are necessary to move Vermont from reacting to incidents toward preventing them.

Rather than relying on any single source of information, the report combines statewide quantitative data with student and family narratives to provide a more complete understanding of school safety and the institutional conditions that allow harm to persist.



The death of Isabelle Jean Dykema-Vezina illustrates the devastating consequences of a system that too often responds to bullying only after harm has escalated. Her story is not presented here as an isolated tragedy, but as a reminder of what is at stake when schools fail to respond early, consistently, and effectively. This report is dedicated to Isabelle and to every Vermont student whose safety, dignity, and opportunity to learn have been compromised by bullying and harassment.

Methodology

This report uses a mixed-methods approach that integrates statewide quantitative data with qualitative narratives. Administrative data helps establish the prevalence of bullying and harassment, while student and family experiences explain how harm occurs, why incidents often go unreported, and how institutional responses shape outcomes.

The analysis draws upon:

- **38 student and family surveys** and five in-depth interviews collected through the Narratives for Change initiative.
- **737 student responses** from the 2023 Vermont Students Against Racism Network (VSARN) survey.
- 2023 **Youth Risk Behavior Survey** (YRBS) data.
- Vermont Agency of Education Hazing, Harassment, and Bullying **incident data** from 2018–2024.
- Historical reports, legal case reviews, and policy analysis.

Together, these sources provide one of the most comprehensive examinations of bullying and harassment currently available in Vermont.

Statewide Context

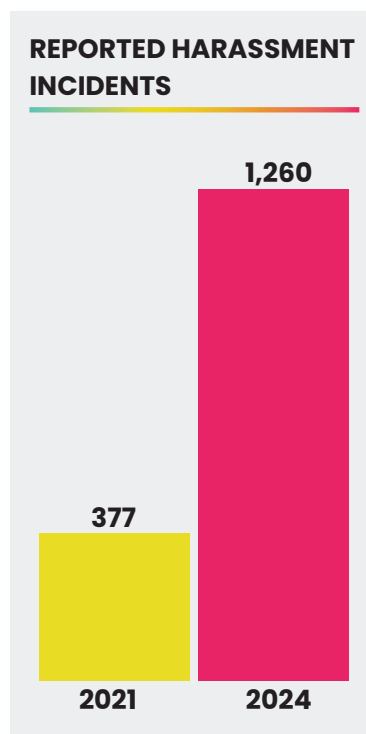
The data show that bullying and harassment remain significant concerns across Vermont schools.

According to the 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey:

- **21%** of Vermont high school students reported being bullied during the previous 30 days.
- **18%** experienced electronic bullying.
- Nearly **1 in 10** students skipped school because they felt unsafe.
- **34%** reported poor mental health most or all of the time.
- **14%** reported making a suicide plan.
- **7%** reported attempting suicide.

Administrative data from the Vermont Agency of Education shows reported harassment incidents increasing from **377 in 2021** to **1,260 in 2024** following the return to in-person learning.

At the same time, administrative data likely underestimates the true scope of the problem. Data suppression practices, limited demographic reporting, and widespread underreporting make it difficult to identify disparities and fully understand which students are most affected.



Key Findings

1. Bullying and Harassment Are Systemic, Not Isolated

Across every source of evidence, students describe bullying and harassment as recurring experiences rather than isolated incidents. Harm occurs across classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, buses, bathrooms, extracurricular activities, and online spaces. These patterns point to broader issues of school climate, institutional culture, and adult response rather than individual conflicts alone.

2. Identity-Based Harassment Remains a Persistent Pattern

Students consistently reported being targeted because of race, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and other aspects of identity.

The VSARN survey found that 63.6% of respondents witnessed racial slurs in school, while 35.8% reported experiencing or witnessing racial discrimination. The 2025 YRBS asked youth if they were treated badly or unfairly because of their gender and sexuality. 63% of LGBTQ+ youth responded in the affirmative. Student narratives describe identity-based harassment as commonplace and often inadequately addressed. At the same time, limitations in Vermont's administrative reporting system make it difficult to fully understand disparities across student populations.

3. Bullying Has Significant Educational and Mental Health Consequences

Bullying affects far more than student behavior. Students described anxiety, depression, isolation, declining academic engagement, school avoidance, and lasting emotional harm.

When students do not feel safe or supported, disengagement is not simply a risk. It becomes a rational response to an environment where they no longer feel they belong.

The consistency between statewide mental health data and student narratives demonstrates that bullying and harassment should be understood not only as school discipline issues, but also as educational access and public health concerns.

4. Current Systems Often Respond After Harm Occurs Rather Than Preventing It

Although Vermont has established Hazing, Harassment, and Bullying policies, implementation varies across schools and districts.

Students and families described reports being dismissed, minimized, or inconsistently investigated. Reporting systems often depend on formal procedures that do not always produce meaningful intervention or long-term solutions. Administrators also described systems that emphasize documentation and compliance while leaving limited capacity for prevention and relationship-building.

The findings suggest that Vermont's challenge is not primarily the absence of policy. It is the gap between policy, implementation, accountability, and prevention.

5. Reporting Systems Do Not Consistently Protect Students

Many students reported choosing not to report bullying because they feared retaliation, doubted meaningful action would occur, or had previously experienced dismissal.

Among participants in the Narratives for Change initiative who reported bullying or harassment, 61% described experiencing backlash or other negative consequences after reporting.

Under these circumstances, underreporting should not be viewed simply as student reluctance. It reflects rational decisions based on prior experiences with systems perceived as ineffective or unsafe.

6. Effective Practices Exist but Are Not Yet Systematically Applied

The report also identifies examples of schools that have successfully improved school climate through restorative approaches, clear expectations, strong adult support, and prevention-focused practices.

These successes demonstrate that meaningful improvement is possible. The challenge is not identifying effective approaches, but ensuring they are supported, evaluated, and implemented consistently across Vermont.

What the Findings Mean

Taken together, the evidence suggests that meaningful reform cannot be achieved through procedural adjustments alone.

Bullying and harassment should be understood as systemic school climate issues rather than isolated disciplinary incidents. Preventing harm requires safe reporting systems, stronger accountability, transparent data, sustained investment in mental health, comprehensive staff training, and consistent implementation across schools and districts.

Most importantly, the findings demonstrate that student and family narratives are not merely anecdotal. They provide essential evidence for understanding how policies function in practice and where improvements are needed.



Policy Recommendations

The report recommends a coordinated statewide strategy built around five priorities.

- ▶ **Strengthen statewide accountability and coordination** by passing H.130 to reinstate the Hazing, Harassment, and Bullying Advisory Council, establishing an independent review process for bullying cases, and creating clearer statewide implementation standards.
- ▶ **Improve data systems and transparency** by strengthening public reporting, improving demographic analysis while protecting privacy, reassessing suppression practices, and supporting dedicated personnel responsible for bullying prevention and response.
- ▶ **Shift from reaction to prevention** by investing in restorative and transformative practices, expanding school-based mental health services, strengthening school climate initiatives, and providing schools with the resources needed to identify and address concerns before they escalate.
- ▶ **Create reporting systems that students trust** by implementing accessible reporting options, enforcing anti-retaliation protections, maintaining meaningful follow-up with students and families, and evaluating reporting systems based on student safety rather than procedural completion.
- ▶ **Invest in people and partnerships** by providing comprehensive anti-bias, trauma-informed, and bullying prevention training for all school personnel while strengthening partnerships with students, families, and community organizations in shaping school safety policies.



Conclusion: A Call to Action

The evidence presented throughout this report demonstrates that bullying and harassment in Vermont schools are not isolated incidents or simply matters of individual student behavior. They reflect broader conditions involving school climate, institutional capacity, accountability, mental health, and policy implementation.

Vermont already possesses the knowledge needed to improve student safety. Effective practices exist in schools across the state. Students and families have clearly articulated where current systems succeed and where they fall short. The question is no longer whether change is needed. The question is whether Vermont will commit to implementing that change consistently and statewide.

Moving from reaction to prevention will require leadership, sustained investment, stronger accountability, and meaningful partnership with students, families, educators, and communities. The measure of success should not be whether every required procedure has been completed. It should be whether students are safer, whether harm is prevented, and whether every child can participate fully in school with dignity, belonging, and the opportunity to thrive.

Until that expectation is met for every student, Vermont's work remains unfinished.

