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Addressing School Bullying Since the Onset of COVID-19: A MERC Research and Policy Brief

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a MERC research and policy brief

ADDRESSING SCHOOL BULLYING SINCE THE ONSET OF COVID-19
A MERC RESEARCH AND POLICY BRIEF

David Naff, Morgan Meadowes, Kim Dupre, Alicia Gaston, Fatemah Khawaji, Christina Tillery, Makeba Lindsay D'Abreu, Lauren Powell, Deanna Fierro
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Among the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic is a shift in the nature and intensity of school bullying, perhaps symptomatic of the rapid changes and stressors that PK-12 students have endured since 2020. In this MERC research and policy brief, we explore how school bullying has changed since the onset of COVID-19 as well as research-based strategies for how educators and division leaders can best respond to it.

What is the nature of school bullying since the onset of COVID-19?

Research exploring changes in school bullying since the onset of COVID-19 is largely centered on how the earliest, most disruptive days of the pandemic may have impacted the likelihood of students engaging in bullying. For example, the additional tasks required of school personnel to help protect students' physical health like enforcing hygiene and social distancing measures may have interfered with their typical efforts to detect and prevent bullying in schools.[1] Furthermore, disrupted access to mental health support staff like school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists may have led to the COVID-related stressors experienced by students to manifest in bullying behaviors.[2] Finally, with rapid closure of schools and transition to online learning in the early months of the pandemic, there were considerable concerns about the potential for cyberbullying to occur and for that to carry over even when students returned to in-person instruction.[3]

Cyberbullying and Bullying in Virtual School Environments

- Research suggests that for cyberbullying to occur among K-12 students there often needs to be some physical connection (e.g. in schools) to initiate it,[4] **suggesting that it might have actually decreased during the pandemic.**[5]
- In a 2022 study, Fredrick and colleagues surveyed K-12 teachers about their perceived prevalence of cyberbullying since the onset of COVID-19. The majority (86%) indicated that they were aware of it happening less than once a month, and 66.7% indicated that it

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[1] Forsberg & Thorvaldsen (2022)
[2] McNamara & Edwards (2021)
[3] Bacher-Hicks et al. (2022)
[4] Bacher-Hicks et al. (2022)
[5] Bacher-Hicks et al. (2022); Repo et al. (2022); Schunk et al. (2022)

occurred about the same amount as prior to the pandemic. Only 8.8% indicated that it occurred a little or great deal more often. However, Patchin & Hinduja (2023) found that while 17% of middle and high school students in a nationally representative dataset experienced cyberbullying in 2016 and 2019, that number increased to 23% in 2021. **This suggests that perceptions of cyberbullying by school personnel may not always accurately represent what students actually experience.**

- One potential explanation for this discrepancy is that **educators in online environments may struggle to identify bullying victims** due to difficulties in establishing relationships with students or their families, chronic absences, and shifting between in-person and remote learning modalities.[6] This also limits the capacity of schools to create bullying prevention and support programs in online environments.

- In a 2022 study by Kim and colleagues, middle and high school **students in entirely remote learning modalities reported significantly higher levels of bullying rooted in biases than students in in-person or hybrid environments.**

Which students have been particularly impacted by bullying since the pandemic?	
Age Differences	• In a 2021 study by McNamara and Edwards, **students in grades 5 and 6 witnessed significantly higher rates of physical and cyberbullying** than students in grades 6-10. Similarly, Forsberg and Thorvaldsen (2022) found that **while students from all age groups reported significantly higher levels of cyber and in-person bullying since the onset of COVID-19, reports were significantly higher for students in grades 4-5** than those in grades 6-10. Still, both studies found that reports of emotional distress significantly increased by grade level. Other studies published since COVID-19 have also found that elementary students are more likely to perceive bullying in various forms.[7] • In Kim and colleagues' 2022 study, **students were more likely to report witnessing Bias-Based Bullying (BBB) and lower perceptions of school fairness in high school**.
Gender Differences	• Forsberg and Thorvaldsen (2022) found that although there were no significant differences between genders, **male students tended to report higher perceptions of physical and cyberbullying than female students**, and both reported higher levels of perceived bullying since COVID-19. • Research suggests that **female and non-binary students may be more likely to perceive instances of bullying grounded in bias or prejudice** than male students since the onset of the pandemic.[8] They are also more likely to have had their mental health adversely impacted.[9]

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[6] McNamara & Edwards (2021)
[7] Kim et al. (2022), Vaillancourt et al. (2021)
[8] Kim et al. (2022)
[9] Naff et al. (2022)

	• Vaillancourt and colleagues (2021) found in their study of how bullying has changed since COVID-19 that while students from all genders reported higher cyberbullying and lower physical, social, and verbal bullying since the pandemic, **female and non-binary students were more likely to report being a victim of bullying while male students were more likely to report perpetrating**.
Asian-American Students	• In a 2022 study exploring bullying over Twitter since the onset of COVID-19, Dhungana Sainju and colleagues found that **roughly 50% of tweets were xenophobic in nature and that 75% of xenophobic tweets were directed towards Asian individuals**. • Research has suggested that **while students often experienced similar or decreased levels of cyberbullying since the onset of the pandemic, Asian students are the exception**. In a 2023 study, Patchin & Hinduja found that 59% of Asian-American students in their sample reported an increase in being cyberbullied since COVID-19, whereas students from all other racial and ethnic groups reported decreases. In 2019 only 7.4% of Asian-American students in their sample reported experiencing cyberbullying, and that number tripled to 23.5% in 2021. • Kim and colleagues (2022) found that **being Asian-American was associated with significantly higher bullying based on biases**.
LGBTQ Students	• Research suggests that **lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) youth are more likely to perceive bullying (including in-person and cyberbullying) and experience bullying-related anxiety** than their heterosexual and cisgendered peers, both before and after the onset of COVID-19.[10] • Gill and McQuillan (2022) found in their survey of over 40,000 middle and high school students that those who identified as **LGBTQ were more likely to perceive peer victimization before and after the onset of COVID-19** than their heterosexual and cisgendered peers, consistent with trends prior to the pandemic. However, while they reported increases in anxiety during 2021, **they also reported decreases in perceived peer victimization and suicide attempts than 2019**. • Similarly, Vaillaincourt and colleagues (2021) found in their survey of over 6,000 adolescents in Canada that although LGBTQ students reported decreased rates of perceived bullying immediately following the onset of the pandemic, **they remained more likely to perceive verbal, physical, social, and cyberbullying victimization than their non-LGBTQ peers, with 60% reporting feeling victimized since COVID**.

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[10] Gill & McQuillan (2022); Vaillancourt et al. (2021)

What are recommended strategies for preventing school bullying since the onset of COVID-19?	
Promoting Positive School Climate	• **Assessing the climate of a school community is a first step towards collecting meaningful data to highlight social norms that exist within the school**.[11] Focusing on school climate and re-establishing social norms for all students in the learning community can help to foster cohesion across all student groups. • Research shows that **prioritizing student voice in promoting school climate is more important than ever in the wake of COVID-19**.[12] In a 2022 study by Kelly & Diskin-Holdaway, students discussed how lockdown measures offered a momentary reprieve from previous bullying they had encountered, indicating the need to prioritize addressing it in the wake of the pandemic. • When schools prioritize promoting a positive school climate, it can not only serve as a preventative measure for bullying but **also help students feel more comfortable reporting instances of bullying** in its various forms when they see it.[13]
Curriculum or Classroom Practices	• Some bullying prevention strategies teachers can implement in their classrooms include **social and emotional learning focused on modeling and rewarding kind and caring behavior, using high rates of verbal and non-verbal praise, and teaching skills that support a sense of belonging for all students**.[14] • According to Fredrick and colleagues (2022), teaching **digital citizenship** is a key factor in cyberbullying prevention and intervention. It is a preventative framework that engages students in internet safety and etiquette, including detecting and addressing cyberbullying when they witness it. School counselors can be partners in this effort, and **teaching about digital citizenship can not only help address cyberbullying, but also strengthen connections between schools and parents**. • Research shows that a potentially effective strategy for curbing bullying since the onset of COVID-19 is incorporating more physical activity in the form of **recess, which has been shown to help promote emotional and behavioral regulation in students**.[15]

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[11] Kim et al. (2022)
[12] McNamara & Edwards (2021)
[13] Kim et al. (2022)
[14] McNamara & Edwards (2021)
[15] Ramstetter et al. (2022)

	• It may be necessary to **add books to the school library that specifically address cyberbullying and bullying in online environments**, including how to detect and respond to it.[16]
Strategies for School and Family Collaboration	• To help with cyberbullying at home, **families should actively monitor their child's devices and set expectations and rules regarding technology**. This may require some partnership with the school or community about general internet safety and appropriate use of social media that are in line with school policies about bullying.[17] A 2022 study by Paek and Choi found that **only 22% of parents or guardians in their sample monitored their children's internet use**. • A key feature of addressing bullying since COVID-19 is to **actively involve families in the formulation of relevant school policies, classroom practices, and resources**. A challenge related to this is that families may find themselves especially burdened or stressed in the wake of the pandemic.[18]
Professional Development	• **The pandemic may have made existing professional development efforts related to bullying less relevant or more difficult to implement the strategies**, suggesting a need to update them to specifically address how bullying has changed since COVID-19.[19] • It may be necessary to particularly **focus professional development on detection and prevention of cyberbullying and how bullying manifests in virtual learning spaces** since the onset of COVID-19.[20] Research suggests that teachers frequently perceive a need for training specifically focused on these areas, along with tools to help address cyberbullying when they see it.[21] • A 2022 study by Herkama and colleagues found that **teachers who participated in a professional learning program about detecting and preventing online bullying not only felt more equipped, they also had a greater understanding of the gravity of the issue and the specific steps to take to address it**.

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[16] McNamara & Edwards (2021)

[17] Su et al. (2021)

[18] McNamara & Edwards (2021)

[19] McNamara & Edwards (2021)

[20] McNamara & Edwards (2021)

[21] Fredrick et al. (2022)

By state law, Virginia school boards are required to include bullying prevention as a part of character education (§ 22.1-208.01), to specify bullying as a prohibited behavior in their student codes of conduct (§ 22.1-279.6.D) and to implement policies and procedures to educate school board employees about bullying and the need to create a bully-free environment (§ 22.1- 291.4). In 2013, the Virginia Board of Education published the Model Policy to Address Bullying in Virginia Public Schools, stating that:

- School division policy should include a definition of bullying.
- School division policy includes "whole-school, evidence-based intervention strategies that use individual, classroom, school, and division-level approaches" that include prevention, intervention, and accountability and consequences.
- School divisions must annually train staff, students, and parents on identification, intervention, and procedures for reporting bullying behaviors.
- Annual surveys of students, staff, and parents should evaluate anti-bullying efforts
- School division policy should outline procedures for investigation and response, including when students with disabilities are involved in a bullying incident.
- School division policy should outline procedures for parent notification about bullying.

School divisions throughout the MERC region hold similar anti-bullying policies, with wording often taken directly from state law. The breakdown below briefly summarizes how bullying and cyberbullying are integrated into student codes of conduct, school board policies, professional development requirements, and technology use agreements. The following information was pulled from publicly available documents.

All MERC Divisions	Some or Most MERC divisions
• Have a clear definition of bullying (including cyberbullying) in their policies or codes of conduct and state that engaging in bullying behavior can result in school discipline • Clearly define their process for reporting bullying in their school board policies • Include character education related to anti-bullying	• List bullying or cyberbullying as "unacceptable" in their technology use agreements • Require annual staff development on bullying • Recognize October as Bullying Prevention Month by signed resolutions from their school boards

What are the key takeaways and enduring questions about addressing school bullying since the onset of COVID-19?		
1. There is a **need to more clearly measure how bullying has changed pre and post COVID with current evidence**, with most publicly available data only including outcomes before the pandemic.	**2.** Much of the related literature understandably focuses on cyberbullying, but because the data was largely collected in the first months of the pandemic, **claims about cyberbullying reduction may not be consistent with current experiences**.	**3.** Any efforts to address bullying since the onset of the pandemic should **simultaneously focus on supporting student mental health**, which research shows has been adversely impacted by COVID-19.[22]
4. Many of the conclusions about how bullying was impacted by the pandemic are drawn from data collected during the earliest months when students were largely participating in exclusively remote learning. **Research in the coming years will hopefully help illuminate how bullying in school settings has changed since COVID-19.**	**5.** Research clearly indicates the **need to prioritize cyberbullying and digital citizenship in professional development and curricular approaches to bullying reduction**. Both of these strategies should focus on helping students and staff alike recognize signs of bullying in online environments.	**6.** Conversations in school divisions about changes in bullying since the onset of COVID-19 **need to address cyberbullying (particularly in online school environments,) as well as observations by faculty, staff, and students** about how verbal, social, and physical bullying have changed, which is less represented in the research.

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[22] Naff et al. (2022)

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[22] Naff et al. (2022)

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