

Facing the Facts: Addressing Problems with Anti-bullying Policies and Surveillance Systems in Maryland Schools

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Background:

Bullying is aggressive behavior that is intentional and involves an imbalance in power. Research suggests that between 15 and 25 percent of students within the United States are bullied with some frequency, and children with disabilities or special needs may be at an even greater risk of being bullied (Melton et al., 1998, Nansel et al., 2001, Rigby, 2002). Bullying can take several forms, such as hitting (physical bullying); teasing or name-calling (verbal bullying); intimidation and harassment, such as social exclusion or gesturing (nonverbal or emotional bullying); and sending or posting insulting messages (cyber bullying).

The consequences of bullying are profound and include interference with student engagement and achievement (NEA Today, 1999). In fact, research suggests that children who are bullied may be fearful of going to school, using the bathroom, and riding on the bus (NEA, 2003). Moreover, children and youth who are bullied are also more likely to experience feelings of depression, loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem, and contemplate suicide (Limber, 2002, Olweus, 1993).

Maryland Policy:

Over the years, laws have been enacted in Maryland in an attempt to protect children from all forms of bullying. The Safe Schools Reporting Act of 2005 required public schools to document and report incidents of harassment or intimidation against students to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). All incidents are documented on a standardized form entitled the Victim of Harassment or Intimidation Report Form and are reported annually. Additionally, Maryland HB 199 requires that all school districts develop model anti-bullying policies. While these laws represent a step in the right direction, several limitations and discrepancies exist with respect to anti-bullying policy development, program implementation, data collection, and reporting of bullying incidents among Maryland school districts.

Results/Discussion:

Data were obtained from 2007 to 2011, and a general trend of increasing bullying rates (average increase of 5.2%) was noted for almost all counties throughout Maryland. The average local school district reported 6.3 incidents per 1000 enrolled students, with dramatic variability between counties (range: 1.1-21.9, SD = 5.7). There were notable predictors for reported rates of bullying. As expected, the smaller the staff to student ratio, the higher the average rate of bullying reported ($p=.03$), and the larger the school district, the lower the reported rate of bullying ($p=.02$). Interestingly, the percentage of children with specific disabilities inversely predicted the average rate for reported bullying, for autism ($p=.03$) and speech language disabilities ($p=.02$). There were additional trends noted for both intellectual disabilities ($p=.06$) and emotional disturbances ($p=.06$).

Overall, the variability between counties speaks to the need for a more standardized method of data collection that does not rely exclusively on teacher and staff reporting. In order to better understand the mechanism of reporting in each school district, schools with rates of bullying that are either much lower or higher than the average rate require further examination. The lower reported rates of bullying in school districts with higher rates of autism, speech language disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and emotional disturbances is encouraging, but should be viewed with a cautious eye, as information at the student level was not available.

Examination of anti-bullying policies indicates the need for more specific state-wide guidelines. While all districts emphasize the importance of evidence-based interventions, few policies describe how such practices are implemented. Policies also lack sufficient detail with respect to staff training initiatives and the dissemination of reporting forms.

Best Practices/Recommendations:

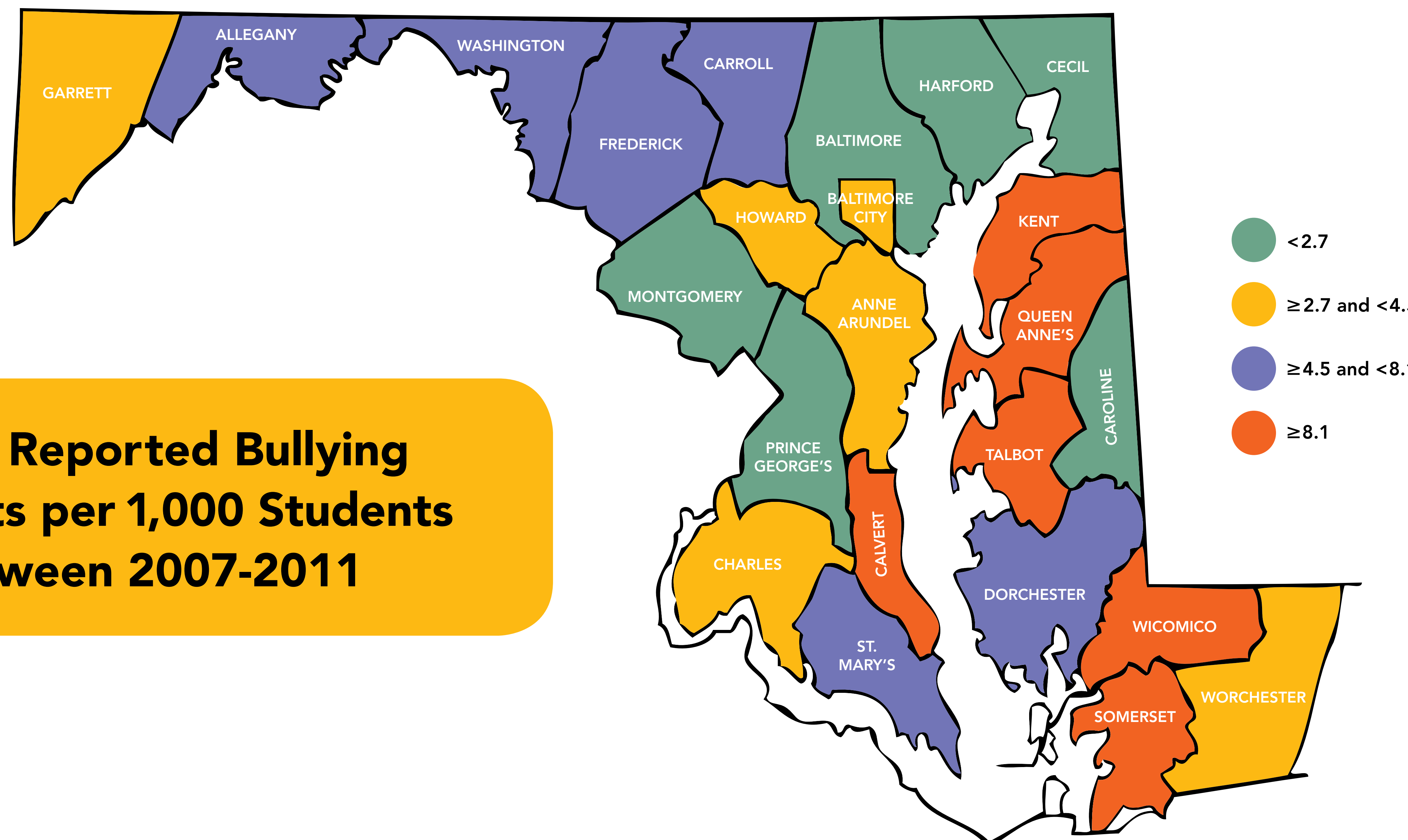
Reporting: In order to increase the use of the bullying reporting form, schools are encouraged to increase advertisements of the form itself with a focus on making the form more easily accessible to parents. Discrepancies between school districts could hopefully be minimized by expanding the typical informants beyond staff members.

Observation: Maryland public schools need to acknowledge that many children simply do not report bullying. Teachers and administrators should be encouraged to take a more active role by being aware and recognizing the warning signs of bullying, with greater attention paid to children with disabilities. Research suggests that warning signs may take a variety of forms, including depression, anxiety, academic problems, safety concerns, aggression, low self-esteem, deficits in peer relations, appearing to be alone, and somatic complaints (Cedeno et al, 2012).

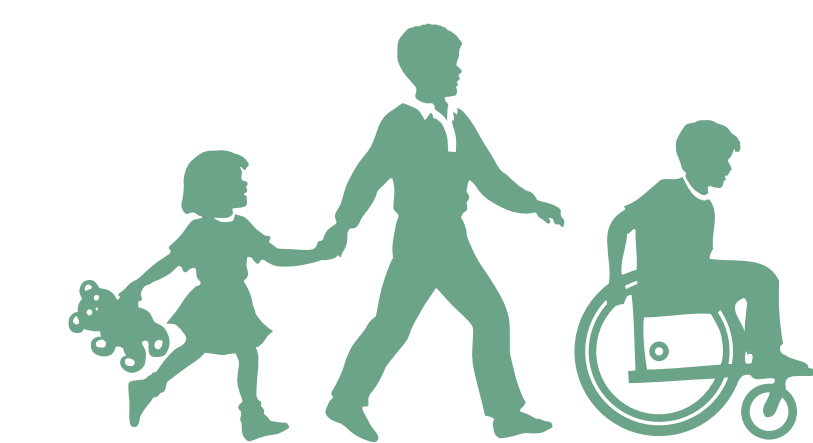
Policy and Implementation: The Model Policy in Maryland offers suggestions regarding anti-bullying prevention and intervention techniques; however, the policy does not provide an exhaustive list of all the actions schools can take to address bullying. MSDE encourages schools to take additional actions and measures beyond those listed in the policy, as needed, in order to prevent bullying. The Model Policy does not in any way limit other types of intervention or remediation that schools can incorporate, as appropriate, or that should be undertaken as needed in order to prevent bullying.

While not included in the Model Policy, the latest research indicates that a positive school climate is the best and most effective way to reduce and prevent bullying incidents from occurring. Many Maryland schools are Positive Behavior and Intervention Strategies (PBIS) schools, and by using the tools and concepts of PBIS, a school can begin to build and strengthen a positive climate and culture within their school.

The policy offers limited guidance on the consequences of bullying, particularly with respect to implementation. Currently, policy dictates that administrators are responsible for investigating and applying appropriate consequences. However, why are specialists or experts (e.g., psychologists, guidance counselors) not consulted when consequences are determined? More specific guidance is needed.



Mean Reported Bullying Incidents per 1,000 Students Between 2007-2011



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