



# Bullying and Harassment Compliance Report

December 2024



# Introduction

Pursuant to Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4501, a safe and civil environment is necessary for students to learn and achieve high academic standards. The Tennessee Department of Education (department) recognizes the negative effects that bullying and harassment have on students, their educational achievement, and their overall growth. Bullying and harassment have no part in our schools, and the department is dedicated to assisting local education agencies (LEAs) to responsibly and effectively address bullying and harassment in Tennessee public schools.

Based on the information available to the department, each LEA in Tennessee satisfied the requirements of the state bullying and harassment laws (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4501 through § 49-6-4506) and submitted bullying compliance information to the department on its compliance report form for the 2023-24 school year.<sup>1</sup> The bullying compliance information for each LEA is included in the Appendix.

## ***Total Number of Bullying Cases Reported Statewide***

According to the data submitted to the department, 12,197 cases of bullying were reported to LEAs during the 2023-24 school year. Approximately 45% of those cases – 5,439 – were confirmed as bullying after an investigation.

<b>2023-24 Tennessee Bullying Cases</b>		
Total number of bullying cases reported in the 2023-24 school year	12,197	
Total number of confirmed cases of bullying	5,439	45%
Total number of confirmed cases involving race, color, or national origin	824	6.8%
Total number of confirmed cases involving sex or gender	862	7%
Total number of confirmed cases involving disability	206	1.6%
Total number of confirmed cases involving the use of electronic technology	959	7.8%
Total number of cases still pending	75	<1%

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to the passage of the state bullying laws, the department annually collected civil rights compliance information from LEAs in order to comply with federal civil rights laws. To facilitate the submission of all compliance information, the department merged the compliance information into one document – the Civil Rights and Bullying Compliance Report. LEA-specific information is included as an appendix to this document.

# Discussion

Although several definitions of bullying exist, Tennessee law includes the definition that is required to be used by LEAs. The law provides that “harassment, intimidation, or bullying” is any act that substantially interferes with a student's educational benefits, opportunities, or performance and:

- If the act takes place on school grounds, at any school-sponsored activity, on school-provided equipment or transportation, or at any official school bus stop, the act has the effect of:
  1. Physically harming a student or damaging a student's property;
  2. Knowingly placing a student or students in reasonable fear of physical harm to the student or damage to the student's property;
  3. Causing emotional distress to a student or students; or
  4. Creating a hostile educational environment; or
- If the act takes place off school property or outside of a school-sponsored activity, it is directed specifically at a student or students and has the effect of creating a hostile educational environment or otherwise creating a substantial disruption to the education environment or learning process.<sup>2</sup>

“Cyberbullying” is defined as bullying undertaken through using electronic devices.<sup>3</sup>

## a. Total Number of Reported and Confirmed Bullying Cases

The 2023-24 school year saw a slight decrease in the number of bullying cases reported compared to the previous school year. Specifically, during the 2022-23 school year, there were 13,377 bullying cases and 5,996 confirmed cases, and during the 2023-24 school year there were 12,197 reported cases and 5,439 confirmed cases. In the 2022-23 school year, 44% of reported cases were confirmed bullying while there were 45% of confirmed cases in the 2023-24 school year. In comparison, in the 2021-22 school year, there were 10,112 reported bullying cases, 4,704 (47%) of which were confirmed cases.

As part of the bullying data collection process, the department continues to solicit feedback and insights from LEAs to continue to assess how the department can further support LEAs to reduce bullying. The lower number of reported bullying cases in the 2021-22 school year when compared

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<sup>2</sup> Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4502(3)(A)-(B).

<sup>3</sup> Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4502(1).

to the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years could be contributed to several factors such as an increase in anti-bullying training among students and staff and a better ability to distinguish between peer conflict and conduct that meets the legal definition of bullying.

There is a myriad of reasons why the overall number of bullying cases remained steady over 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years. Some factors contributing to this may include increased training for students and staff on bullying issues to better identify types of bullying conduct. As with the previous school year, some school districts may have improved their reporting procedures, making it easier for students and staff to report bullying conduct as well as provide supportive measures. That said, these numbers may not fully capture all bullying cases because some students may underreport due to fear of retaliation or negative social impacts. Additionally, the rise and prevalence of social media and online platforms may provide new avenues for cyberbullying, making it more difficult to monitor and address.

b. Bullying Cases Involving Protected Classes

i. Race, Color, and National Origin

For the 2023-24 school year, there were 824 bullying cases involving race, color, or national origin. This represents 6.8% of all bullying of total cases. When compared to the 2022-23 school year, where the number of cases involving race, color, or national origin represented 4.7% of cases, there was an over 2% increase in cases, marking a significant change from previous years.

There are several factors that may have contributed to this increase, in addition to those listed above. Those factors include changes in school climate and culture leading to greater awareness of racial and ethnic discrimination and allowing students to feel more empowered to report incidents and take a more active role in speaking out against racial discrimination and harassment. Moreover, increased use of social media platforms among students could have also led to the increase. Other factors such as changes in what students are exposed to outside of the school setting may have also influenced these numbers.

The department will continue monitoring these numbers for subsequent school years to determine whether the 2023-24 school year was an outlier or whether additional supports and interventions are necessary to address the increase in race and national origin-based bullying and harassment.

ii. Sex or Gender

For the 2023-24 school year, there were 865 bullying cases involving sex or gender. This represents 7% of total cases. When compared to the 2022-23 school year, the percentage of bullying cases

involving sex and gender remained largely unchanged (6.9%), down from 8.7% in the 2021-22 school year.

The factors contributing to the percentage of bullying cases remaining unchanged may include increased student and staff awareness of sex discrimination and harassment as well as increased training on Title IX and implementation of robust Title IX procedures in light of the May 2020 amendments to Title IX.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, school districts had more time to familiarize themselves with the revised Title IX regulations, which may have led them to applying stronger Title IX procedures to reported incidents.

While the department is pleased that the number of bullying cases involving sex or gender appears to be trending downward from the 2021-22 school year, the department will continue to monitor these numbers and provide additional supports to school districts as necessary.

### iii. Disability

Bullying cases involving disability represented 1.6% of cases for the 2023-24 school year. This is identical to the 2022-23 school year and is a slight increase from the 2021-22 school year (1.4%). As indicated in the 2022-23 Bullying and Harassment Compliance Report, the consistency of these numbers may not be statistically significant, however the department will continue to monitor the number of bullying cases involving disability for subsequent school years to determine whether a problematic trend exists.

### c. Bullying Cases Involving Electronic Devices

For the 2023-24 school year, the number of bullying cases involving electronic devices represented 7.8%. In the 2022-23 school year, these cases represented 7.5%. Both the 2023-24 and the 2022-23 school year are down from the high of 9.9% in the 2021-22 school year.

As noted in previous Bullying and Harassment Compliance Reports, the use of technology is necessary in today's educational environments and has influenced the ways in which educators teach, students learn, and how students and teachers communicate. According to the most recent statistics from the Cyberbullying Research Center, 55% of middle and high school students surveyed nationwide reported being the target of cyberbullying.<sup>5</sup> This is a 10% increase from data the organization collected from the previous school year and is expected to continue to rise given the

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<sup>4</sup> *Questions and Answers on the Title IX Regulations on Sexual Harassment*, U.S. DEPT. OF ED., <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/202107-qa-titleix.pdf> (June 28, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Justin W. Patchin, and Sameer Hinduja, Cyberbullying Research Center, *Summary of Our Cyberbullying Research (2007-2023)*, <https://cyberbullying.org/summary-of-our-cyberbullying-research> (Feb. 16, 2024).

ubiquity of cellphones, social media, and increased use of technology in the classroom.

For students in Tennessee, there is a marginal increase in the number of cyberbullying cases. However, the numbers are down from the 2021-22 school year, where cyberbullying represented 7.5% (1,009) of reported cases. It is possible that this marginal increase is not statistically significant given that the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years remained consistent, but it is also important to note that this percentage is down from pre-pandemic levels, where the percentage of cyberbullying cases was as high as 14% in the 2018-19 school year.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the department will continue monitoring these numbers for trends in the data.

Likewise, LEAs, schools, and parents should continue to be vigilant as students navigate using technology both at home and in the classroom. It is important that LEAs develop robust policies addressing the use of electronic devices on school grounds and at school-sponsored activities. Additionally, parents should monitor their student's use of social media and technology at home to ensure that their use does not disrupt the education environment. It is the department's hope that if these measures are taken, the number of reported cyberbullying cases will decline in subsequent school years.

## Conclusion

As always, the department remains committed to assisting LEAs in their implementation of initiatives and policies to prevent and address bullying, harassment, intimidation, and cyberbullying. The department anticipates and remains hopeful that bullying, harassment, intimidation, and cyberbullying cases will decline in the years ahead. The department trusts that the state anti-bullying and harassment laws, this report, and the attached compliance information will continue to help eliminate bullying, harassment, intimidation, and cyberbullying in Tennessee public schools. The department renews its commitment to improving in this area, in addition to many others, during the upcoming school years.

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<sup>6</sup> 2018-19 Bullying and Harassment Compliance Report, <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/legal/BullyingandHarassmentComplianceReport20182019FINAL.pdf> (December 2019).