

REPORT CARD

AN UPDATE FROM OUR EDUCATION LAW EXPERTS FOR PRINCIPALS, BOARDS AND SCHOOL LEADERS ON KEY ISSUES AND RECENT LEGAL EVENTS IN YOUR SECTOR

School bullying in the spotlight

Checklist for School leaders and Boards



Are your bullying policies fit for purpose?



Consider having anti-bullying training or programmes in your school community.



Can your bullying reporting process be understood by your students?



How are you communicating this to your school community?

Bullying within schools is an issue that has increasingly been in the spotlight:

In May 2019, we saw the Education Review Office release a report stating that bullying remains a serious issue in New Zealand schools, with a third of students spoken to by ERO indicating that they had been bullied at their current school.

In September 2019, the Ombudsman issued a report stating that bullying is “one of the single most important issues that schools are grappling with” and finding that a College had failed to ensure that a student was safe following bullying complaints.

This all comes at a time when bullying behaviour may be under scrutiny through the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care. The Commission’s Inquiry is broad in scope, covering abuse (including both physical and emotional/psychological abuse). The Commission’s focus is historic, looking at the period of 1950 to 1999. However, the Royal Commission is tasked with recommendations to transform future practice and its findings will be relevant to schools today.

AGAINST THIS BACKGROUND, IT IS TIMELY TO CONSIDER, WHAT YOUR SCHOOL IS DOING TO PREVENT AND RESPOND TO BULLYING?

At its core, bullying is a health and safety issue and schools have a statutory obligation to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of their students. In doing so, we recommend that schools implement the following three steps:

1 Have robust policies in place for preventing and responding to bullying: These policies should include definitions and examples of bullying and, most importantly, should include a clear and student-appropriate process for reporting bullying concerns.

Make sure that these policies are easy to access for students and parents. Consider the age of your students when choosing the language in your reporting process.

We recommend implementing a “speak up” culture where students are actively encouraged to report bullying, whether towards themselves or others. As part of this, schools should have a range of well-informed and trusted ‘contact people’ who students (and their Whanau) can approach.

2 Implement an anti-bullying programme: Although policies are an important first step, they are not enough on their own.

We recommend that schools also implement broader approaches and programmes to focus on practical advice and strategies for the prevention and response to bullying behavior. For example, restorative practice is an approach that teaches students skills for developing and maintaining healthy relationships, rather than relying solely on punishment, and can be used in response to behaviour such as bullying.

There are also programmes available such as “PB4L” (through the Ministry of Education), which focuses on students being able to describe, articulate and address

bullying behaviour (whilst avoiding harmful labels and promoting positive behaviour). Other programmes include Wellbeing@School, Kia Kaha (run by the New Zealand Police) and KiVa (being an evidence-based approach developed by the University of Turku, Finland).

3 Engage with the wider school community in relation to bullying: Multi-component initiatives involving the whole school community are more likely to reduce bullying behaviour than single component programmes (such as those involving only classroom curriculum activities). Effective schools have inclusive practices and positive staff, parent and whanau relationships in place.

We encourage you to communicate with your wider school community in relation to your anti-bullying initiatives and to seek wider engagement.

As part of this, parents should be aware of the steps your school is taking to address bullying, aware of the ways in which they (and the student) can raise concerns, and confident that their concerns will be appropriately dealt with by the school.

WHO TO CONTACT FOR ADVICE AND MORE INFORMATION



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