



Student-to-Student Bullying 2016 Report

Key Findings

1. Of participant-generated definitions of student bullying, staff more often included a variety of core components that make up MMSD's definition of bullying than students. Some participant-generated definitions of bullying included components not required in MMSD policy (e.g., repetition).
2. Participants reported that students get bullied for aspects of their appearance (e.g., shoes, clothes, looking different), their identity (e.g., sexuality, race, disability), and their behavior (e.g., student actions, ability).
3. The majority of staff and student discussions of work being done around bullying focused on response, rather than prevention and follow-up (which was talked about the least).
4. Staff typically reported not being trained to manage bullying per MMSD policy, but students described learning about bullying (e.g., the concepts of "allies" and "bystanders").
5. Staff offered many suggestions for how the district could move forward in bullying prevention, response, and follow-up: they wanted clarification of and training in MMSD policies and practices, more student education around bullying, more time and support, appropriate consequences that would hold students accountable, and more follow-up and communication after a bullying incident has occurred.

Background

Bullying can have very harmful effects on the target, the bully, and bystanders. It affects not only feelings of personal safety, but can also impede learning. Under the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) [Behavior Education Plan \(BEP\)](#), bullying is considered a response level 2, 3, or 4, with consequences ranging from support staff intervention and/or administrative discipline to 3 or more days of out-of-school suspension.

Data suggests that we should keep tabs on bullying in MMSD schools. The [2015-16 Student Climate Survey](#) included a question about bullying: "In this school, students experience bullying." Over half of participating students (54%) agreed that students in their school experienced bullying, and only 17% of students disagreed that students in their school experience bullying. Broken down by level, 52% of high school students and 52% of elementary school students agreed that students in their school experience bullying, while 59% of middle school students agree that students in their school experience bullying. Further, in MMSD schools in 2015-16, there were a total of 660 bullying incidents – 251 at the elementary school level, 326 at the middle school level, and 83 at the high school level. Yet bullying out-of-school suspensions and days of instruction lost are rare. In fact, of those 660 incidents, there were 36 out-of-school suspensions in 2015-16. This data, however, does not uncover the magnitude of bullying or how schools think about it.

Student Services in conjunction with Legal Services, asked the Research & Program Evaluation Office (RPEO) to explore bullying further; specifically how staff and students define student-to-student bullying, along with what actions staff and students do and should take in response. We sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do MMSD students and staff define student bullying?
2. What are some common examples of student bullying that occur in schools?
3. What actions do MMSD students and staff take in response to bullying?
4. What actions should MMSD students and staff take in response to bullying?

This report details how staff and students define bullying, what practices are currently in place to address bullying, and what participants think is important as the district-wide conversation around bullying continues.

Data Collection

RPEO staff collected data on student-to-student bullying via two venues: in-person focus groups and online Google form.

In-person focus groups – The RPEO team identified a list of schools to contact for participation based on their climate survey results; of those schools, five principals chose to participate. Two elementary schools, two middle



schools, and one high school participated in this research. Schools organized a minimum of 3 focus groups at their school (one with staff, one with students, and one with the individual(s) primarily in charge of behavior prevention and response). RPEO staff led 18 focus groups, each lasting 30-45 minutes, and involving a total of more than 120 respondents. Of these 18 focus groups, 7 consisted of students, 6 consisted of staff (teachers and support staff), and 5 consisted of leadership or people in charge of bullying prevention and response. Eight occurred at the elementary school level, 6 at the middle school level, and 4 at the high school level. Note-takers recorded some background information on participants, when available. Of the 128 total participants, about half were male and half were non-white.

Online Google Form – RPEO staff sent a link for an online Google Form to participating schools’ principals for them to send to their staff in case interested staff were unable to attend a focus group. It was open for submissions for five days following the focus groups. The form asked respondents for their definition of student bullying, what staff at their school do to address student-to-student bullying (prevention, response, follow-up), what should be changed about the current approach to bullying policy and practice in the district, and if they have received MMSD training on how to manage student-to-student bullying situations. Eighteen responses were received from 14 teachers and 4 support staff (6 from the elementary school, 3 from the middle school, 8 from the high school, 1 unidentified).

Analysis Methods

To analyze comments made in the focus groups and the open-ended comments from the online form, we performed a qualitative analysis using a multi-step procedure. First, we structurally coded (i.e., assigning the same code to all responses to a particular question) comments in the online form and comments made in the in-person sessions. Coding is a way of organizing and sorting qualitative data that involves assigning labels, or codes, to each comment or response, which make it easier to draw themes from and summarize the data. Next steps varied by question. In general, comments were coded as “Other” if the comment was not relevant to the question being asked or was unclear.

When analyzing participant definitions of student bullying and participant descriptions of current practice, we coded comments into a code list developed *a priori* (before coding). Comments that did not address those *a priori* codes were categorized as “Other.” Next, all comments were read in each *a priori* code and the “Other” categories for trends, commonalities, and keywords, which helped identify the themes that organically emerged. Additionally any comments in “Other” categories re-coded if appropriate. When percentages are reported, they are the percent of total coded comments for that question or group of questions by participant group.

When analyzing comments about examples of bullying, cyberbullying, and future recommendations, comments were read thoroughly for trends, commonalities, and keywords, which resulted in categories representative of emergent themes.

Findings

The first section of this report describes how participants defined student-to-student bullying. The second section outlines common examples of bullying. The third section examines the current practice of addressing student-to-student bullying in terms of prevention, response, follow-up, and education/training. The fourth section reports participant-generated suggestions for moving forward. The report ends on the topic of cyberbullying. Throughout, we discuss participants together and by participant type (student, staff).

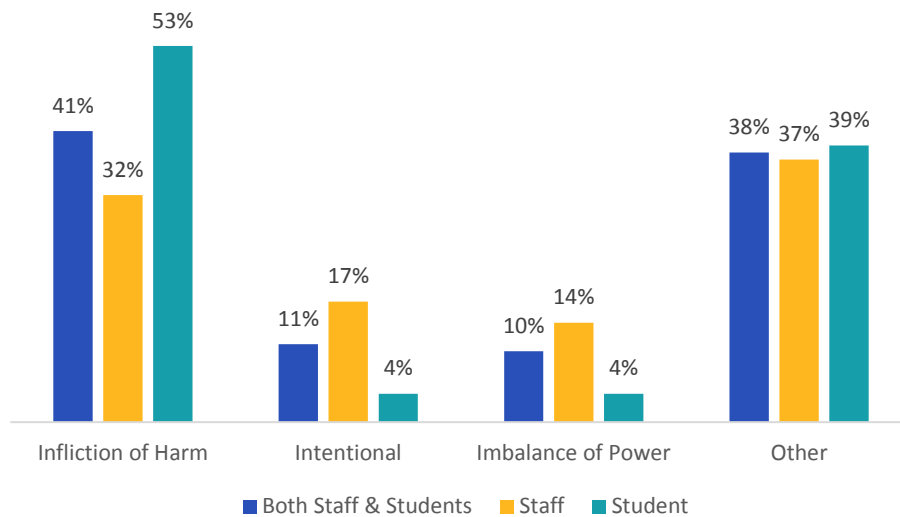
How do MMSD staff and students define student bullying?

The current [MMSD bullying policy](#) defines bullying based on three central components: (1) intentionality; (2) infliction of harm or suffering on another individual or group of individuals; (3) an imbalance of real or perceived power. Using these key phrases, we present how students and staff defined bullying.

Of participant generated definitions of student bullying, staff included more of the core components that make up MMSD’s definition of bullying than students. The infliction of harm was more salient for all participants, especially students. Many definitions of bullying did not include all of the components outlined in MMSD policy, and many included components not required in MMSD policy – such as repetition being a requirement for determining behavior as “bullying.”



Figure 1: Components of Participants' Definitions of Student Bullying by Participant Type



Infliction of Harm or Suffering. Almost half (41%) of participant-generated bullying definitions included mentions of harm or suffering, and many of the definitions included examples of behavior that would result in harm or suffering. For example common definitions of bullying, especially for student participants, included specific actions such as pushing, kicking, touching others, or spreading rumors. Participants considered hurt feelings and unwanted physical contact a core component of bullying. According to a staff member, bullying is “students intimidating others, keeping them out of activities, influencing their self-worth,” and another believed that bullying to be “Actions toward a person that are physically, emotionally, and/or mentally damaging. The damage may be determined by the victim.” A middle school student described it as “Another kid intimidating another kid – comes in many forms.”

Intentional. The purposeful, intentional, and targeted nature of bullying appeared in 11% of the coded comments, but were more often discussed by staff. Some participants described how context affects the perceived intention of actions. For instance, one high school student explained how friends kind of bully each other, but that is more like joking and bullying involves a more malicious intent. Similarly, a middle school student explained that “If you do it on accident, it’s not technically bullying. But if you do it on purpose more than once…” A staff member also described it as a “conscious decision.”

Imbalance of Power. An imbalance of real or perceived power emerged in 10% of coded comments. Some participants recognized that “power deferential” or “power imbalance” as a key component of bullying, but it was not as apparent as the infliction of harm or intentionality. According to one middle school student, bullying is usually a small group of kids who are feared or have some power – “popular or something like.” One staff member in charge of bullying response defined student bullying as “Power injustice, power deferential between students; perceived injustice or differentiation of power between two parties.”

Other. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of coded comments involved definitions of bullying outside of the scope of the above three components. Some included references to control, to differentiating between meanness or joking and bullying, and many included frequency or repetition. Participants who discussed repetition mostly claimed that bullying behavior was “repeated” or would happen “over and over again.” While MMSD’s definition of bullying currently reads “Bullying behavior may be repeated,” a sizeable portion of comments indicated it *had* to be repeated.

In general, when defining student bullying, some staff and students specified different types of bullying such as physical, verbal, indirect, and/or direct.



What are some common examples of student bullying that occur in schools?

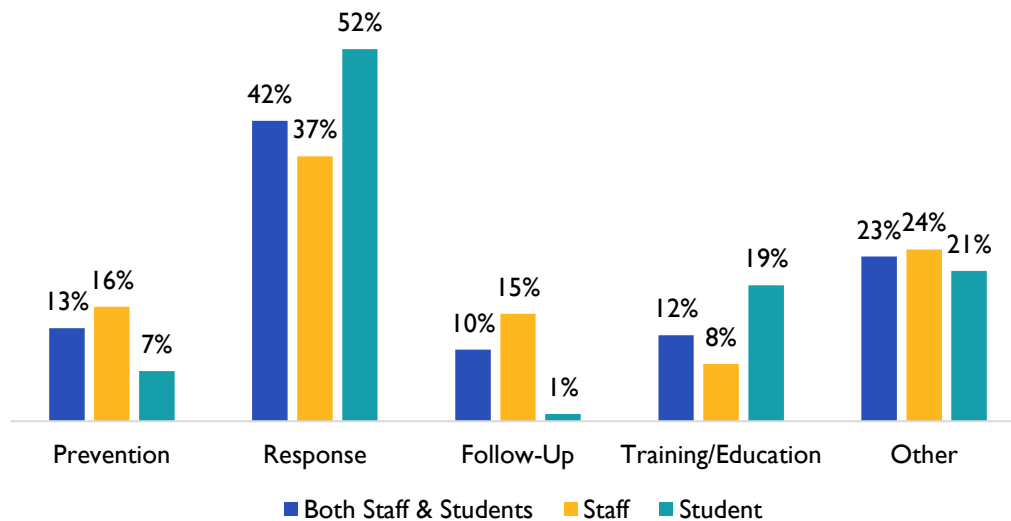
When asked for examples of what students get bullied about, participants identified some predominate reasons: aspects of appearance (e.g., shoes, clothes, hair, size, looking different), aspects of identity (e.g., sexuality, race, disability), and aspects of behavior (e.g., student actions, doing homework, ability). While both groups talked about students being bullied about their appearance the most, students then talked about incidents related to identity more than staff, while staff talked more about student actions or behavior.

What actions do MMSD students and staff take in response to bullying?

We asked participants to describe how they managed bullying incidents, allowing their thoughts to emerge organically, or in some cases prompting them on prevention, response, follow-up activities, and training/education they had received. We present how participants talked about each aspect of current practice in its logical order of action, detailing the major themes that surfaced in each area.

Overall, both staff and students talked about bullying response more than prevention or follow-up, with follow-up talked about the least. Most staff comments about training reflected a lack of formal training focused on MMSD bullying policy, but students appear to be learning about bullying (e.g., the concepts of “allies” and “bystanders”).

Figure 2: Components of Anti-bullying Current Practice by Participant Group



Prevention. Thirteen percent (13%) of coded comments discussed prevention. To prevent bullying, staff discussed providing students with an *education* about bullying through modeling, morning meetings, the social emotional-learning curriculum, Second Step, or just talking with students about what bullying is and how to identify it. According to one staff member, “...teach, model, reward positive student interactions” are methods of how staff prevent bullying. *Building community/relationships* also helped staff proactively deal with bullying. Emphasizing a “place to go” and “someone to care about them,” one staff member believed building community was a critical piece of the puzzle. Other staff members recounted using goals, language, or other role-playing activities to help kids recognize and prevent bullying. Students suggested they could prevent bullying by *being nice* to others or *talking to an adult*.

Response. By far the largest category, 42% of total coded comments included information about responses to bullying. From the staff perspective, responses in the moment involved *redirection*, *mediation*, and “*calling out*” the behavior or the student, either privately or publicly. Students may not be aware that they are bullying, so “*calling out*” or naming the behavior may help them understand their actions. After an incident, staff mentioned filling out *referrals*, *gathering information/investigating* the incident to understand what happened and determine if it was actually bullying, and/or *reporting it to another staff person/administration*. One staff member outlined sending students to the office to fill out the



form that he assumed people followed up with, describing it as being “out of his hands” and not knowing how the process works. In terms of resolving incidents, staff often reported using *restorative conversations/circles*. For some, the response to the incident depended on the situation, such as “severity and timing.” For example, if the situation was immediate, there would be intervention and mediation on the spot. The BEP also played an important role in response; one staff member described pulling out the BEP “every day.”

When responding to a bullying incident, students said they would “*stand up*” to the bully, such as telling them to “stop.” Others said they would “*tell an adult*” or *deal with it on their own*, depending on the bully’s actions. For example, one student specified that it depended on the actions of the bully – if they were hurting you or using words – if you felt like you “should talk to them” or “just go straight to an adult.” Although reporting to an adult came up often, some students did not believe anything was done. A number of students implied that staff members did not react, even if they saw the behavior occurring.

Follow-Up. We included contacts with parents, logging incidents into Oasys, and subsequent check-ins as “follow up,” and 10% of coded comments described follow-up practices. Staff talked about *parental contact* and wanting parents to be part of the process. They also talked about the process of *documenting incidents* in Oasys, but expressed challenges of keeping up with the paperwork given time constraints and being “rushed from one thing to the next thing” to the point that “no one has time to follow through.” Additionally, follow through was not always communicated with staff. Some mentioned not knowing how incidents turn out, but that such information would be beneficial. Students did not speak to follow-up as much because they were prompted more around response.

Training or Education. Twelve percent (12%) of comments related to training or education, and it seemed that students received more education on bullying than staff members received MMSD-specific training on bullying. Staff often reported *not having any formal training* focused on student bullying, but a few mentioned partaking in training/professional development that had aspects applicable to bullying, such as inclusive schools, cultural sensitivity, or restorative conversations. In the Google Form, 15 of the 18 participants had not received training (83%). Some staff believed training would be beneficial, including training in behavior response. Students expressed having learned about topics such as *allies and bystanders*.

Other. This category (23% of coded comments) included comments not referring to current practices. Examples include difficulties identifying bullying or hypothetical comments.

What actions should MMSD students and staff take in response to bullying?

Additionally, we asked staff and students what actions should be taken in response to bullying and what the district could do moving forward. Students came up with a few key ideas, while staff offered a host of suggestions. We generally asked students to think about what students should do, and we generally asked staff what staff should do.

Students wanted other students to *stand up* to the bully and be an “ally” and not a “bystander” if they saw someone being bullied, and they wanted the targets to stand up for themselves as well. They suggested that students *tell a teacher*.

When staff were asked about other thoughts regarding bullying or actions that staff should take with bullying prevention, response, and follow-up, staff most often wanted *clarification of the process and policy*, and some felt like there were inconsistencies between policy and practice. A staff member confessed, “I’m not aware of what the policy is...” Staff also expressed a mix of wanting to *educate students* more on behavior and frustrations around perceived *consequences* (or lack thereof) and whether or not the consequences were holding students accountable. One staff member wrote, “I think we should have harder punishments and consequences.” Throughout, staff noted challenges related to *time and support*. Staff also expressed wanting more *follow up* and communication and more *training*. Staff felt that if the staff member doesn’t know there is a consequence, then chances are the target has the “same thought,” and without knowing the outcome, targets may stop asking for help “because nothing will happen anyway.” *Awareness* was also important, and staff thought some of that could be obtained by monitoring the halls, teachers being more aware in their classrooms, and or staff members simply being present.



The Challenges of Cyberbullying

Finally, an unforeseen finding not directly tied to a research question was the prevalence of cyberbullying. Especially prevalent in the middle and high schools, cyberbullying represented an issue of growing concern, especially with mobile apps such as SnapChat and other social media (e.g., Facebook and Instagram) making it easy to post pictures and “talk about bad stuff about people.” Multiple students described Instagram accounts where students anonymously posted things such as lists of the top 5 prettiest girls and also created lists of people who were “smartest, dumbest, ugliest.” The pervasiveness of digital technology, especially cell phones, make cyberbullying difficult to control and monitor. A staff member alluded to students having cell phones in the classroom, and it being an “ongoing battle” that staff “aren’t winning.” Another staff member noted, “...it’s disruptive to kids learning – checking phones all the time, it’s stressful and emotional...it’s hard for kids to focus because it’s happening all day.”

Beyond the ubiquity of technology, cyberbullying is *challenging for staff to manage* because the bullying can occur outside of class time and off school property, but students bring the aftermath back to school. Describing it as difficult to monitor, a staff member explained, “There’s a piece that happens outside of school that we have a tough time monitoring but it comes back into school. Parents ask why it’s happening and what we can do, but it’s hard when it’s happening at midnight.” Moreover, students have *difficulty disengaging*, so attacks can be “continuous” and “non-stop.” A staff member described, “There’s a piece with social media that kids refuse to move away from it – blocking or disengaging is tough because everyone is watching you and you don’t want to be seen as a punk, so you keep engaging.” Staff and students agreed that cyberbullying makes it easy for the bully to hide and not be held accountable.

Conclusion

Staff were more able to identify the core components that make up MMSD’s definition of bullying than students, and two important points emerge. First, some staff believed that repetition is a key part of bullying, which contrasts MMSD policy that states bullying “may be” repeated. This may result in some cases of bullying not being identified or followed up on if the bullying behavior only happens once. Second, students identified more with the infliction of harm or suffering aspect of bullying. Again, this may affect their ability to correctly identify bullying behavior when it happens because perceived power imbalances and intentionality parse out bullying from meanness or “joking around.” This means that clear and consistent messaging around the definition of bullying would be important to ensure that all bullying incidents are accurately identified and acted upon by both students and staff.

Staff and students pointed to multiple examples for why students get bullied, and these reasons often included aspects of students’ appearance (e.g., shoes, clothes, looking different), identity (e.g., sexuality, race, disability), and behavior (e.g., student actions, ability). Although both staff and students believed students got bullied for their appearance more often, students then talked about incidents related to identity more than staff, while staff spoke more about behavior.

When discussing work currently being done around student bullying, there was less discussion around prevention and follow-up from both staff and students – the majority of conversations focused on response. Staff members often described not having been trained in MMSD-specific bullying policy and response, and students indicated learning about bullying (e.g., the concepts of “allies” and “bystanders”).

As the district continues its work on student bullying, staff offered many suggestions for moving forward. Staff wanted to better understand the policy and processes they should go through when bullying incidents occur. They expressed a mix of wanting to educate students more on behavior and frustration around a perceived lack of consequences for bullying when it does occur, and they wanted appropriate consequences that they feel would hold students accountable for their actions. Staff desired more time, support, and follow-through about what happens after a bullying incident has occurred. They wanted training in MMSD policies and practice. Staff may also lack awareness that bullying is occurring. That said, providing training may help staff feel more equipped to recognize bullying and manage it.

Finally, cyberbullying is a growing challenge for staff to manage because it may occur outside of school hours and off of school property, yet the students bring the aftermath into school. Given this, it is important for students and staff alike to learn more about how to respond to cyberbullying and for students to learn how to disengage.