

1. Better support and direction for school districts

Kansas law requires school districts to adopt bullying policies and plans and make provisions for training. More direction and support are needed for these efforts. Clear guidelines for strong policies and effective plans need be shared. A statewide unit should be established or appointed to offer guidance and support school districts as they implement policies, plans and training. A bank of promising practices needs to be collected and available for school districts.

2. Continue and develop the state's focus on social-emotional and character development education to address school bullying

The research is clear about those youth behaviors that lead to school bullying. Preparation in social-emotional and character development skills are directly related to these bullying and victimization behaviors. Social-emotional growth is one of five measured outcomes in the Kansans Can initiative. Resources and supports available related to these initiatives in Kansas need to be shared through better communication efforts.

3. Examine the current state law and determine if it requires reconsideration

The Kansas law on bullying is broad and is somewhat inconsistent with research identifying bullying as repetitive over time and involving a power imbalance. The same inconsistency is evident in the state definition of cyberbullying. It is recommended that the State Board of Education examine the current state law and provide appropriate guidance.

4. Local policies and plans must focus on relationships, school climate and culture, and the mental health impact of bullying in schools

Bullying is a complex and multidimensional social issue. Bullying can occur in physical locations such as at the school, on a school bus, but can also take place virtually through online platforms such as social media and gaming. Different strategies are needed to address bullying based on the level of schooling, age of children and different school contexts. Changing school climate and culture takes time and persistence. Changing culture is especially difficult. To positively impact bullying behavior, schools need to focus on peer and adult-student relationships. A caring and safe environment is necessary. Any bullying plan must address the differing needs of students and staff identified by research regarding but not limited to biological sex, gender identity and expression, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, religious faith, and socio-economic status. The whole school community needs to be involved in policies and plans addressing bullying, including students, staff, teachers, leaders, families and those in the larger community context. A trusted means for reporting bullying behavior needs to be developed and shared. Mental health and counseling support for schools need to be strengthened and new funding sources considered.

5. The state needs better data on school bullying and measures for assessing program effectiveness.

The KCTC survey is an ambitious effort to gather information from students across multiple dimensions. The survey currently contains seven questions regarding bullying. At the same time, no collectively accepted measures for assessing bullying exist in Kansas. Given there are disparities in bullying experiences for identifiable characteristics measures that enumerate those experiences by demographics should be available. It is recommended that the KCTC survey continue to be administered but improved in ways outlined in the report. In addition, the need for school climate and other teacher surveys should be considered. Districts need guidance in determining which bullying programs are truly evidenced-based. In addition, agreed upon variables and measures for assessing the effectiveness of bullying programs need to be identified. Any surveys conducted should include a common definition of bullying.

6. Addressing Cyberbullying

As technology and social media continue to proliferate across our society, it is expected that the incidences of cyberbullying will increase. Cyberbullying can be exceedingly pernicious as it can increase the number of witnesses and audience, while also being anonymous. Districts need to consider specific plans regarding cyberbullying, and work with teachers, students, families, caregivers and technology/social media experts in finding effective means for addressing this behavior. Information campaigns by districts with input from students are recommended.

7. Training, professional development and teacher preparation

Educators have a wide array of responsibilities. Teaching and learning are complex matters that require a lot of skills. Academic achievement is important, as is the training of the other skills identified in the Kansans Can agenda. This includes growth on socio-emotional learning. But in order for schools to implement any program effectively, time, resources, and effective training are key. Training for in-service teachers and pre-service teachers on issues related to bullying and youth suicide prevention is recommended. The most promising practices to impact bullying behavior are those that are school-wide, universal and involve parents and families. This is the goal of social-emotional learning programs, and effective approaches should be shared and considered.