

# How to be an Advocate for Bullied Students

An advocate is one that pleads the cause of another, or one who supports or promotes the interests of another. The question is how can we, as educators, support students who have been bullied? How can we plead the cause of all bullied students and stop bullying? We have to be their champions. We must create a culture in our schools, which will hopefully spread to society, where everyone is treated respectfully and bullying is correctly understood and addressed. This tool kit is intended to help educators know how to **identify bullying, intervene in a bullying incident**, and **advocate for bullied students**.

## Pledge to be a Caring Adult Who Helps Bullied Students

When you take NEA's Bully Free pledge, you are promising students that they can talk to you and you will listen, that you will stand up for them, and that they are not alone. Take the following actions to carry out your promise to advocate for bullied students.

### Be Present and Available to Observe and Listen

We know that bullying commonly takes place in areas on school grounds with little or no supervision (such as in the hallways between classes). Make an effort to move to the areas where students are during transition times. Just your presence can make a huge difference. And, when something does happen, you are there to see it with your own eyes and intervene right away.

## Students Can't Learn in Fear

Students must be provided with a safe school climate that is conducive to learning. Bullying is a huge deterrent to a safe learning environment. In education, we sometimes feel that there are many things that impact student learning that are out of our control. Bullying is not one of those things. A student who is being bullied at school is being denied an opportunity to learn. We have the ability to change this, to stop the negative impacts to students' well-being and their ability to learn, and ultimately, in some cases, to save their lives.

*"I was bullied badly when I was a student, starting all the way back in elementary school. It started in my fifth grade Physical Education class. I didn't throw a ball in the most masculine ways. One of the boys yelled, "You throw like a girl!" Then others joined in. "You're a queer," they said, laughing. By high school, the constant bullying led me to extreme depression. My grades dropped, and so did my aspirations. I attempted suicide twice. When I recovered and finally came to terms with who I was, I knew I was going to dedicate my life to making sure that no other kids would endure what I endured."*

*Vincent Pompei, Teacher*

Val Verde High School, Perris, California

NEA Bully Free: It Starts With Me Pledge Taker

## Bullying is a Solvable Problem

Expand your advocacy for bullied students, by ensuring that your school has a comprehensive bullying prevention plan in place. A prevention plan enables educators to have a process in place for learning how to recognize bullying behaviors, how to intervene appropriately when it's witnessed, and how to prevent it in the first place.

### Educate Students

Involve your students as peer advocates. Get student input when developing a bullying prevention plan. Integrate the topic of bullying and how to deal with it into your curriculum.

Role-play with students on diffusing a bullying situation and engaging bystanders. Create opportunities for students to work together, such as assignments that require sharing and collaboration. An anti-bullying curricula should encourage students to report bullying and harassment to an adult.

## Where and When Do Students Feel Unsafe?

Locate and conduct school climate surveys with staff and students. Surveys can help identify areas for improvement in regards to school climate. A positive school climate is associated with less bullying and more learning. You can also conduct a mapping activity. This involves making copies of the school map and asking all staff to indicate where they think students do and do not feel safe. The same activity should be done with students. Mapping these “hot spots” is a very effective indicator of where bullying could be occurring. Strategies must be implemented to remedy these “hot spots” (e.g., more adult supervision on the stairwells or better lighting in dark hallways). Bullying is most likely to occur in schools where there is a lack of adult supervision during the day, so let’s make wise changes to staff assignments and keep students safe.

## Stand Up

Let your voice be heard with a call to action. Organize your local and state association members, as well as non-members and parents around bullying prevention. Get bullying on the map; ensure that space is carved out to address bullying at local meetings and state conferences. Track changes to your state’s anti-bullying law. Also, review and revise state education agency and district policies related to bullying. Remember that parents of bullied students can be strong allies and advocates.

## Zero Out Zero Tolerance

Zero tolerance policies hinder bullying prevention efforts. Such policies generally involve suspension or exclusion from school and are related to increased drop out rates and discriminatory application of school discipline practices. Also, there is no evidence that removing students from school makes a positive contribution to school safety. We do know that students who bully need pro-social models. We can advocate for bullied students by working to develop and/or utilize bullying prevention programs that do work, such as:

- ▶ Targeted behavioral support programs for at-risk students
- ▶ Character education and social-emotional learning programs
- ▶ School-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports
- ▶ Early intervention strategies

## If It’s Broken It Does Need Fixing

A large part of being an advocate for bullied students is to not accept the status quo. Be informed about measures you and/or your school may be using that are known not to work, or that make a situation worse. For example, peer mediation and conflict resolution are valuable strategies that do work in other instances, but they are NOT the right fit for dealing with bullying. The message that both parties are partly right and partly wrong is inappropriate. Students who bully must receive the message that their behavior is wrong and won’t be tolerated. The fact that peer mediation exacerbates the imbalance of power between the student who bullies and their target also cannot be ignored. Speak up for changing out the current way of addressing bullying. The research is out there; encourage your colleagues to be open to change.

## Develop ESP-Specific Strategies

Education Support Professionals (ESPs), such as bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and paraeducators, are likely to be present where bullying tends to occur, so they need concrete strategies to use during an incident. Be sure to involve all school staff in the development of a comprehensive school-wide prevention plan as well as in all trainings. ESP-specific resources are also needed.

## Evaluate Annually and Sustain Efforts Over Time

Monitor classrooms and school grounds for implementation fidelity. Consistency of effort is essential. Bullying prevention requires a long-term commitment.

## Bullying is a Social Justice Issue

NEA’s vision and mission statements are rooted in social justice. Social justice includes a vision of society in which all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. Bullying and sexual harassment are behaviors designed to oppress another person. It is our duty as educators to assure a safe learning environment and social justice for all students.

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