

DIGNITY FOR ALL STUDENTS ACT

Review After One Year Under the Act

New York State's Dignity for All Students Act took effect on July 1, 2012, and was amended effective July 1, 2013. This paper seeks to inform readers of Indian River's progress during the first year of the Act in implementing the Act's original provisions, and the course Indian River has laid out to build on our successes and meet the requirements of the 2013 amendments.

The Act seeks to provide the State's public elementary and secondary school students with a safe and supportive environment free from discrimination, intimidation, taunting, harassment, and bullying on school property, on school buses, and at school functions. It requires instruction in civility, citizenship, and character education, and seeks to expand the concepts of tolerance, respect for others and dignity to include awareness of and sensitivity to the relations of people, including different races, weights, national origins, ethnic groups, religions, religious practices, mental or physical abilities, sexual orientations, genders, and gender identities.

The Act provides a cohesive framework around which the District may integrate its existing programs aimed at ensuring that all students have a safe educational environment, free from the pressures which historically arise out of individual differences.

PRIOR TO THE ACT

Bullying and other forms of harassment and intimidation have been present in the public school setting for years. The Indian River Central School District recognized the need to prevent and address bullying and other forms of harassment and intimidation years before Act mandated school districts to address these issues. Of particular importance, the District recognized that a "one size fits all" approach was not appropriate. Whereas older, high school age students can be involved in peer mediation, for example, younger students still require a much larger degree of adult mediation and intervention to head off problems. Among the many approaches taken by the District were:

- Each year the District has conducted "Right To Know" compliance training for its staff before the first day of school, including elements addressing sexual and other forms of harassment prohibited by law.
- Throughout the school year there are "superintendent's conference days" at which staff receive instruction; this frequently includes items addressing discrimination, harassment, or bullying.
- The members of the Board of Education annually attend a retreat at which they are instructed on the requirements of the discrimination and harassment laws and any recent changes.
- On the first day of school each year the District provides instruction to all students regarding the District's Code of Conduct and its prohibitions on harassment and bullying, which covers sexual harassment and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation.

- In the late 1990s the District began employing a team of student mediation personnel whose sole focus was to be in touch with students on a day-to-day, personal level, and to enact appropriate interventions.
- The District, because of its extensive military population, began training its guidance staff on techniques in dealing with highly mobile children as they entered and departed the system. By easing the pressures of the transition, a new student was no longer an “easy target.”
- The full implementation of the S2S (Student to Student) program provided peer leadership and intervention under direct adult supervision and greatly limited the potential for harassment based on differences.
- The S2S peer leadership/peer intervention program also served as the umbrella for Rachel’s Challenge, a program dedicated to the memory of Rachel Joy Scott, a victim of the Columbine shootings. The aim of the program was to prevent differences from becoming the catalyst for destructive bullying behavior.
- In 2003, the District was the first in the region to integrate the services of a school resource officer into its program. The concept was simple – as an adjunct to the district staff, the officer could provide instruction in the legal ramifications of individual acts. The officer would also provide a safe conduit for sharing information impacting the safety of all students and staff. Through a number of difficult budget years, the District steadfastly maintained this valuable program.
- Our athletics department departed from athletic “tradition” with an outright ban on any activities which could be construed as hazing. Student athletes were unequivocally informed that any such activities would not be tolerated.
- The High School Drama Club took on the sensitive topic of hate crimes with their 2008 production of “The Laramie Project” about the reaction to the brutal murder of University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard.
- The District engaged in a training session with renowned author Barbara Coloroso, author of *The Bully*, *The Bullied*, and *The Bystander*, because, in her words, “Kids are worth it!”

FIRST YEAR OF THE ACT

The Act requires schools to address bullying and harassment in policy, in training, and in the curriculum. Further, it requires that curricular efforts be age appropriate and written in the language and level of understanding of the target audience.

At Indian River, the Act served as a vehicle to organize ongoing efforts in this area as well as to provide a formal, documented means of reporting and investigating allegations brought to the attention of appropriate individuals. To that end, the District took the following steps:

- Policies and the Code of Conduct were re-written by the Board of Education, with the assistance of counsel, to encompass these activities and to expressly cover all protected classes.
- Links to the new Code of Conduct and the new harassment and discrimination policies were posted on the District website, along with information about the Act and the process for reporting harassment, discrimination, and bullying to designated individuals within the District.
- Dignity Act Coordinators were named at each building and District-wide to respond to harassment complaints, conduct and oversee investigations, address questions from staff and students, and keep the District's administrators informed of such issues.
- Formal training was provided to the District's entire staff by the District's attorneys.
- Each building held meetings with all of the students to discuss the importance of respecting each other's differences.
- The presentations to students on the first day of the school year were updated to include more specific examples of incidents involving bias and discrimination, and reviewed the changes to the Code of Conduct spelling out in detail what is prohibited harassment (including harassment on the basis of sex or sexual orientation).
- The Board of Education retreat included a presentation on antigay harassment and cyberbullying.

The knowledge and awareness of staff grew as they worked to distinguish pervasive bullying from isolated rude comments. The heightened attention to these issues was evident at all grade levels. Adult staff members were able to mediate peer-to-peer communications as the process evolved. The involvement of parents in the process, of course, was and is critical to its success. As the District's intense efforts in this area progressed, the message "if you see something, say something" became reality, as more and more students became comfortable using the formal reporting channels to combat bullying and harassment.

MOVING FORWARD WITH THE ACT

As the District moved forward into the new school year, the 2013 amendments to the Act were implemented as well.

Among other things, the amendments address a new challenge of the digital age – cyber-bullying. The various forms of social media allow text messages to be sent and received at all hours of the day and night, and they can often be cruel. Snapchat provides for the posting of

video clips that quickly disappear, and Facebook emulates that with its Poke app. Because offending images on Snapchat or the Poke app are short-lived, they can be even more difficult to control. Now, more than ever before, the District will need to enlist parents in an effort to control communications.

These new challenges will require new training for staff and for parents. We must partner as never before to ensure that children will have the opportunity to get a solid education, free from the effects of harassment by peers. The District must have means to effectively address these concerns. We will be looking at the data collected over the past years for trends and hotspots, and we will be continuing to provide training to our staff and students on civility and tolerance.

As this year closes and we prepare for the new year, we encourage parents to watch for opportunities to partner with your schools' administration, teachers, counselors and support staff to ensure that each and every student is shown the courtesy and dignity he or she deserves while a student at Indian River.