

## School violence reporting in NY likely to change

### Violence

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ALBANY -- Schools in New York will have a more streamlined system to report violence amid longstanding criticism that the current process is flawed.

The state Education Department this week said it has recommended an overhaul to the Violent and Disruptive Incident Reporting system, which was put in place in 2001 to better monitor violence in New York schools.

The changes come a year after a state audit ripped the current system, saying violence was under-reported in some districts.

“Schools should be safe havens for our children but, all too often, tragedies and emergencies rob our

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students and teachers of that sense of security,” Betty Rosa, the chancellor for the state Board of Regents, said in a statement.

The changes include greater emphasis on violent offenses and reducing the number of reporting categories from 20 to nine, state education leaders said.

Also, the new regulations would improve the definitions of violent incidents, which is aimed at helping schools better report any problems to state officials.

The proposed amendments will be published in the State Register on Sept. 28, allowing for 45-day public comment period that expires on Nov. 14.

If the Board of Regents adopts the regulations, they will be effective for the 2017-18 school year.

“It is critical that everyone has a clear and consistent way to track and compare the level of safety in every school so districts can better work toward ensuring each child is protected from harm,” state Education Commissioner Mary-Ellen Elia said in a statement.

Federal and state laws require the Education Department to track violence in schools and identify dangerous public elementary and secondary schools. The state law dates back to 2001. But the system has been criticized because the incidents are self-reported by schools, leading to few violent situations actually being recorded and sent to the state. Also, the state has been knocked for not enforcing the regulations.

An audit from state Comptroller Thomas Di-Napoli in January 2015 found that seven schools — East High School in Rochester and Pleasantville High School in Westchester County — failed to report cases of violence, sexual offenses and bullying. “Unfortunately, it appears that many schools are failing to live up to the reporting requirements, leaving parents in the dark about violence and other incidents that affect the

classroom learning environment,” DiNapoli said at the time.

The audit found numerous schools failed to report hundreds of cases, while many cases were misclassified as less serious than they should have been. The state Education Department said the problem is partly because the regulations do not give schools accurate ways to describe a violent event at a school. Also, the regulations failed to offer ways for schools to cut down on violence.

The laws regarding violence, bullying and sexual harassment were bolstered in 2012 when the Dignity for All Students Act was put into law by the state Legislature and Gov. Andrew Cuomo. The anti-bullying law also has had reporting flaws, state lawmakers aid. So the state Education Department said the new standards will create one reporting structure for incidents that fall under either law. The nine categories of school violence would be: bomb threat; false alarm; homicide; incidents of discrimination; harassment and bullying; physical injury; sexual offenses; use, possession or sale of drugs; use, possession or sale of alcohol; and weapons possession. Assemblyman Daniel O’Donnell, D-Manhattan, who sponsored the Dignity for All Students Act, has urged the state Education Department to revisit the law.

He said the accuracy of AIDS/HIV education should be reviewed. He also proposed that teachers seeking state certification should have to take a full-semester course about harassment, bullying and discrimination in schools. “Despite implementation of the Dignity Act, schools are reporting bullying, but not being proactive in preventing bullying by creating inclusive cultures,” he said in a statement Sept. 7.

The new regulations are positive changes, said Robert Lowry, deputy director of the state Council of School Superintendents.

He said superintendents “feel a personal obligation to parents to keep their children safe every day” because they are often the ones who have to personally address any major incidents. “The old categories were complicated and unclear, making reporting cumbersome for school officials and inconsistent across districts,” Lowry said. “The new categories will simplify reporting and give the public better information about the safety of our schools.”

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**ROBERT LOWRY**

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