

KENTUCKY CENTER FOR SCHOOL SAFETY



Kentucky Center for School Safety

Addressing Bullying Incidents: A Principal's Perspective

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Introduction

While much has been written about the perception of bullying in schools from the perspective of students, parents and teachers, there is scant mention of school-level administrators' view on the subject. In this report, we examine the issues surrounding bullying in schools from the perspective of Kentucky principals and assistant principals who are charged with the task of investigating reports of bullying instances. Between September 1 and October 30, 2015, the Kentucky Center for School Safety requested that elementary, middle and high school principals and assistant principals complete a survey to examine their perceptions of and experiences with bullying issues in Kentucky schools. In general, principals were asked to provide data related to how anti-bullying policies are implemented in their school system.

Presentation Method

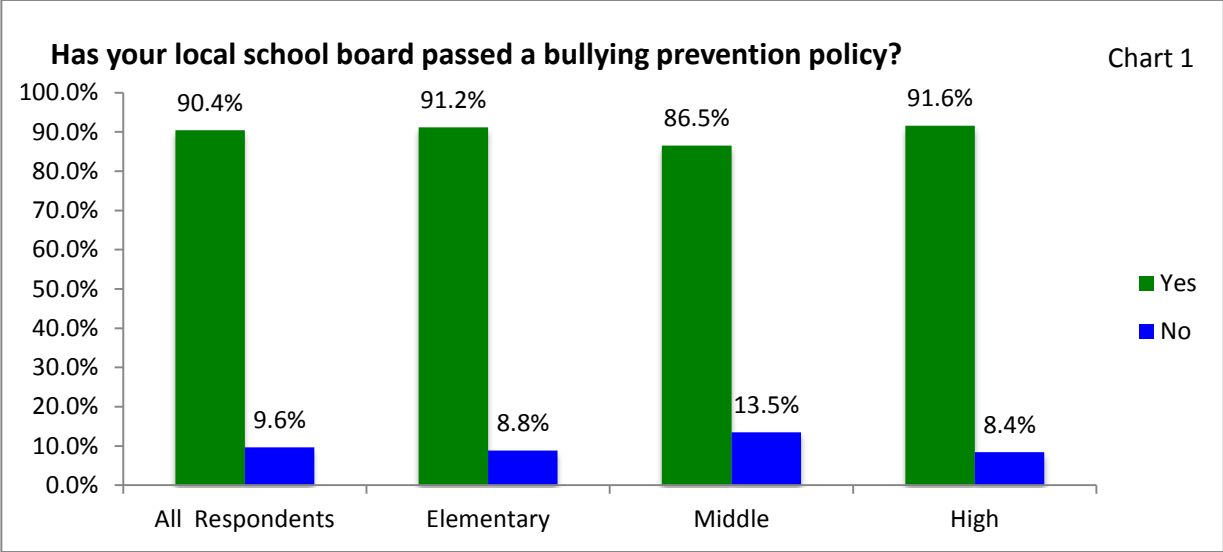
All data in this report are presented in percentages. All charts and tables include only valid responses; if the respondents did not complete the question or did not know the answer, these responses were excluded from the percentage calculations. If needed, keys to the tables can be found directly below each chart.

Demographic Summary of Respondents to the Survey

Principals and assistant principals across Kentucky were asked to answer 26 questions via Survey Monkey regarding their perceptions about bullying in schools. Of the 26 questions, 3 asked for demographic data, 18 were multiple choice, and 5 were open-ended. Of 1,250 principals and 1,200 assistant principals in Kentucky, 625 responded. Of the 625 respondents, 383 were principals and 242 were assistant principals. The highest response rate, 39.5%, was from the elementary level while the lowest rate, 26.4%, came from middle schools, and the high school response fell between the two at 34.1%. Respondents were not asked to identify their gender, locality, or level of experience.

The Responses

The body of the report illustrates survey items and responses. Please note that any cumulative percentage exceeding 100 is a result of items for which respondents were asked to choose multiple responses if they were applicable.



The results presented in Chart 1 indicate that a majority of school boards in Kentucky have passed a bullying prevention policy. Respondents from high and elementary schools reported the highest percentage of school boards with policies, 91.6% and 91.2% respectively, with a slightly lower percentage (86.5%) at the middle school level.

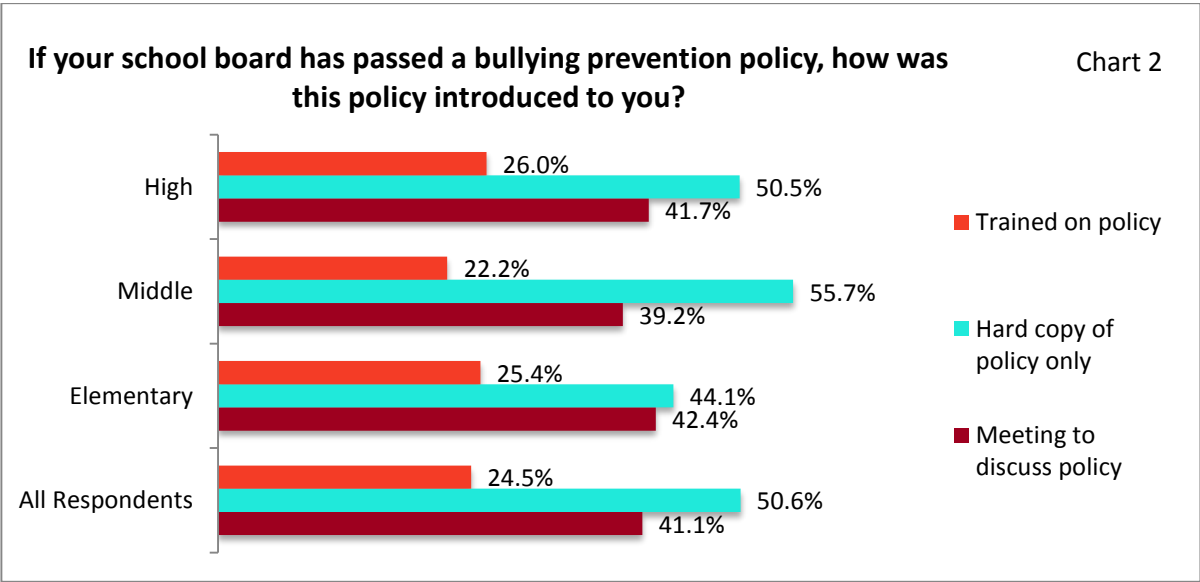
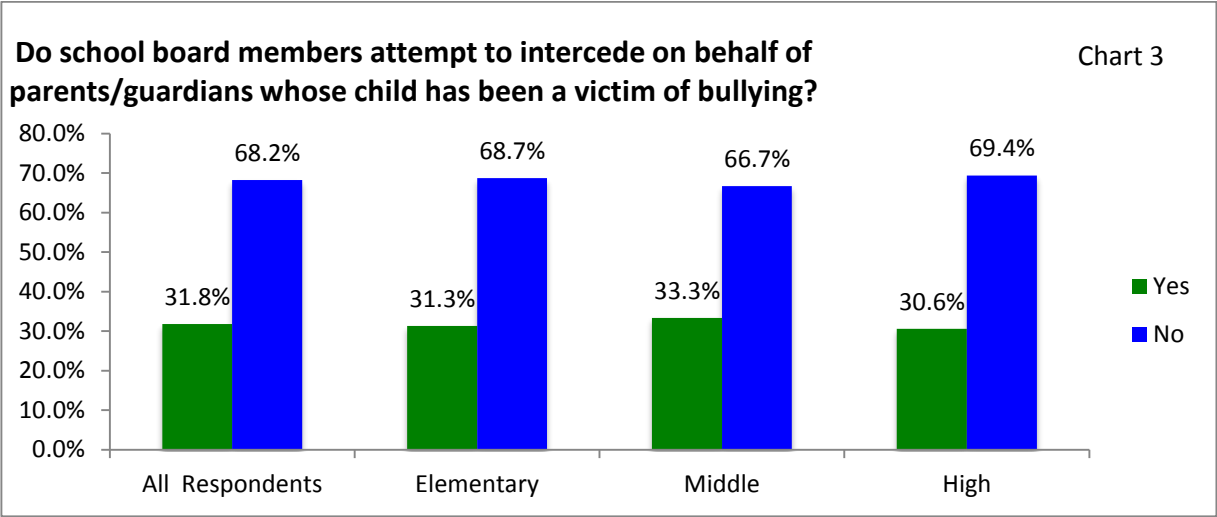
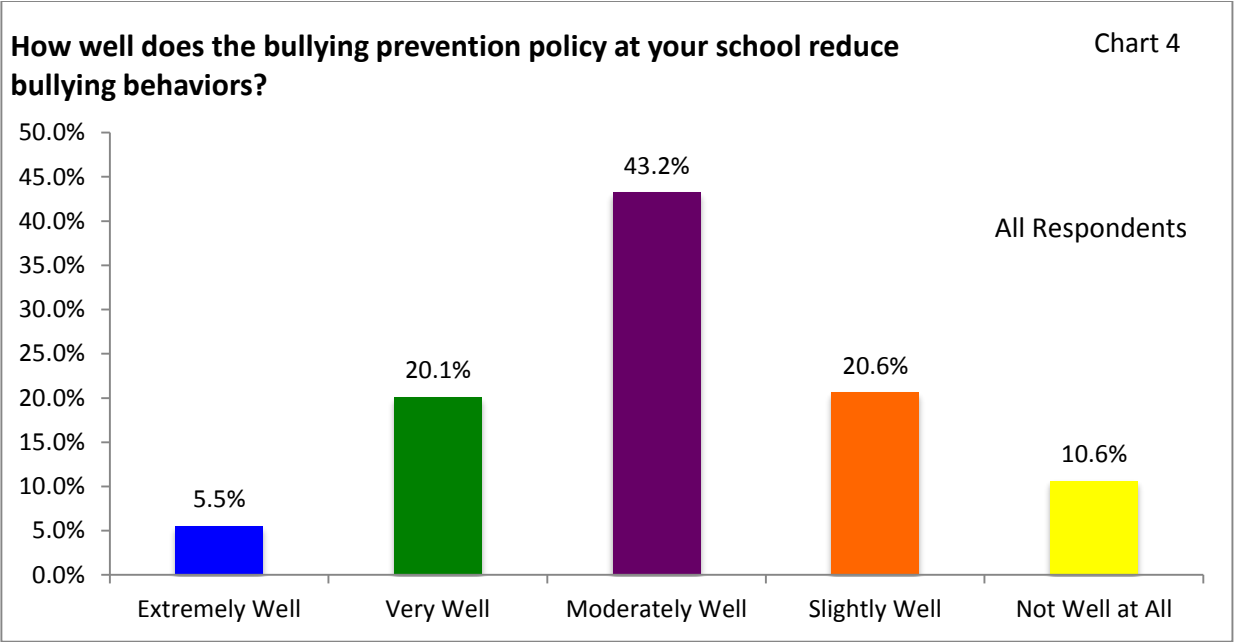


Chart 2 indicates that administrators at all levels responded that training was the least frequent means of presenting a bullying prevention policy to administrators (24.5%) while receiving a hard copy of the policy (50.6%) and attending a meeting to discuss the bullying prevention policy (41.1%) were more common.



Nearly one-third of principals (31.8%, Chart 3) perceive that school board members attempt to intercede on parents/guardians’ behalf. There was no significant difference among the principals across the three levels.



More than two-thirds, 68.8%, of all respondents perceived that the bullying prevention policy is reducing bullying behaviors in their school at least moderately well (**Chart 4**). Only 10.6% perceived that the policy was not working well at all.

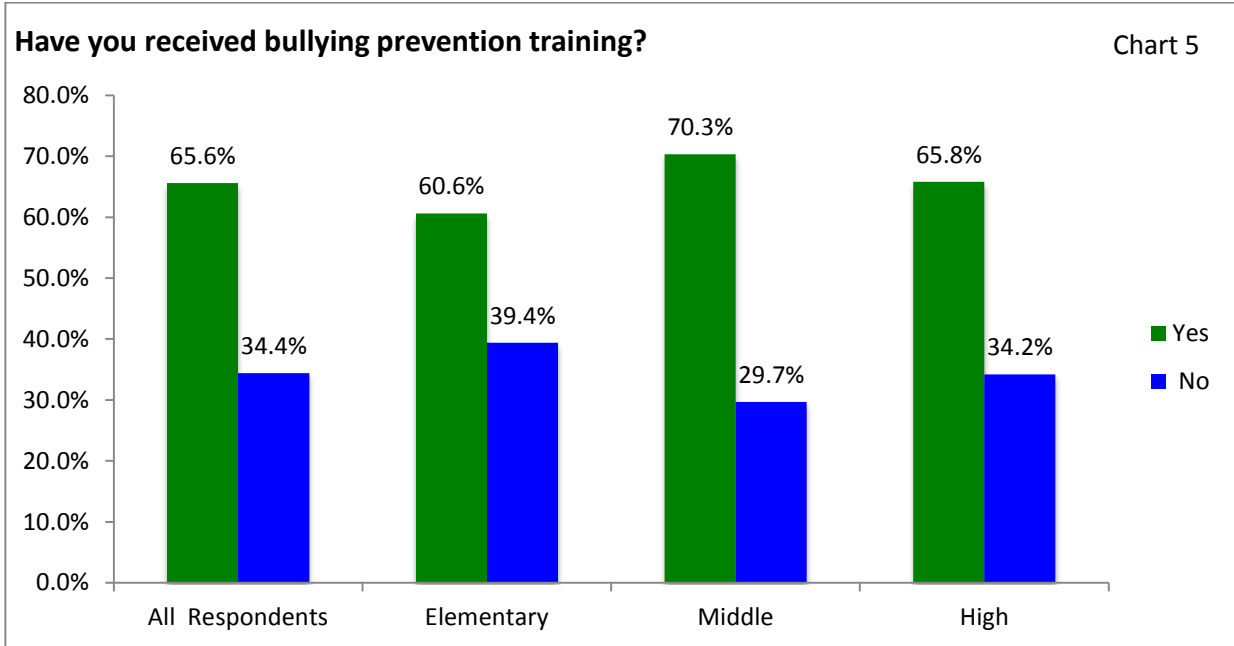
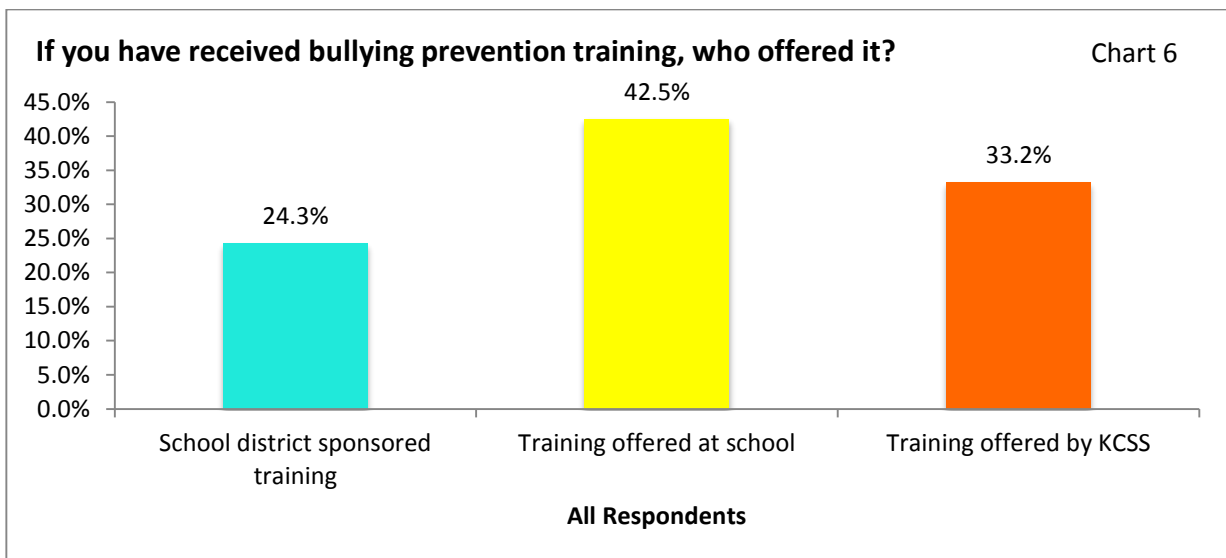
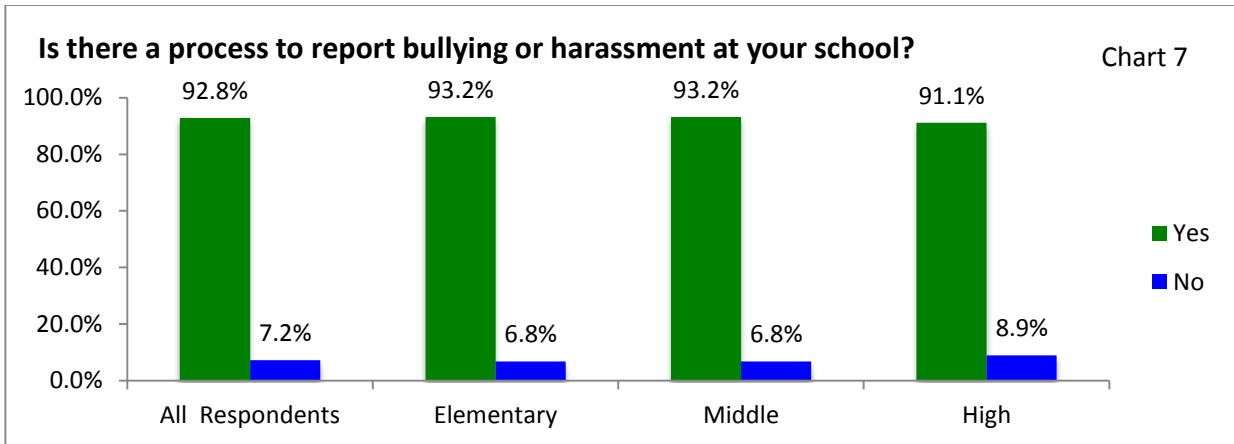


Chart 5 shows that slightly more than two-thirds (65.6%) of all respondents had received bullying training. Middle school principals reported the highest rate of training, 70.3%, and elementary principals reported the lowest, 60.6%.



Of the 407 respondents who had received bullying prevention training, the training was most frequently school based, 42.5%, while trainings conducted by the Kentucky Center for School Safety (KCSS) and the school district were reported 33.2% and 24.3% respectively (Chart 6).



Respondents from elementary and middle schools reported that 93.2% have a process to report bullying while high schools reported a slightly lower percentage, 91.1% (Chart 7).

Descriptions of the reporting process varied widely across the three levels with the only consistency being that someone at the school level was designated to receive reports.

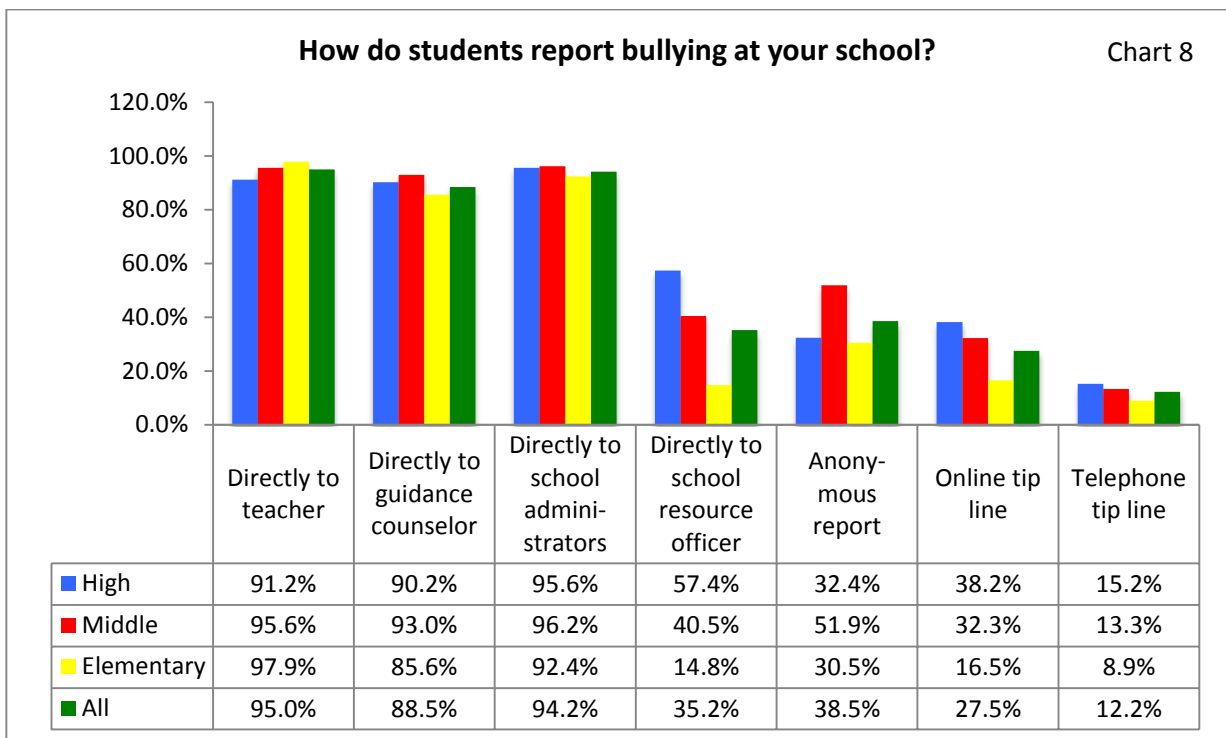
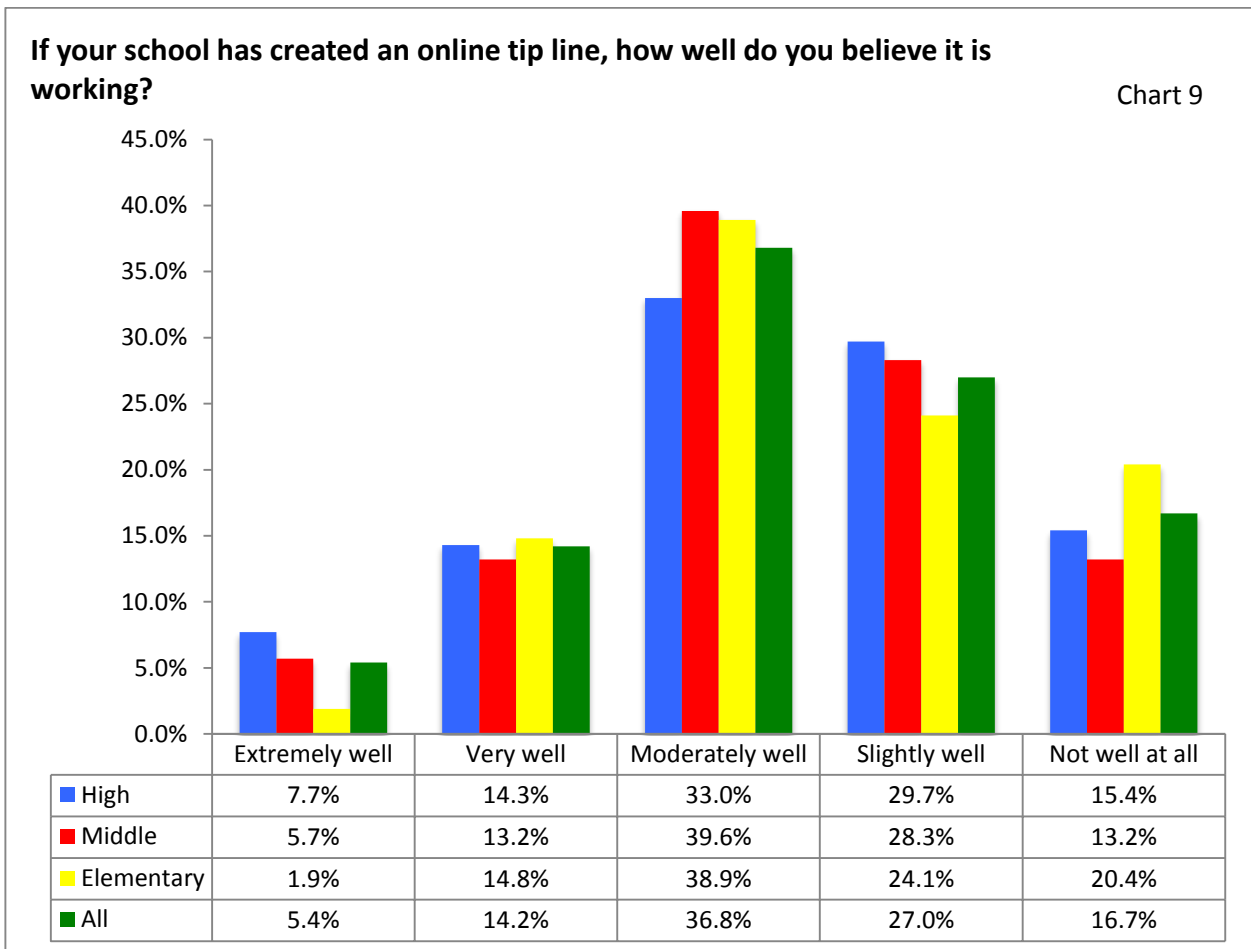


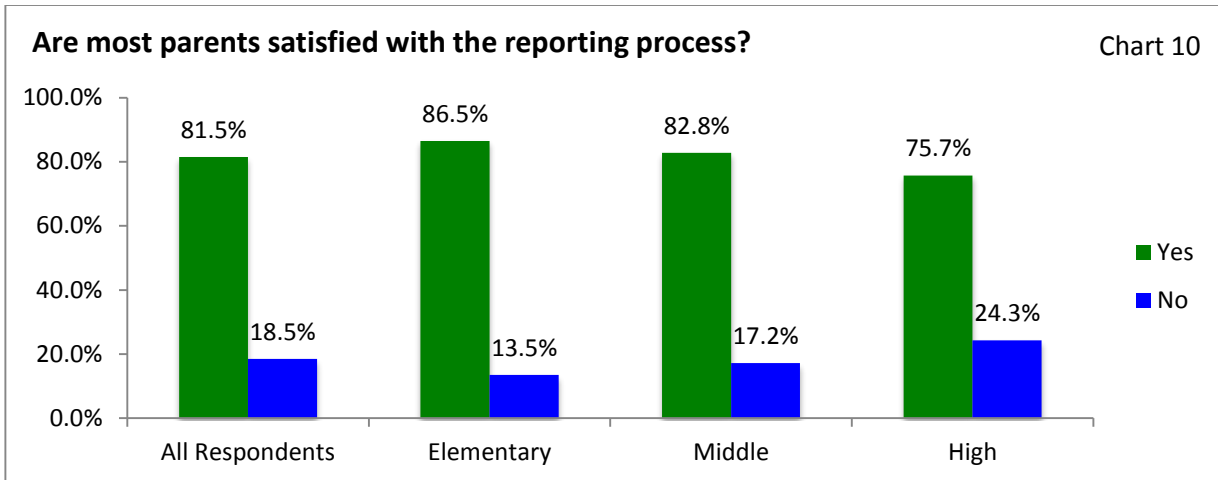
Chart 8 shows that at all levels, students report bullying directly to teachers, school administrators, and counselors most frequently (95.0%, 94.2%, and 88.5% respectively). Elementary respondents reported the lowest levels of reporting to school resource officers, online tip line and telephone tip line. Anonymous reporting is most frequent at the middle school level, 51.9%, as compared to elementary, 30.5%, and high school, 32.4%.



The online tip line was rated as working extremely or very well by 22% of respondents at the high school level, 18.9% at middle school, and 16.7% at elementary (Chart 9). Not working well at all was cited by 20.4% of elementary respondents while high school and middle school respondents were 15.4% and 13.2%, respectively.

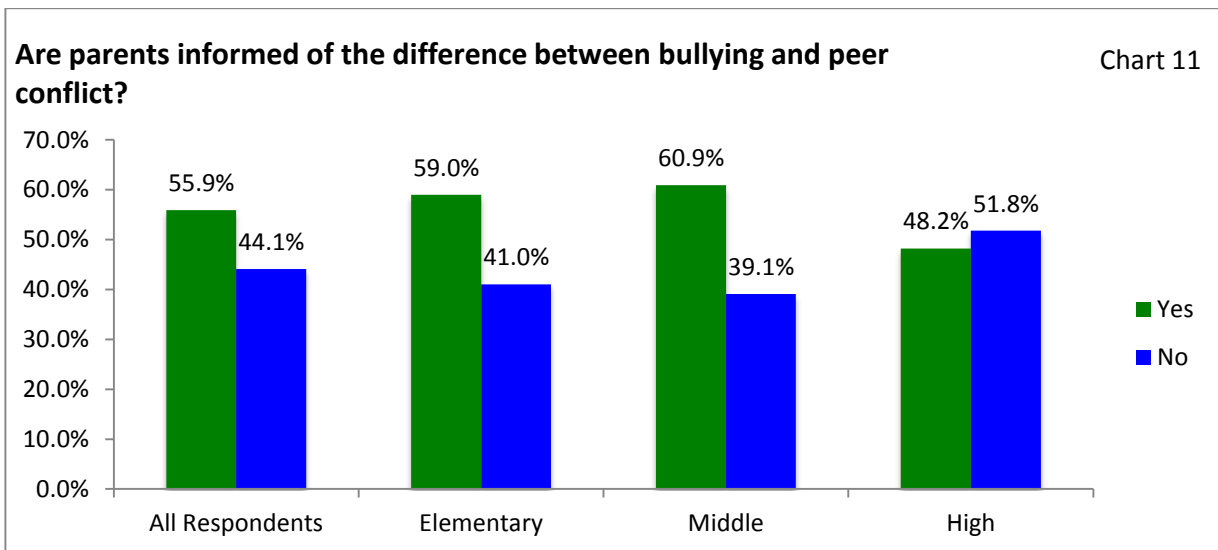
When asked to identify what improvements could be made to the online tip line, making students more aware of the tip line was a frequent theme, but many perceived no improvements were needed.

When asked to specify problems that they have encountered in administering the bullying prevention policy, principals most frequently cited problems connected to the definition of bullying. For example, mean behavior and peer conflict were described as often being labeled as bullying by students and their parents/guardians.

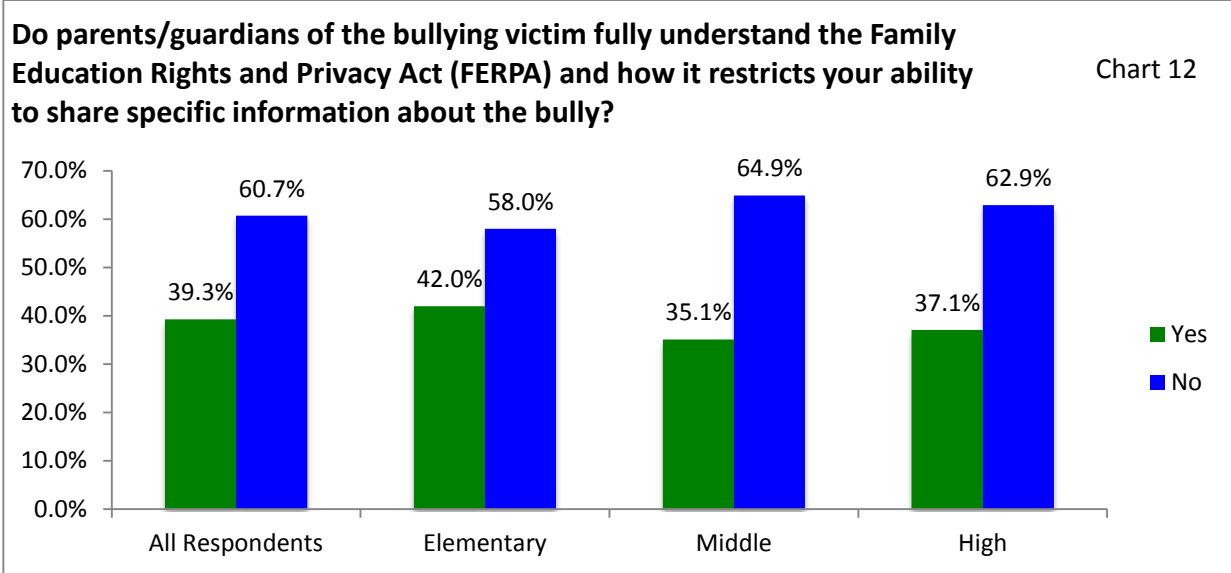


Parent satisfaction with the reporting process was highest at the elementary level, 86.5%, and lowest at the high school level, 75.7%, with middle schools falling in the middle, 82.8%

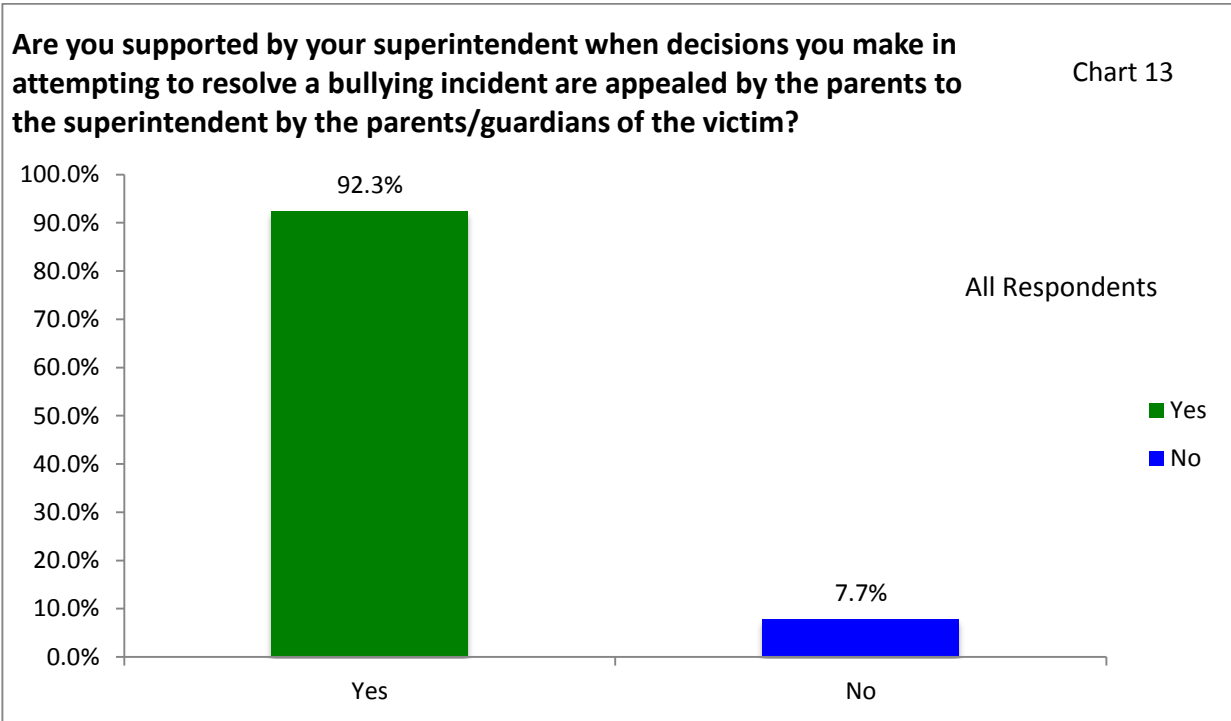
Respondents reported that parents were most often informed of the bullying prevention policy through written communication, i.e., handbook, code of conduct, letters home, posting on website, etc. Verbal communication of the policy was most often conducted at an open house at the beginning of school or at a PTA meeting.



Parents were informed of the difference between peer conflict and bullying most frequently at the middle and elementary school levels, (60.9% and 59.0% respectively) with less than half, 48.2%, at the high school level. Although the majority of respondents perceived parents were informed of the difference between peer conflict and bullying, principals still perceived (as reported in Chart 11) that many of the problems they encountered in administering the bullying prevention policy was due to a lack of understanding the definition of bullying.



Approximately two-thirds of middle and high school respondents (64.9% and 62.9%) perceived that parents did not fully understand the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) while more than half of the elementary respondents, 58.0% perceived the same (Chart 12).



Principals perceived overwhelming support, 92.3%, from their superintendents when an administrative decision is appealed by the parents/guardians of the victim (Chart 13).

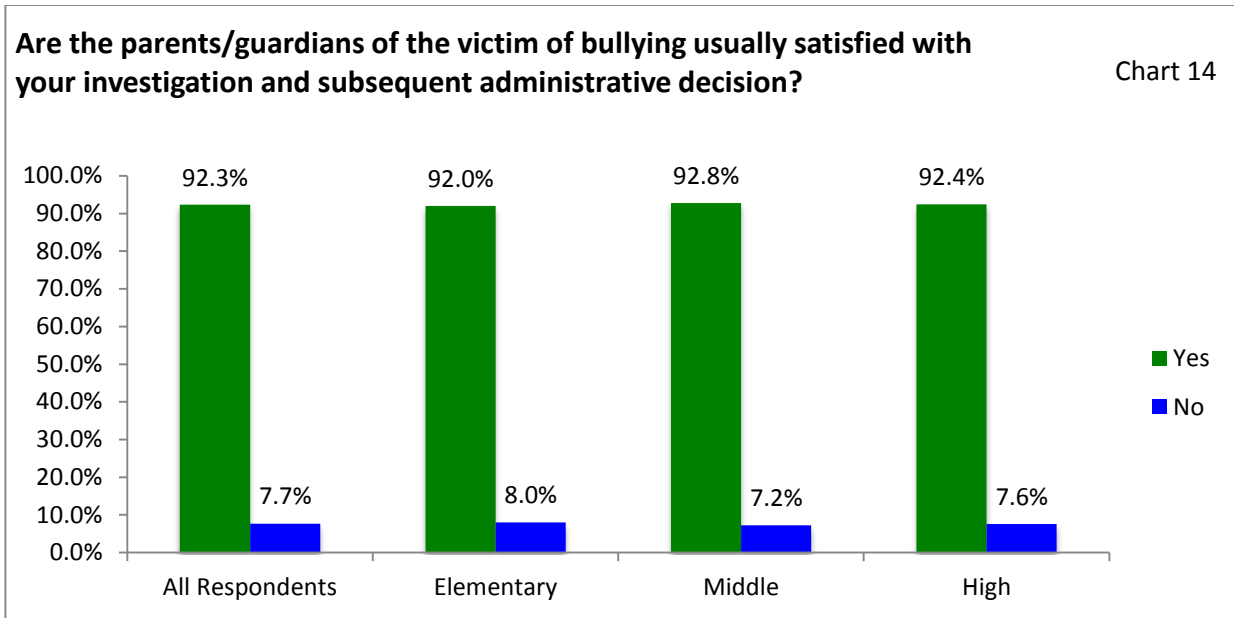
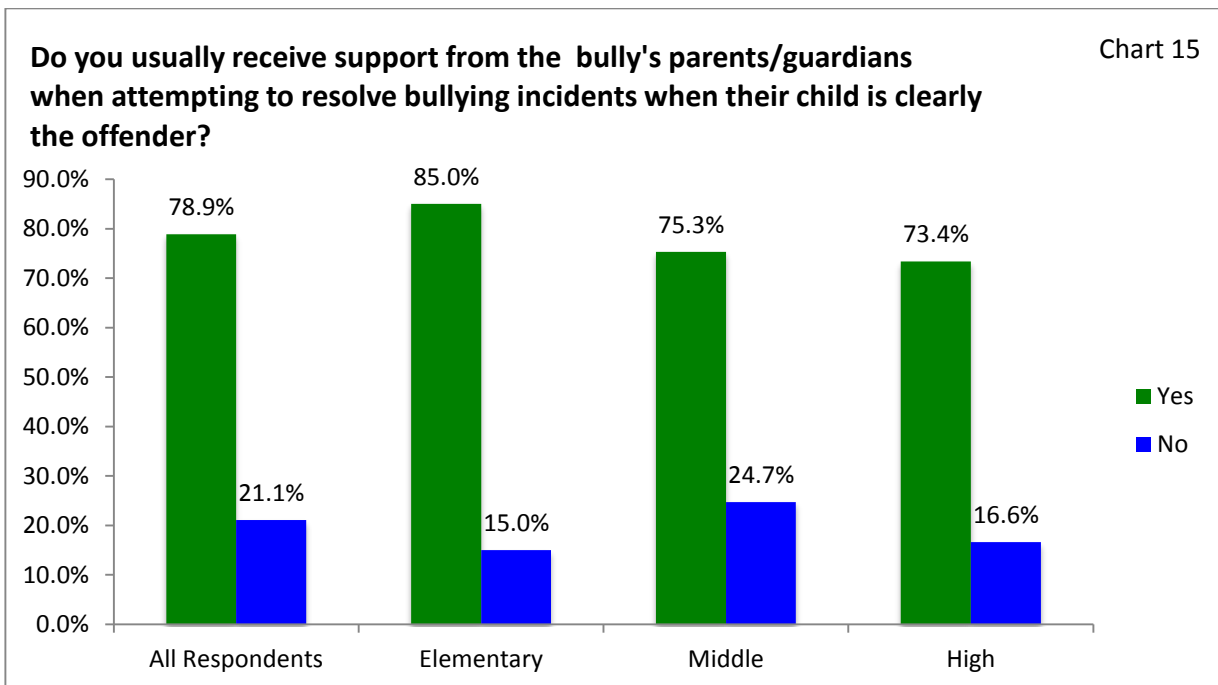
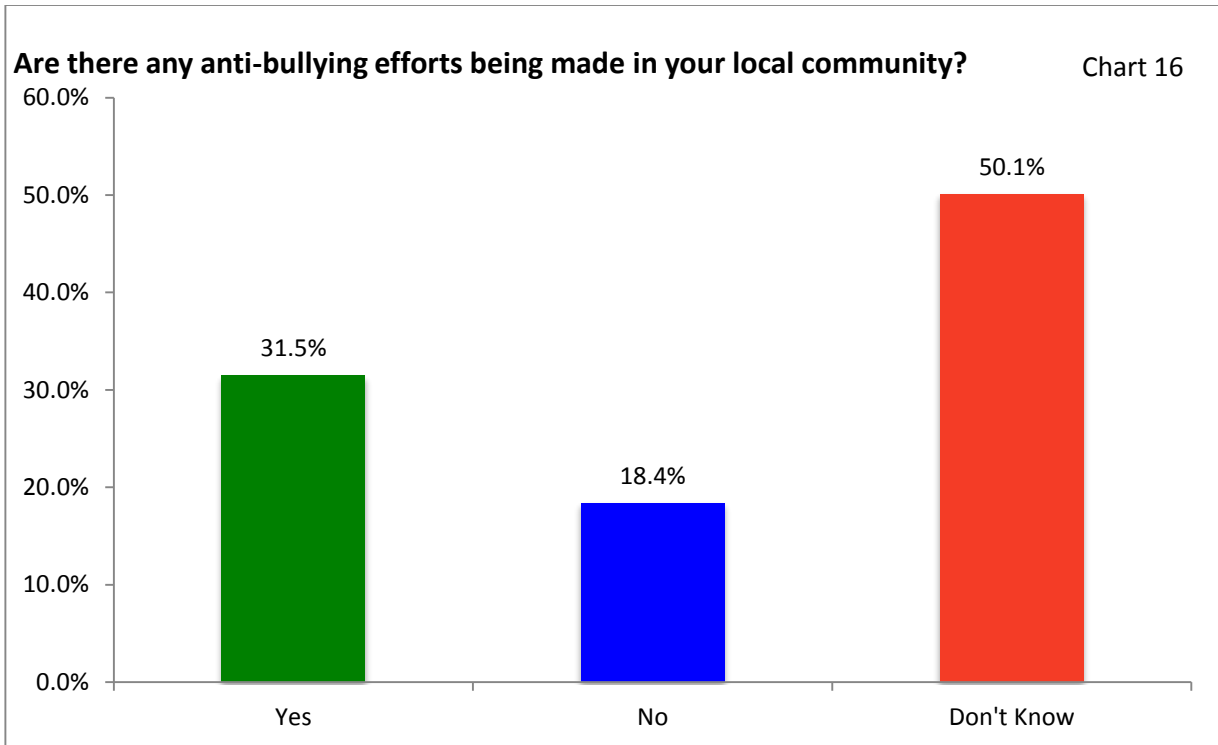


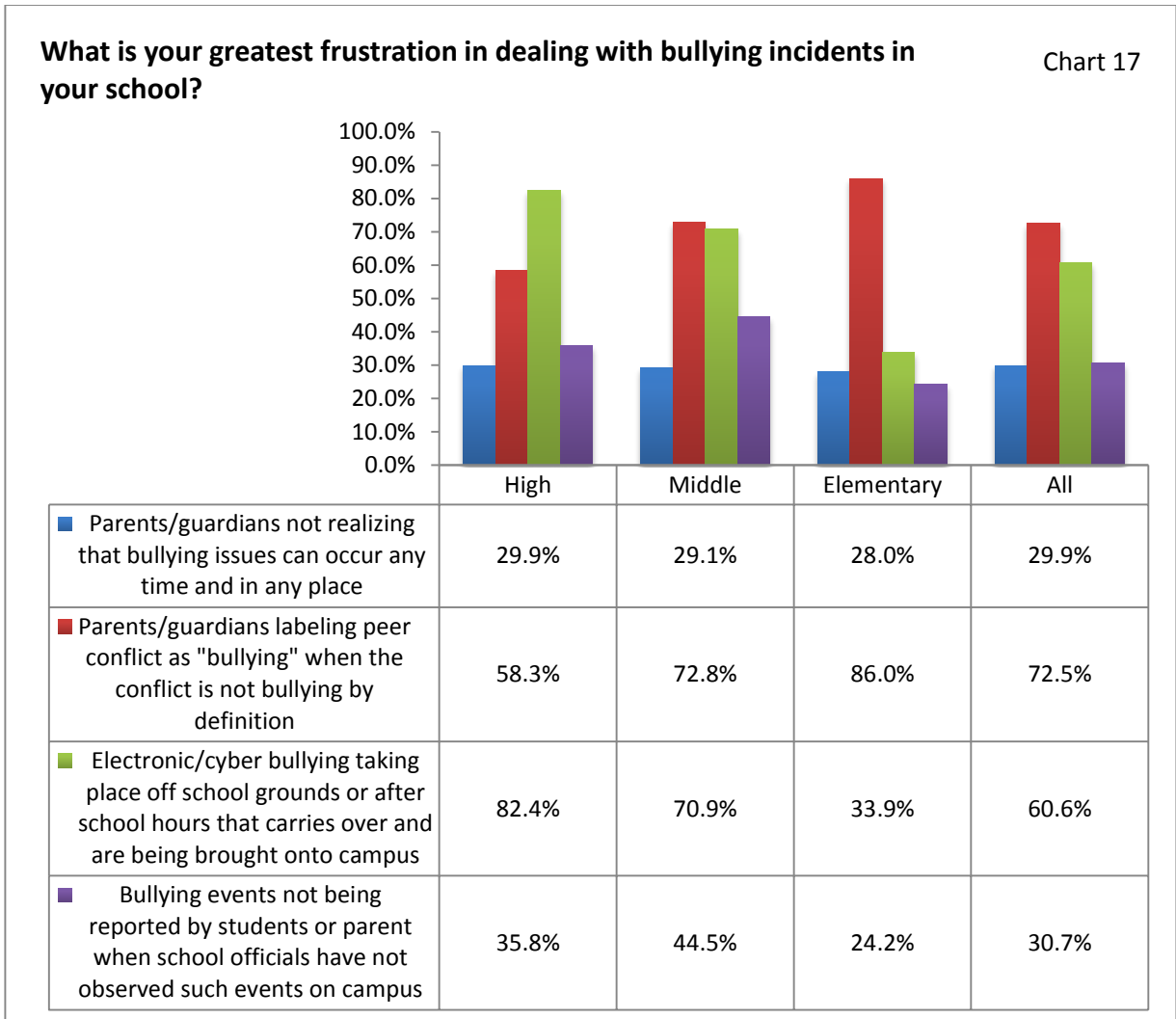
Chart 14 illustrates that at all levels, more than 90% of the respondents perceived that parents/guardians of the victim were satisfied with their investigation and administrative decision. This high level of satisfaction indicates that principals are being successful in clarifying parent/guardians misconceptions about the definition of bullying.



When attempting to resolve bullying incidents, while more than 78% of respondents at all levels perceived that they received support from the bully's parents/guardians (Chart 15), the level of support was strongest at the elementary level, 85%, with middle and high school support falling to 75.3% and 73.4% respectively.



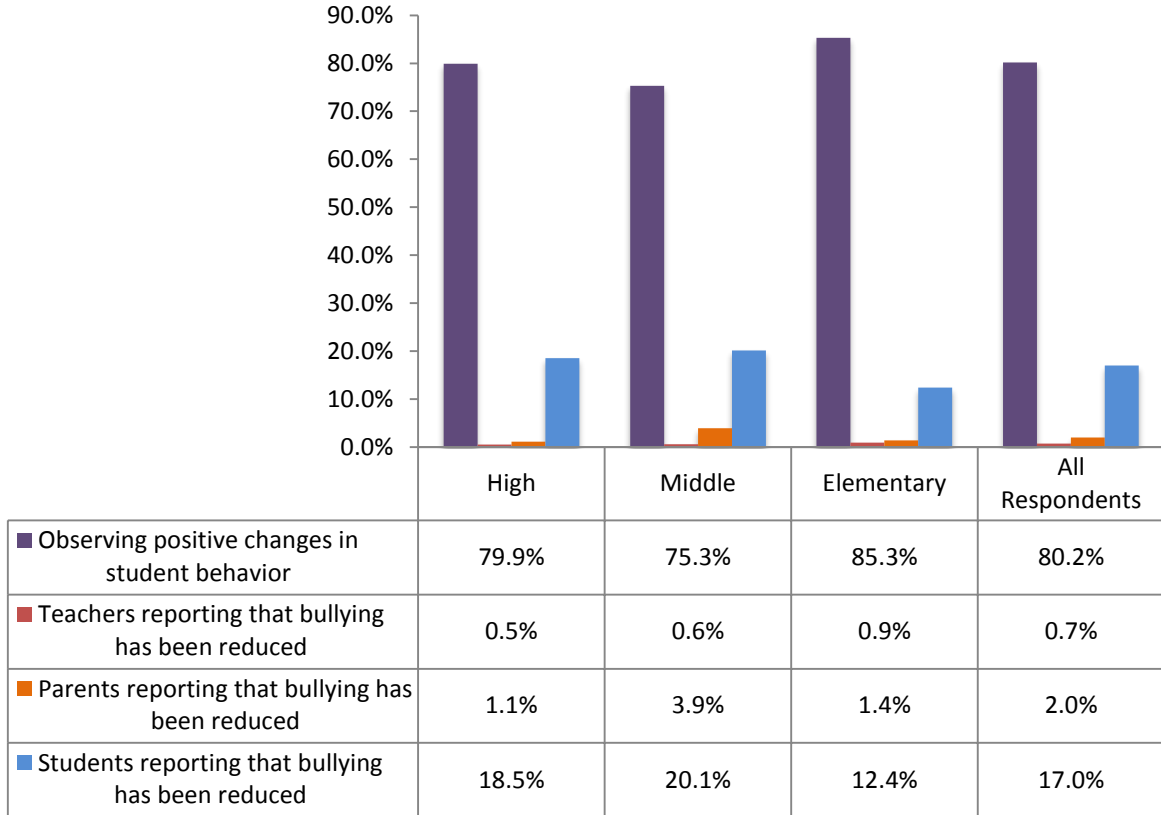
Fifty percent of respondents did not know if there were any anti-bullying efforts being made in the community (Chart 16). Eighteen percent responded that there were no anti-bullying efforts in their community. Those respondents who were aware of anti-bullying efforts, 31.5%, listed programs being offered by the local YMCA, local churches, Big Brothers/Sisters, Boy/Girl Scouts, and DARE.



The biggest frustration for respondents at the high school level, 82.4%, was electronic/cyber bullying taking place off school grounds or after school hours that carries over and is brought onto campus (Chart 17). Elementary respondents cited parents/guardians labeling peer conflict as bullying when the conflict is not bullying by definition as their greatest frustration, 86%. Middle school level respondents viewed electronic/cyber bullying and mislabeling of peer conflict to be fairly equal frustrations, 70.9% and 72.8% respectively. Bullying events not being reported by students was most frustrating at the middle school level, 44.5%, while percentages at the high school level were 35.8 and 24.2 at the elementary level. Respondents at all levels rated parents/guardians not realizing that bullying can occur any time and in any place as the least frustrating and also garnered the most agreement with percentages ranging from 28.0% to 29.9% across the three levels.

What is your greatest reward in dealing with bullying incidents in your school?

Chart 18



Respondents at all levels perceived that observing positive changes in student behavior as their greatest reward in dealing with bullying incidents, with the highest percentage, 85.3, at the elementary level (Chart 18). Although the percentage of all respondents who cited their greatest reward as students reporting that bullying had been reduced (17.0%) was significantly lower than observing behavioral change, it ranked as the second most popular rewarding aspect of dealing with bullying incidents. Very few respondents (2.0% and 0.7%) cited their greatest reward as being parents and teachers reporting that bullying had been reduced.

Key Findings

Analysis of responses to 18 questions from 625 principals and assistant principals revealed the perceptions of the issues surrounding bullying in Kentucky's elementary, middle and high schools. That examination led to the following conclusions:

- A high level of agreement exists across the elementary, middle and high school principals and assistant principals on almost all issues surrounding bullying.
- While the vast majority of schools had a bullying prevention policy and a process to report bullying, surprisingly, only two-thirds of the respondents had received bullying prevention training despite principals' high level of involvement in bullying cases.
- More than half of all principals were simply given a hard copy of the board policy on bullying prevention and no formal training.
- Despite perceiving that parents/guardians confused peer conflict with bullying and did not fully understand the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), principals, nevertheless, perceived parents/guardians to be highly satisfied with the reporting and investigative process as it related to bullying allegations. Additionally, principals believed that the majority of offenders' parents/guardians were supportive of their efforts to resolve bullying complaints.
- Approximately one-third of the principals surveyed perceived that school board members attempted to intercede on the behalf of parents/guardians in bullying cases.
- Electronic/cyber bullying was considerably more frustrating at the high and middle school levels than the elementary.

- Most principals (all levels) perceived that the bullying prevention program is reducing bullying behaviors to some degree.
- Considerably more middle school students use anonymous routes to report bullying than any other level.
- All levels viewed the online tip line as working moderately well. (Note: Some schools do not have an online tip line.)
- Fewer than half of high school principals report that their parents are informed of the difference in definition between bullying and peer conflict.
- More than 90% of principals perceive that the parents/guardians of alleged bullying victims are satisfied with the school's investigation and subsequent administrative decision.
- At least half of all respondents are unaware of any anti-bullying efforts being made in their respective communities.
- Overwhelming, all respondents agreed that the greatest reward in dealing with bullying resulted in positive changes in student behaviors.

Next Steps:

Given the results of the principals' perception survey regarding bullying in Kentucky's schools, districts should consider taking the following steps:

1. Conduct comprehensive and meaningful bullying prevention training for all principals and assistant principals. This training should include print materials concerning the school district's bullying prevention policy as well as information relating to the definition of bullying and distinguishing bullying from other misbehaviors.
2. Provide training on the school district's bullying prevention policy for all new school principals and assistant principals to ensure that they are as well informed as their more experienced colleagues.
3. School officials should consider sending information on the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act criteria annually to parents explaining what information school officials can and cannot share with parents/guardians regarding other children. In addition, this information could be posted on the school's website.
4. School officials should consider publicizing the multiple conduits that are available to students and parents/guardians to report harassing/bullying acts; i.e., a) report to school officials, b) report to the child's parent/guardian who, in turn, could report this to school officials, c) Shout-Out or Drop Boxes, d) telephone tip line or e) online tip line.
5. School officials should consider publishing a definition of Peer Conflict and how it differs from bullying. For example, peer conflict refers to a mutual disagreement or hostility between peers or peer groups of similar or equal power who are not generally seeking attention.
6. Bullying can occur at any time and place. It is not just a school problem, but a community one as well. Therefore, to adequately address the overall problem of students exhibiting bullying behaviors, many entities are needed. School officials working with local government officials, community agencies, local businesses and faith-based institutions have the joint ability to develop anti-bullying messages throughout the year and to establish an ongoing bullying standard for the community-at-large. Moreover, school administrators should consider engaging their local Chamber of Commerce officials in efforts to establish relationships with them that could contribute to offering solutions for this growing problem as well.
7. Local Boards of Education (BOE) should reflect upon their primary responsibilities, i.e., Boards of Education set policy – school administrators implement the BOE policies. School administrators should have the discretionary authority to investigate bullying-harassment cases without the interference of an individual member from a local Board of Education.