



teenTALK

TALKING • LISTENING • TAKING ACTION

RECOMMENDATIONS



Josh Shapiro
Pennsylvania Attorney General

Students today face obstacles that are different from any earlier generation. I know they're certainly different than the challenges I faced when I was in school. While adults recall high school as a time to navigate through the demands of offline life – getting good grades, fitting in, exceling in sports or extracurriculars, planning for the future, and working afterschool jobs— today's students face additional demands on top of those we experienced.



Attorney General Josh Shapiro at Susquehanna High School on April 29, 2019 for the OAG's third **teenTalk** Roundtable

In the age of constant Internet access, it's become increasingly difficult for students to disconnect, even after they've left the walls of their school buildings. The relentless pressure of social media drives many students to stay online 24/7 and portray seemingly perfect lives for their followers, without confronting the real challenges they face every day. Bullying and cyberbullying lower students' self-esteem, adversely affect their learning, and—most importantly—endanger their mental health and put them at risk of suicide.

As hard as parents and educators work to protect our students from harm and ensure that their experiences at school are positive, some things feel out of our control. Bullying – particularly cyberbullying – is certainly one of those issues. As the top law enforcement officer in our Commonwealth, and as a parent of four students myself, I'm always working to better understand the environment in which our students operate. The challenge, particularly online, is that the rules and the apps seem to change every week.

In order to better understand what our students are dealing with and how the Office of Attorney General (OAG) can help them, I hosted a series of **teenTALK** roundtables to learn firsthand from high school students about what they are experiencing. These student-led, student-driven conversations showed me that there are plenty of actions that parents, educators, and even students can take to change the conversation, address bullying head-on, and prevent unnecessary harm. The **teenTALKs** also drove home just how grave the threat of today's pressures are to students mental and emotional health.

The information we learned from the **teenTALK** roundtables was bolstered by data collected through my Office's Safe2Say Something initiative. Reports to Safe2Say Something show the reality of what Pennsylvania students are facing in school. We received nearly 25,000 tips to Safe2Say Something in the first six months of the program—January-June 2019. The most commonly reported events were about bullying/cyberbullying. Other top reported events were about cutting/self-harm, suicide/suicide ideation, and depression/anxiety. It is clear from this data that bullying and mental health are top concerns for students, and they are intrinsically connected.

While the teachers and administrators in our schools do their best every day to prevent and address bullying, student mental health issues, and school climate concerns, there is always more that can be done. Until every student can grow up feeling safe and supported, we must continue to strive to build schools and communities that root out damaging behaviors, protect students' mental wellbeing, and provide support for those who have already been harmed.

Based on our roundtable conversations, my Office has compiled this **teenTALK** Report. The goal of this document is to provide a useful resource to students, parents, and educators as we all work to provide safe, healthy environments in our schools. I am deeply committed to protecting all of Pennsylvania's students, and I look forward to continuing the conversations started by the **teenTALK** roundtables.

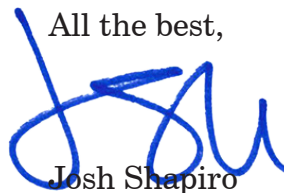
All the best,

Josh Shapiro

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Disclaimer:

This report was developed for students, parents, and educators as a resource guide summarizing the ideas and recommendations discussed during the **teenTalk** sessions hosted by the OAG and held around the Commonwealth during the 2018-19 school year. This report does not constitute legal advice. Schools are encouraged to seek legal advice from legal counsel regarding the implementation of any recommendation contained in the report. Each school entity should make policy and program decisions based on the unique needs of their staff, students, and community.

This document contains references and hyperlinks to third party sources that contain information that may be helpful to schools in evaluating particular policies or programs. These references and hyperlinks are provided only as a convenience to you. The OAG makes no representations, warranties, or endorsements concerning the content of any third party site.

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The following individuals were instrumental in the creation of this report. They actively participated in the **teenTALK** roundtables, provided suggestions and recommendations, and reviewed early drafts of this report.

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ABOUT THE teenTALK ROUNDTABLES

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Bullying is a serious concern in schools across Pennsylvania. In fact, one-fifth of U.S. students ages 12-18 are bullied on school property each year.¹ Every day, students are harmed by the negative actions of their peers. Bullying doesn't just affect a child's life in the short term; the trauma bullying inflicts can have lifelong consequences.

To help address this problem, Attorney General Josh Shapiro convened high school students and school administrators for a series of roundtables held across the Commonwealth during the 2018-19 school year to talk about bullying, cyberbullying, and other issues impacting our schools today.

These four events brought together students and administrators from 13 districts across four counties:*

- Allegheny County
 - North Hills School District
 - Northgate School District
 - Quaker Valley School District
- Chester County
 - Coatesville Area School District
 - Downingtown Area School District
 - Phoenixville Area School District
- Dauphin County
 - Central Dauphin School District
 - Harrisburg School District
 - Susquehanna Township School District
- Lehigh County
 - Allentown School District
 - East Penn School District
 - Parkland School District
 - Southern Lehigh School District



* Because student voice/student engagement is a necessary component in any effort to decrease bullying and improve school climate, only students participated in the facilitated discussions with Attorney General Shapiro.

The events were designed as free-flowing discussions on bullying - what works to prevent it, what doesn't work, what adults should do, how to engage students to intervene in safe and supportive ways when they observe bullying, how to increase student reporting, how to increase adult awareness, and more. During those conversations, Attorney General Shapiro and the students explored a variety of topics that impact school climate and safety, including:

- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Parent/Family Engagement
- School Resource Officers
- Self-Respect and Respect for Others
- Social Media
- Student Connectedness
- Student Mental Health
- Student Support Personnel
(e.g. guidance counselors and school psychologists)
- Student/Teacher Relationships



April 29, 2019 –
OAG's third **teenTalk** Roundtable
was held at Susquehanna High
School (Dauphin Co.) with students
participating from Central Dauphin
High School, Harrisburg High School
and Susquehanna High School

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

Bullying is defined by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as “any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated.”² Bullying may be physical, verbal, or relational, and may occur directly in the presence of the targeted youth or indirectly through electronic devices or other methods of communication.³

While any student can be targeted for bullying, recent studies indicate that some students are more likely to be bullied than others. Students have an increased risk when falling under one or more of the following categories:

Race and ethnicity

Black and African-American students represent a disproportionate amount of reported bullying incidents.⁴

	Percentage of Students Enrolled in US Schools	Percentage of Race-Based Bullying or Harassment Reports
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1%	2%
Asian	5%	2%
Black or African American	15%	35%
Hispanic or Latino of any race	26%	20%
Two or more races	3%	6%
White or Caucasian	49%	29%

It is important to note that data on bullying and harassment based on race, ethnicity and national origin are not complete. Students who have been bullied or harassed may not report for a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to, concern that the report won't be taken seriously, fear of being perceived as weak or immature, fear of retaliation, and a sense of marginalization or lack of connection to the school.

Race-related bullying is significantly associated with negative physical and emotional health effects from bullying experiences.⁵ For example, Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students who are bullied are more likely to suffer academically than their white peers.⁶

February 14, 2019 –
OAG's second **teenTalk** Roundtable
was held at North Hills Middle
School (Allegheny Co.) with students
participating from Northgate High
School, Quaker Valley High School
and North Hills High School



Physical disability and intellectual disability, including autism spectrum disorders

- Students with disabilities or autism are two-to-three times more likely to be targeted than students without disabilities.^{7,8}

Actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity

- 70% of LGBTQ students report being verbally bullied or harassed because of their sexual orientation, and 59% report being verbally bullied or harassed because of their gender expression.⁹
- LGBTQ Students are three times more likely to be bullied and four times more likely to be cyberbullied than non-LGBTQ students.¹⁰

Each year, the DOE's Office for Civil Rights receives over 135,000 individual allegations of harassment or bullying on the following protected class bases:¹¹

- Sex – 41%
- Race – 23%
- Sexual Orientation – 16%
- Disability – 11%
- Religion – 8%

WHAT WE HEARD

The students who participated in the **teenTALK** roundtables expressed the concern that bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment continue to contribute to the larger issue of student mental health. Their experiences are supported by the research. For example, according to the CDC:

[B]ullying behavior and suicide-related behavior are closely related. This means youth who report any involvement with bullying behavior are more likely to report higher levels of suicide-related behavior than youth who do not report any involvement with bullying behavior.¹²

In fact, students who are bullied are 2.4 times more likely to report suicidal ideations and 3.3 times more likely to report a suicide attempt than their non-bullied peers.¹³ Additionally, a recent report released by the CDC shows that the teen suicide death rate has increased by 30% since 2000.¹⁴

SAFE2SAY SOMETHING

In response to the rising concerns of school climate and safety issues, Governor Wolf signed Act 44 of 2018 into law, paving the way for Pennsylvania to become the first state to mandate that all schools use an anonymous tip line to report school safety concerns. The Pennsylvania OAG is responsible for operating this tip line; to do so, we partnered with Sandy Hook Promise to create Safe2Say Something, where anyone can anonymously provide information about concerning threats or behaviors (e.g., unsafe, potentially harmful, dangerous, violent, or criminal activities) relative to any student or school in the Commonwealth. From January 2019 to June 2019, Safe2Say Something processed 3,558 tips that were categorized as bullying/cyber bullying. This was by far the most often reported issue, representing 15.1 percent of all Safe2Say Something reports.

Students participating in these roundtables indicated that Safe2Say Something is an excellent asset that allows teens to report behaviors and concerns through an anonymous digital platform. They stated that Safe2Say Something is a safe way to report concerns, and felt that doing so was an appropriate way to bring concerns to the attention of adults who can intervene.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations set forth in this report are a collection of the ideas discussed during the **teenTALK** roundtables. However, we recognize that every school is unique. They vary by many factors, including: size; geography; whether they are urban, suburban, or rural; whether they are public, private, or charter; population served; and more. Because of this diversity, not every recommendation will be appropriate for every type of school. It is up to each school's leadership to determine which, if any, of the recommendations set forth below it wishes to implement.

Certainly, this is not a complete list of all possible ideas to address these issues. There are many excellent policies that were not included either for space considerations or because they were not raised during the **teenTALK** sessions. Every school is encouraged to seek out their own ideas and improvements by collaborating with students, staff, community organizations, peers at other schools, local law enforcement, and other key stakeholders.

The recommendations are broken down into three categories:

- Recommendations for Students
- Recommendations for Parents
- Recommendations for Educators

Recommendations for Students

Prevention/Intervention:

- Take time to get to know other students – engage others in conversations, ask questions, and appreciate the uniqueness of others.
 - Create or join a club that focuses on students supporting other students. One example is Cumberland Valley School District's [It Takes One](#) club that focuses on addressing bullying at the peer level and creating opportunities for students to develop connections with each other.
 - Create or join your school's [GSA](#), student-run clubs that unite LGBTQ and allied students to build community and serve as safe spaces in schools.
 - Organize a "[Mix It Up at Lunch](#)" day: a nationwide event organized by Teaching Tolerance that focuses on meeting new students during lunch (this year's national Mix It Up Day is October 22, 2019).
- Treat others with empathy and respect – everyone deserves to be respected and by putting ourselves into others' situations, we show we care.
 - Create a [SPARK](#) Club at your school -- SPARK (which stands for Students Promoting Attitudes of Respect & Kindness) is a student-run club that fosters empathy and acceptance.

- Engage in the “[Developing Empathy](#)” lesson from Teaching Tolerance to build empathy skills.
- Resist negative peer pressure and create positive peer pressure – instead of doing what is popular, do what is right.
 - Learn more about peer pressure with this article from [Teens Health](#).
 - Identify and practice [steps to resist peer pressure](#) and build self-confidence to do what is right.
- Recognize students who do the right thing through the National Do the Right Thing Program, such as this example from [Elizabethtown Area School District](#).

Response:

- Report threats or safety concerns to [Safe2Say Something](#).
- Rise above the drama – don’t start or participate in negative interactions like gossip, name-calling, bullying, or ostracizing others.
- Recognize warning signs and “red flags” – learn to spot concerning thoughts, words, and actions.
- Report concerns to trusted adults – know who to reach out to and how to connect with support networks.
- Stand up for others when you see or hear bullying or harassment.

Recommendations for Parents

Prevention/Intervention:

- Connect with educators to be partners in your child’s education to best support your child.
 - Attend back to school events or parent-teacher conferences to meet and connect with your child’s teachers, if possible.
 - Connect with your child’s teachers and counselors through email or your school’s online communication system to create a partnership to support your child’s success in school.
 - Volunteer in your child’s school or classroom if you are able to do so.
- Listen to your child’s concerns about bullying and other school climate or safety issues – discuss what is going on, and brainstorm solutions to the concern.
 - Ask questions to find out the details on the extent of the bullying. The Pennsylvania [Bullying Prevention Toolkit](#) identifies questions to ask your child and how to follow-up on concerns with the school.

- [“What Every Parent Should Know About Bullying”](#) provides additional information to help parents help their children navigate through bullying situations.
- Recognize the warning signs of bullying and other concerning behaviors – know what to look for, what questions to ask, and how to get help.
 - Identify warning signs of bullying from [StopBullying.gov](#).
 - [“Get Help Now”](#) – this chart identifies who to reach out to if you have done everything you can to resolve the situation and nothing has worked, or someone is in immediate danger.

Response:

- Report threats or safety concerns to [Safe2Say Something](#).
- Remind your child that they do not deserve to be mistreated and that you, their teachers, and counselors can help them through the situation.
- Reach out to medical and/or mental health providers if you are concerned about your child’s physical or mental health.
- Report concerns about all school climate or safety issues to school personnel, and follow up to make sure concerns are being addressed.

Recommendations for Educators

Prevention:

- Create mechanisms for students to report school climate and safety concerns
 - Encourage students to utilize [Safe2Safe Something](#) to capture anonymous tips/concerns.
 - Establish open lines of communication with [parents/guardians](#) and with [students](#) by providing opportunities to communicate with teachers and administrators.
 - Engage in conversations (like the **teenTALK** sessions) with students on a regular basis to hear feedback from a broader audience and take action to address concerns, as appropriate.
- Make training available for staff to prevent and intervene in concerning behaviors, such as bullying, harassment, teen dating violence, and suicide.
 - Contact the OAG’s [Office of Public Engagement](#) for teacher In-Service trainings on bullying, cyberbullying, and “Beyond Bullying” at your school.
 - Review resources from the [Pennsylvania Department of Education](#) to create suicide awareness and prevention policies and train staff.
 - Consider implementing [evidence-based programs](#) that prevent and respond to bullying, teen dating violence and suicide.

- Create opportunities for teachers to interact with students and build positive relationships, such as mentoring opportunities and class meetings.
 - Utilize “[Strategies to Develop Positive Relationships with Students.](#)”
 - Explore these 21 ways to foster connections with students from The [National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning.](#)
- Promote activities that support diversity, equity, and inclusion among staff and students.
 - Engage in equitable practices in the classroom as outlined by [Edutopia.](#)
 - [Use icebreakers and mixers that promote inclusion](#) on a regular basis as a way to get to know each other in the classroom.
- Establish school and classroom rules that encourage the exchange of ideas and opinions in a way that is respectful to all – even those who have different points of view.
 - Learn about civil discourse and why it is important from [Federal Judges.](#)
 - Teach students to engage in respectful communications from Teaching Tolerance’s [Civil Discourse in the Classroom curriculum.](#)

Intervention and Response:

- Ensure that student support service personnel are able to spend time talking with students who have concerns – encourage students to make SAP (Student Assistance Program) referrals for themselves or others.
 - Learn more about [SAP](#) from the [PA Network for Student Assistance Services](#) and the requirement for all Pennsylvania schools to have a SAP team.
 - Connect with the [PA Association of Student Assistance Professionals](#) for ongoing updates and professional development designed to enhance SAP Team members’ knowledge.
- Investigate reports of bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment in a prompt, fair, and thorough manner.
 - [Get the facts](#) from all students separately.
 - Utilize the “[Referral Protocol for Suspected Bullying](#)” from the PA Bullying Prevention Toolkit to provide a consistent response to reports of bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment.
- Intervene whenever students say harmful or hurtful comments to others – turn these incidents into teachable moments.
 - Review the “[How to Speak Up at School](#)” resource from Teaching Tolerance to learn techniques to address mean talk.

CONCLUSION



The **teenTALK** roundtables brought together diverse groups of student leaders from districts located across the Commonwealth. While the discussions focused on what students, parents and educators can do to prevent and intervene in bullying, action areas for broader audiences were also identified. Specifically, the students focused on three broad areas where improvement is needed to positively impact bullying prevention and mental health services in schools:

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1) Student mental health services staffing: Students at all four sessions identified a lack of sufficient staffing in key positions such as guidance counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, school nurses, or other mental health staff. The students indicated that they do not think there are enough staff in these positions to provide effective services to help all students in the building and provide additional support to students in need. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA), a division of the American Counseling Association, recommends one school counselor to every 250 students. However, Pennsylvania's schools only average 381 students to every one counselor – falling well short of the ASCA's recommendation. Our government leaders at the state and local level should identify funding solutions to this severe shortage in mental health professionals staffing our schools.

2) Data reporting gaps: While there are a number of sources of information about the prevalence of bullying, there is a great deal of discrepancy among them. Information from Safe2Say Something indicates a higher level of bullying and cyberbullying than is accounted for in district's Safe Schools Reports or Pennsylvania Youth Survey Data. Additionally, some students do not report bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment, and research suggests that older students are less likely to report these concerns than younger students. Improved data collection would allow school leaders to better assess the scope and prevalence of bullying in their schools, and allocate resources to address the problem through staff training, use of evidence-based programs for students, and updated policies and practices. Better training, oversight, and resources could all help facilitate increased reporting and more complete data collection.

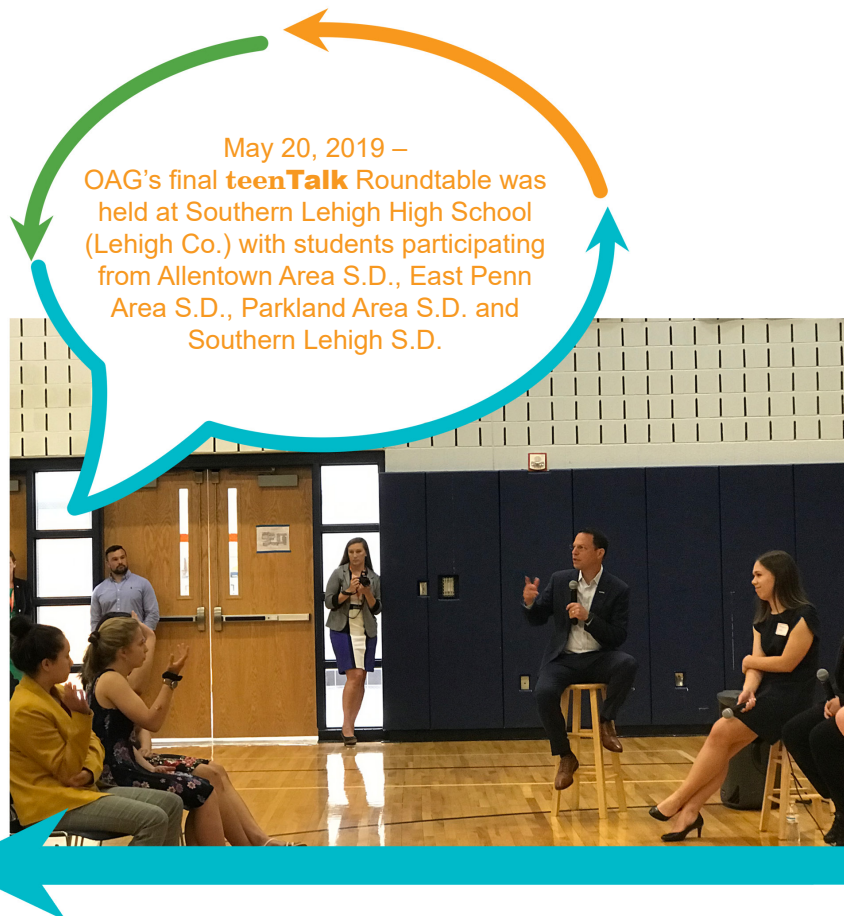
3) Funding to support bullying prevention, mental health programs, and other positive school climate initiatives: The Pennsylvania School Safety and Security Committee, along with the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, approved \$40 million in grant funding available for the 2019-20 school year for schools to address school climate and safety needs. Schools are encouraged to apply for this funding to enhance existing bullying prevention, student mental health programs and other positive school climate and safety initiatives. The grant application closes November 4, 2019.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

OAG's **teenTALK** roundtables highlighted many areas where students, parents, teachers, and administrators can improve to help reduce bullying in our schools, as well as many possible solutions to these issues. Students are harmed every day by bullying, and it is incumbent upon all of us to step up and do everything we can to put a stop to it.

To that end, this report is intended to be used actively. All stakeholders should read this report and use it to inform their efforts to prevent and address bullying. Furthermore, we hope that the Pennsylvania General Assembly, the Governor, and members of our federal Congressional delegation will use this report in conjunction with OAG's Safe2Say Something report to inform meaningful legislative and administrative solutions to bullying. This problem affects every school in our Commonwealth, and deserves a statewide policy response.

By working together across all stakeholder levels, we will improve efforts to address and respond to bullying, cyberbullying, harassment and student mental health concerns in our schools.



APPENDIX

Additional Resources:

- [Safe2Say Something](#): S2SS is a youth violence prevention program run by the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General. The program teaches youth and adults how to recognize warning signs and signals, especially within social media, from individuals who may be a threat to themselves or others and to “say something” before it is too late.
- [The Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General’s Office of Public Engagement](#): The Office of Attorney General’s number one priority is to keep the citizens of Pennsylvania safe, starting with our youth. Children are our greatest resource, and OAG works vigorously to protect young people from drugs, violence, and crime. OAG’s Office of Public Engagement provides free educational assemblies for students, teacher-in-service trainings and parent/community programs on a wide range of topics.
- [The Pennsylvania Department of Education](#): The Pennsylvania Department of Education’s Bullying Prevention Consultation Line (1-866-716-0424), a toll-free call line that invites individuals experiencing chronic and unresolved bullying to discuss effective strategies and available resources to manage school-based bullying.
- [The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#): this website provides information from various federal agencies on what bullying is, what cyberbullying is, who is at risk, and how you can prevent and respond to bullying.
- [The Center for Safe Schools](#): The Pennsylvania Bullying Prevention Toolkit, created by the Center for Safe Schools, provides resources for parents, educators, and professionals serving children, youth, and families.
- [Mental Health First Aid](#): Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is an 8-hour course that teaches you how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders. The training gives you the skills you need to reach out and provide initial help and support to someone who may be developing a mental health or substance use problem or experiencing a crisis. A training for teens, tMHFA, is also available.
- [The Pennsylvania Equity and Inclusion Toolkit](#): This toolkit published by the Pennsylvania Department of Education was developed to help advance efforts at the state and local levels to create and maintain supportive settings that celebrate diversity and teach students the importance of respect for self and others.

- [Teaching Tolerance](#): Teaching Tolerance provides free resources to educators—teachers, administrators, counselors, and other practitioners—who work with children from kindergarten through high school. Educators use our materials to supplement the curriculum, to inform their practices, and to create civil and inclusive school communities where children are respected, valued and welcome participants.

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