



STATE OF NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**Commissioner's Annual Report to the
Education Committees of the Senate and
General Assembly on**

**Student Safety and Discipline in
New Jersey Public Schools**

July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021

New Jersey Department of Education

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	4
Introduction	6
Key Findings.....	7
SSDS Incidents	7
School Police Reports.....	11
HIB Investigations and Confirmed Incidents	12
Nature of HIB	15
HIB Trainings.....	20
HIB Programs	22
Disciplinary Actions	24
Initiatives to Improve School Safety.....	27
Department’s Response	27
Department’s Future Objectives.....	33

Executive Summary

Annually, the Department of Education (Department) collects data from school districts across the state on disciplinary infractions and their consequences. These data are analyzed in a state-level report developed by the Department for the Governor and the Legislature to fulfill the requirements of the *Public School Safety Law N.J.S.A. 18A:17-46 through 48*. This report includes statewide data on incidents of school violence, harassment, intimidation and bullying and school suspensions as well as related professional development for educators. School districts can use both statewide data and their local data to evaluate the efficacy of efforts to maintain a positive school climate, foster social emotional learning, and provide interventions for students who exhibit patterns of violating school conduct policies.

Beginning with the 2017-18 school year, the Department migrated to a new reporting system, the Student Safety Data System (SSDS), which includes improved definitions, new reporting fields, and updated guidance for reporting incidents. Data from both the 2018-19 and 2017-18 school years should be considered baseline years since school districts continued to align local systems with the SSDS to reflect new data elements and improve data accuracy.

Among reported incidents in 2020-21:

- School personnel reported incidents to the police on 1,312 occasions, 482 of which were mandatory referrals, leading to 70 student school-related arrests.
- Most Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) incidents occurred on school grounds, with 49 percent in middle schools.
- Schools reported 18,524 HIB trainings and 24,401 HIB programs in 2020-21.
- 4,644 students were suspended from school during the school year on at least one occasion.
- 115 students were removed from school and sent to another school or other education program, and zero students were expelled from school.
- As figure 26 indicates, males were more likely to be suspended than females, black students more likely than students of other races, and high school and middle school students were more likely than elementary students.

The *Student Safety and Discipline Report* also reflects the Department's initiatives to assist schools with implementing Social Emotional Learning competencies, positive approaches to discipline, and improving school climate and culture. These research-based approaches are intended to create a positive school climate where strategies, direct instruction, and interventions result in reduced incidents of HIB and school violence.

Introduction

This report presents information provided by New Jersey public schools on disciplinary infractions and their consequences for the 2020-21 school year to the Student Safety Data System (SSDS). The information is presented annually by the New Jersey Department of Education to the Governor and Legislature to fulfill the requirements of the *Public School Safety Law N.J.S.A. 18A:17-46 through 48*. Districts are encouraged to review their incidents in comparison to state-level results and consider whether proactive steps are needed to improve school climate and student safety.

The SSDS was available for the first time in the 2017-18 school year. The system replaced both the Electronic Violence and Vandalism Reporting System (EVVRS) and the Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying – Investigations, Trainings, and Programs (HIB-ITP) system. The Department anticipated that districts would improve data reporting with the new system but expected fluctuations in reporting as schools and districts adjusted to the new system, which includes updates to definitions and reporting guidance from previous years' reports. Guidance and training documents regarding what is reported to the SSDS are available on the [SSDS homepage](#). Data from the 2017-18 and 2018-19 reports should be considered baseline years and should not be compared to prior-year data. Additionally, best practice dictates that data include at least three years of information before trends are analyzed. While this report does represent the fourth year of data from the SSDS, due to school closures related to COVID-19, the overall number of reported incidences decreased and, therefore, comparing the 2019-20 and 2020-21 to previous years is not recommended.

The SSDS collects incidents of violence, vandalism, weapons, substance use, and harassment, intimidation and bullying (HIB), as well as HIB trainings and programs. In addition, the system collects details on all allegations of HIB, along with all student suspensions and other removals from school, as well as reports to the police and arrests.

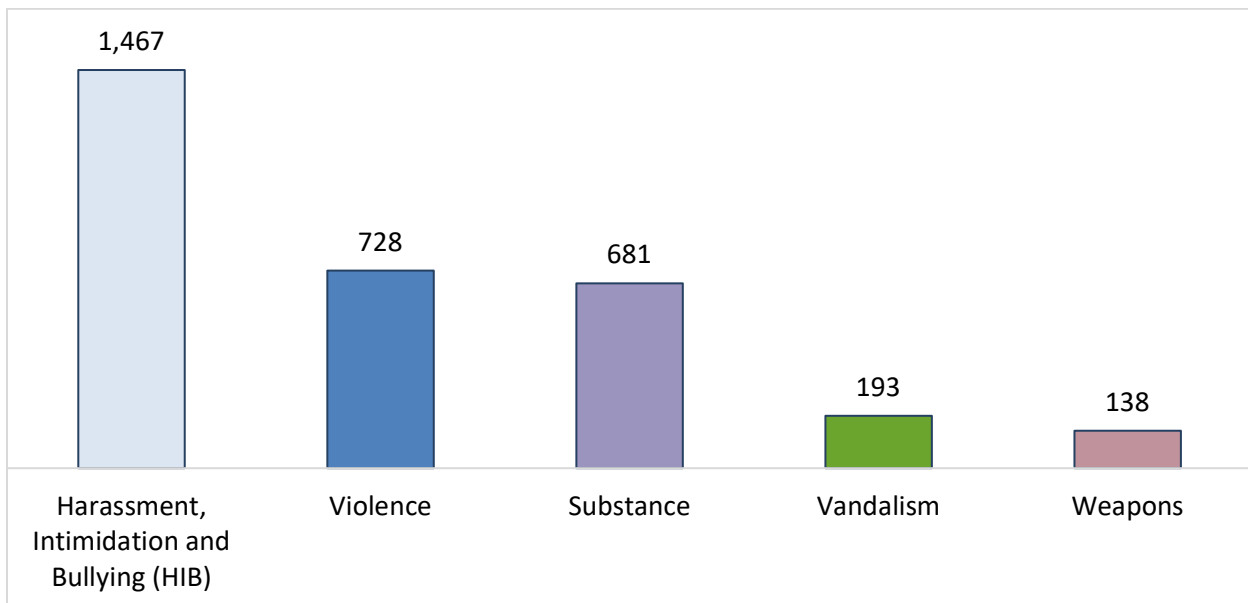
Key Findings

SSDS Incidents

School districts in New Jersey reported 3,151 incidents of violence, vandalism, weapons, substance use, and harassment, intimidation and bullying in the 2020-21 school year. This is a unique count of incidents. As in the chart below, as well as other charts in this report, a single incident may consist of more than one incident type (e.g., an incident may involve both a threat and violence). Violence and weapons offenses were found primarily in both high schools and middle schools, substance offenses were mostly in high schools and other incidents leading to removal primarily occurred in middle and high schools. HIB incidents were more likely to occur in middle school than in high school or elementary school.

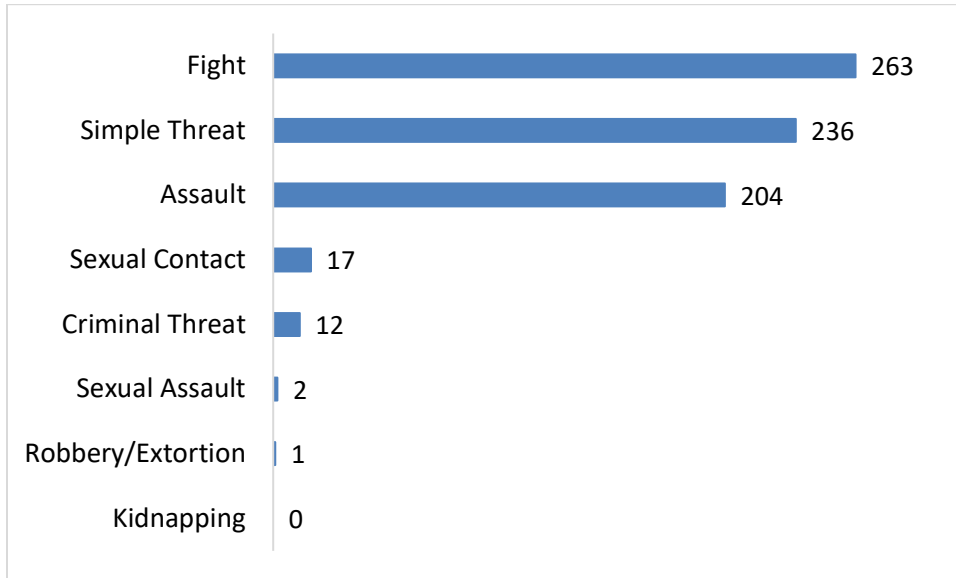
Note for people using screen readers or text-to-speech tools: The alt text for each graph lists the type of graph and a high-level summary. All content from the graphs, including all data points, is presented as lists or text immediately following the image for the graph.

Figure 1. Incidents by Category



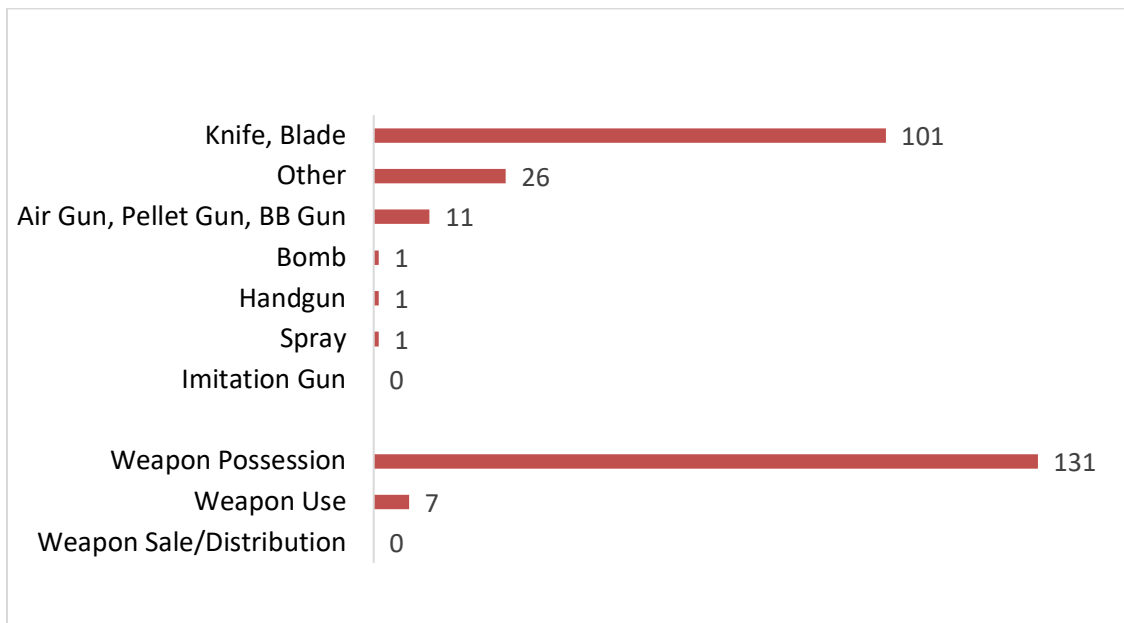
Note: Figure 1 shows the number of incidents reported by type. A single incident may consist of more than one incident type.

Figure 2. Incidents of Violence



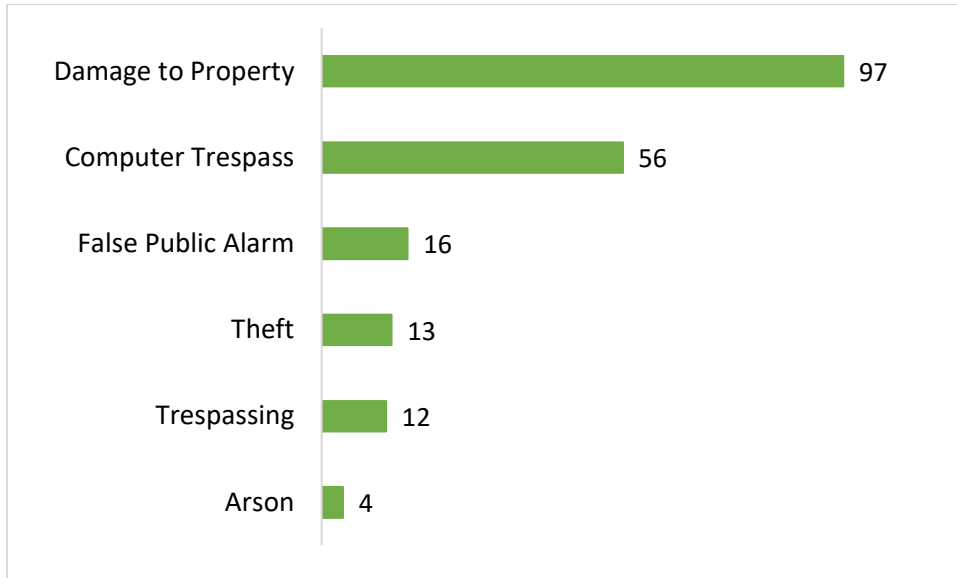
Note: Figure 2 shows the number of incidents reported by violence type. A single incident may consist of more than one violence type.

Figure 3. Incidents of Weapons



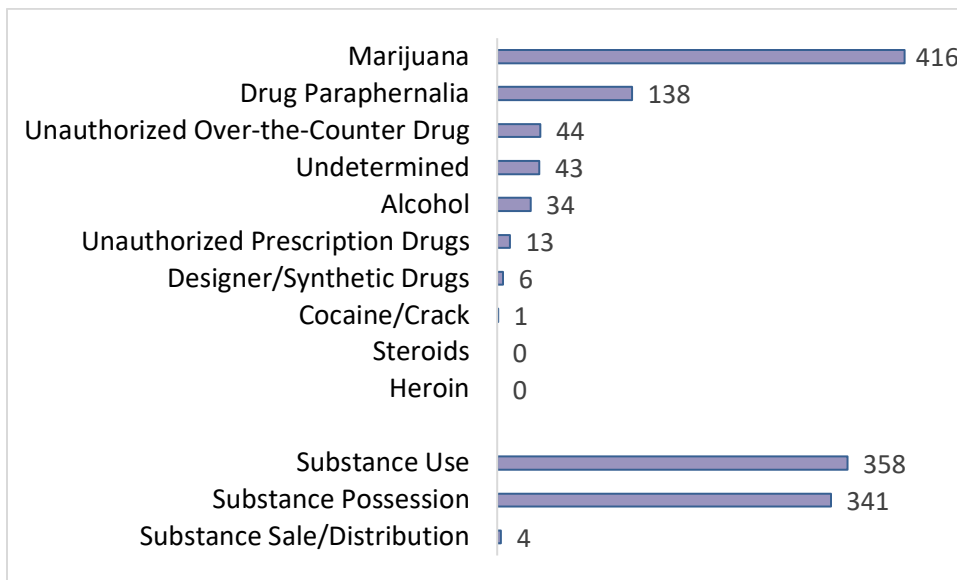
Note: Figure 3 shows the number of incidents reported by weapon type and mode. A single incident may consist of more than one weapon type and mode.

Figure 4. Incidents of Vandalism



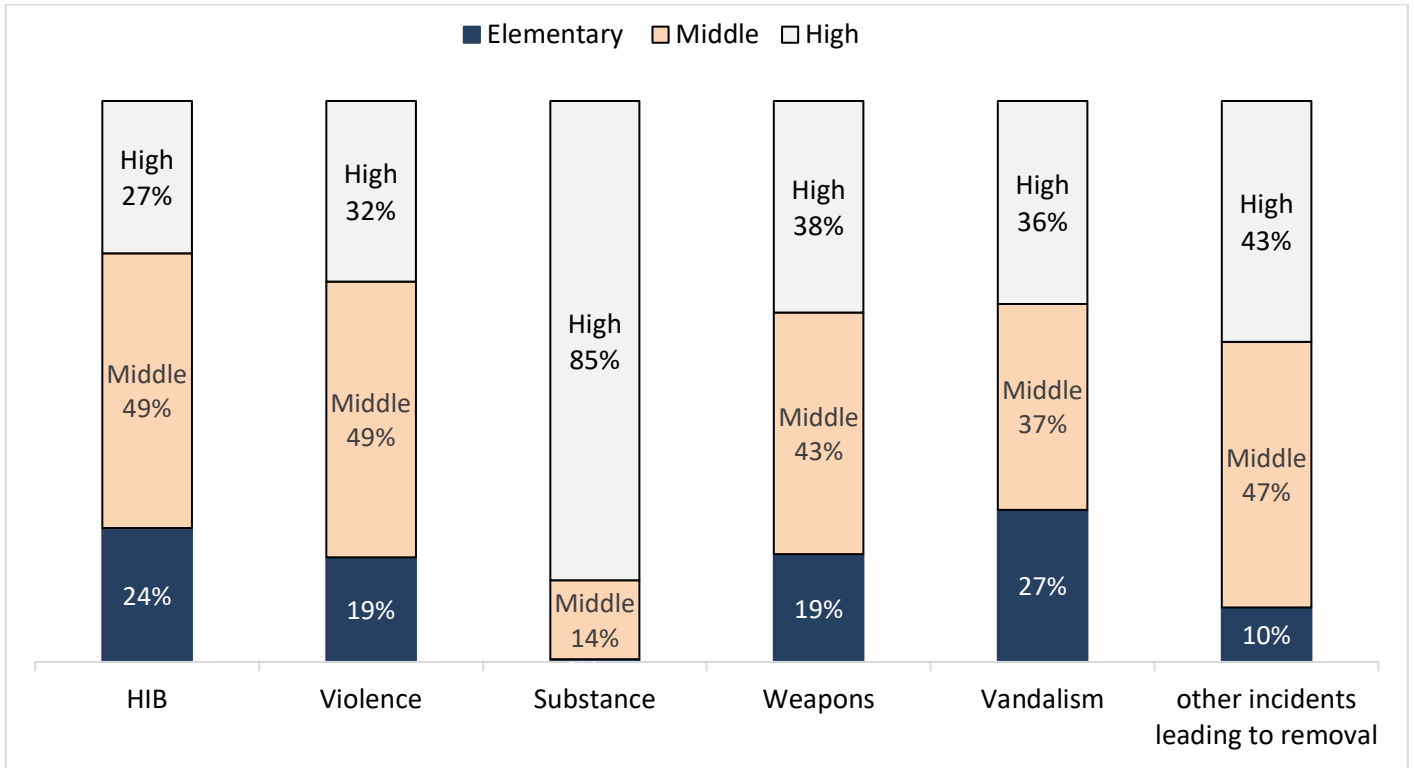
Note: Figure 4 shows the number of incidents reported by vandalism type. A single incident may consist of more than one vandalism type.

Figure 5. Incidents of Substances



Note: Figure 5 shows the number of incidents reported by substance type and mode. A single incident may consist of more than one substance type and mode.

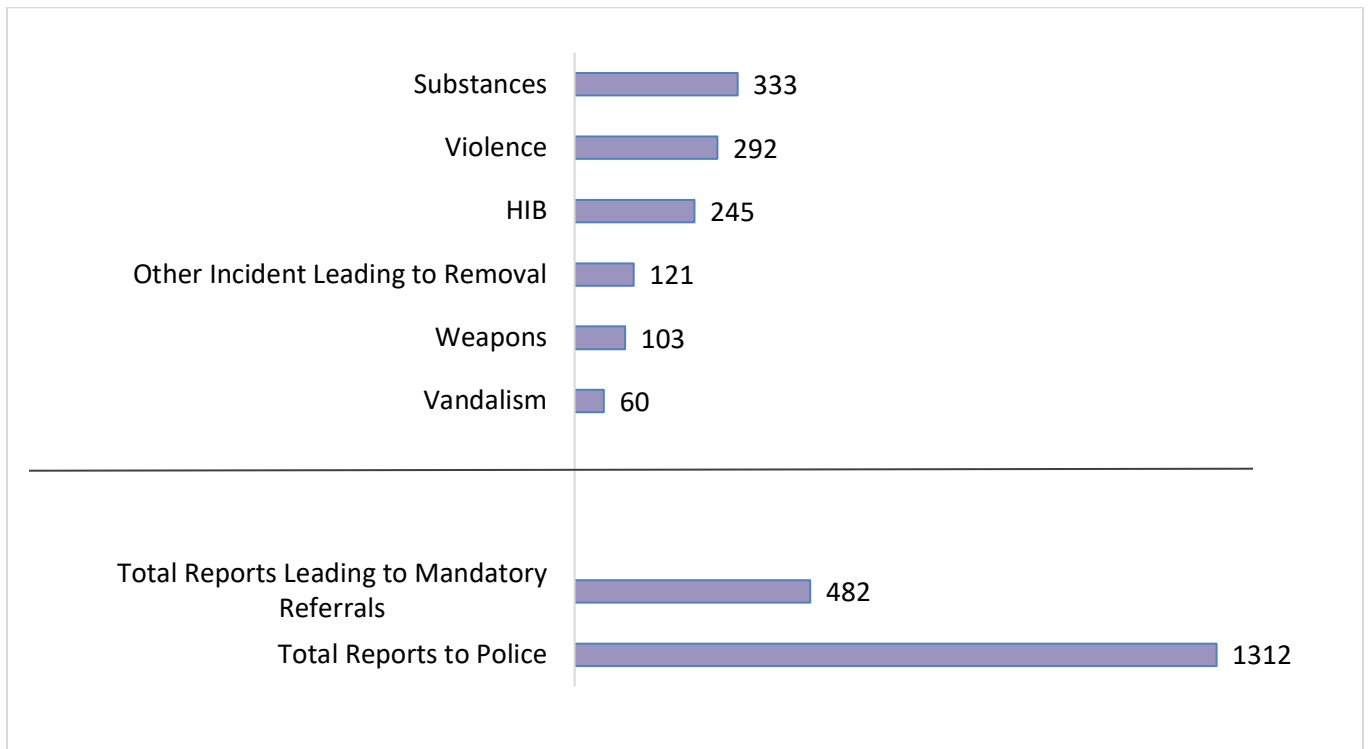
Figure 6. Incident Types by School Type



School Police Reports

During the 2020-21 school year, school personnel reported incidents to the police on 1,312 occasions. In 121 instances, reports involved student infractions that did not fit into a category of violence, weapons, vandalism, substance, or HIB. Of all reports to police, 482 were mandatory referrals, or school-related incidents required to be reported to law enforcement per New Jersey statute or regulation. This includes incidents involving firearms or knives, assaults with weapons, assaults on staff members, criminal threats, sexual assault, controlled dangerous substance possession, and bias-related incidents.

Figure 7. School-Related Reports to Police



Note: More than one offender may be reported to police per incident, and one student may be reported to police more than one time per school year.

HIB Investigations and Confirmed Incidents

There were 3,664 HIB investigations during the 2020-21 school year. Though suspensions are common, schools often report other disciplinary actions for HIB offenders rather than removing the student from school. Student counseling for both offenders and victims is the most common remedial action.

Figure 8. HIB Investigations

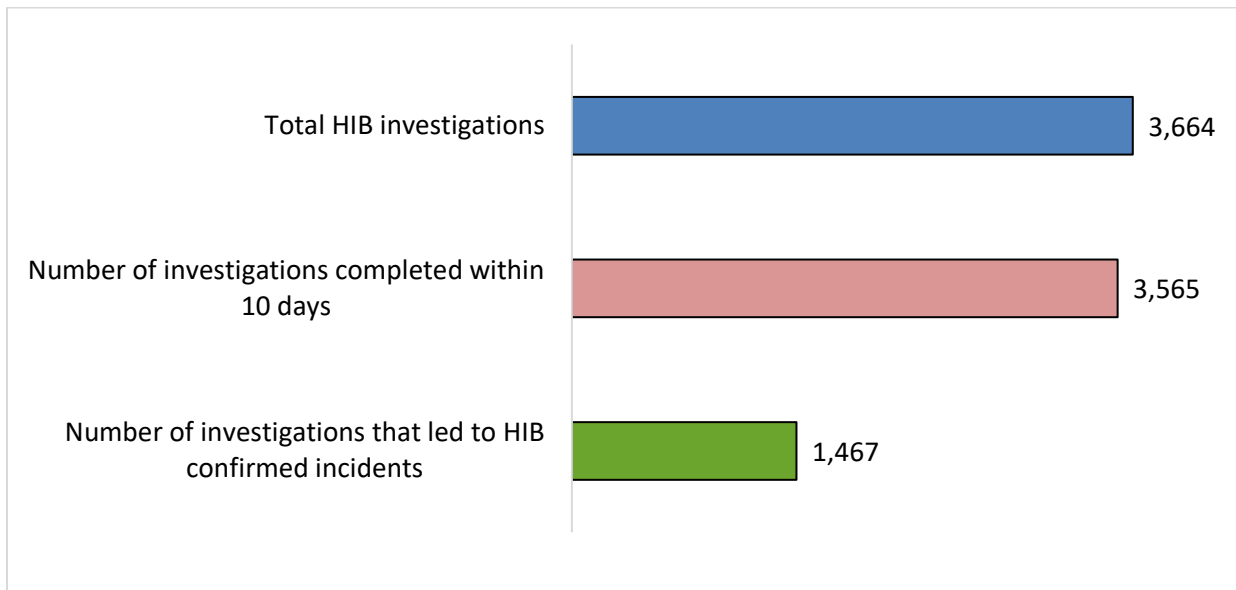


Figure 9. HIB Incident Location

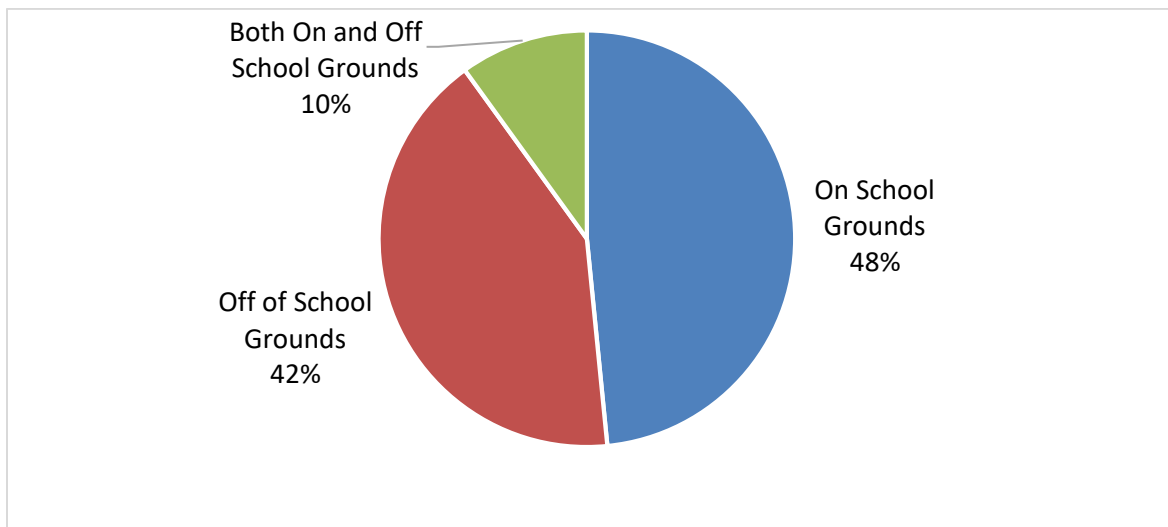


Figure 10. HIB Mode

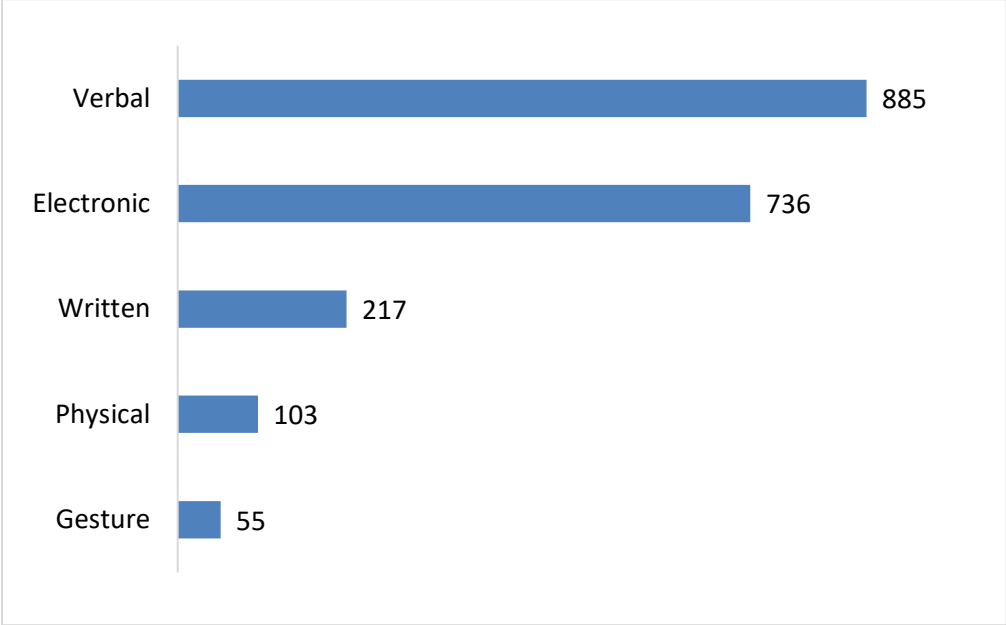


Figure 11. HIB Effect

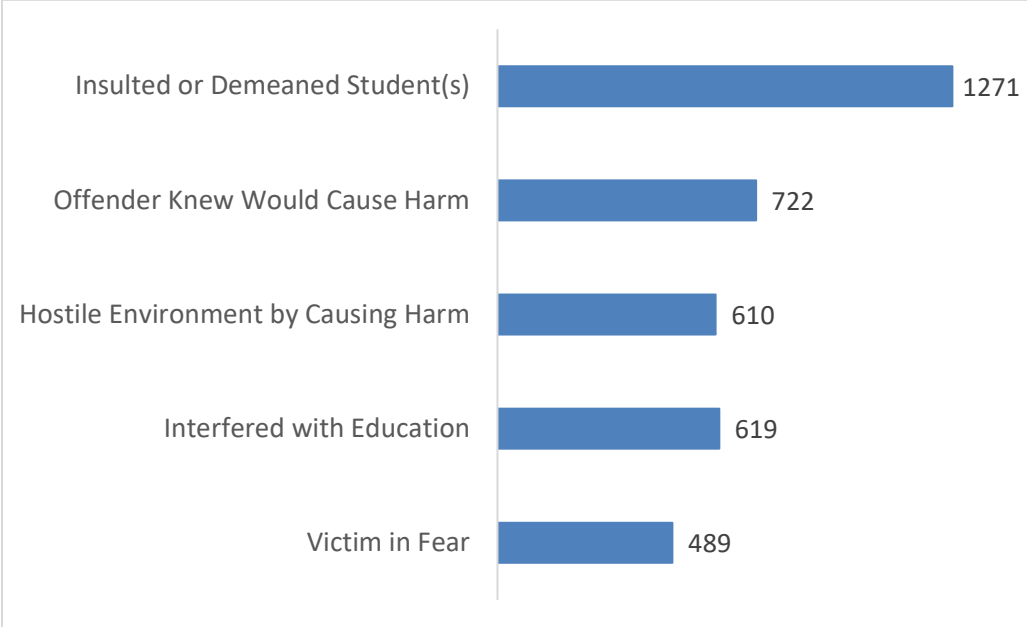


Figure 12. HIB Disciplinary Actions

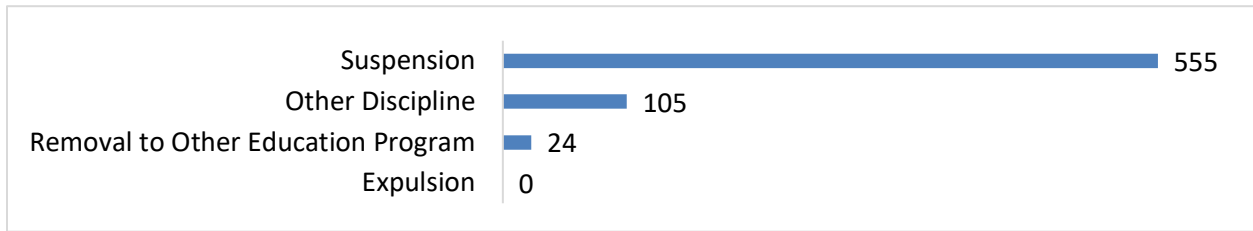
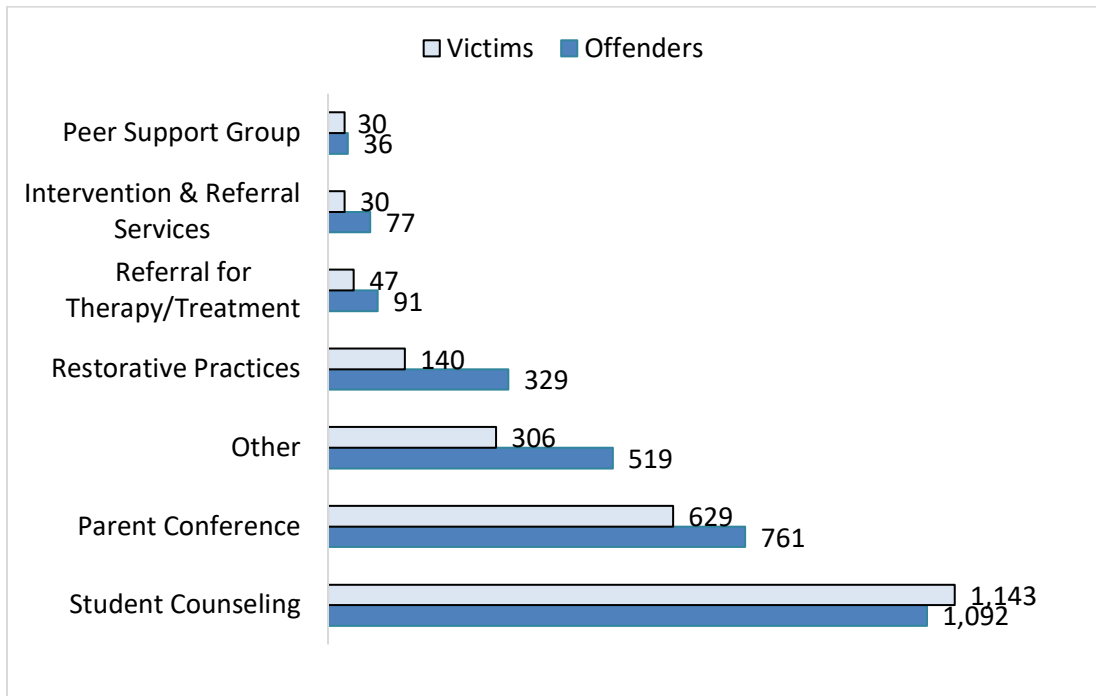


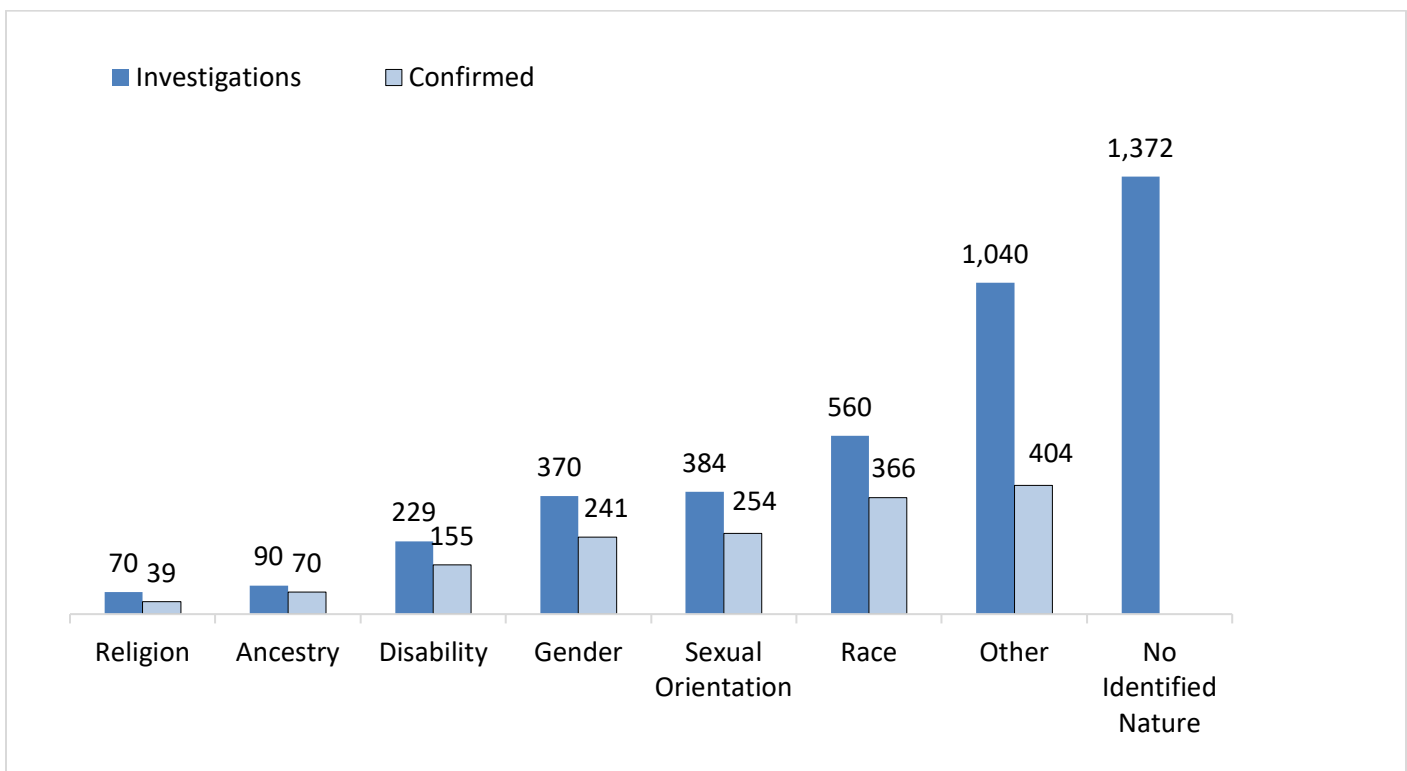
Figure 13. HIB Remedial Actions



Nature of HIB

Forty percent of HIB investigations led to confirmed HIB incidents. Cases involving certain protected categories were more likely to be affirmed, including gender (65%), ancestry (78%), sexual orientation (66%) or race (65%). District reported data indicates that Asian and Black students were more likely than students of other races to be targets of HIB due to their race. Students with disabilities were more likely to be targeted for their disabilities and females were more likely to be targeted for their gender or gender identity and expression.

Figure 14. HIB Investigations and HIB Confirmed by HIB Nature



Pursuant to *N.J.S.A. 18A:37-14*, an HIB incident must be reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic, such as race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or a mental, physical or sensory disability, or any other distinguishing characteristic (e.g., weight, social status, skin blemishes, etc.).

Figure 15. HIB Nature of Bullying Incident

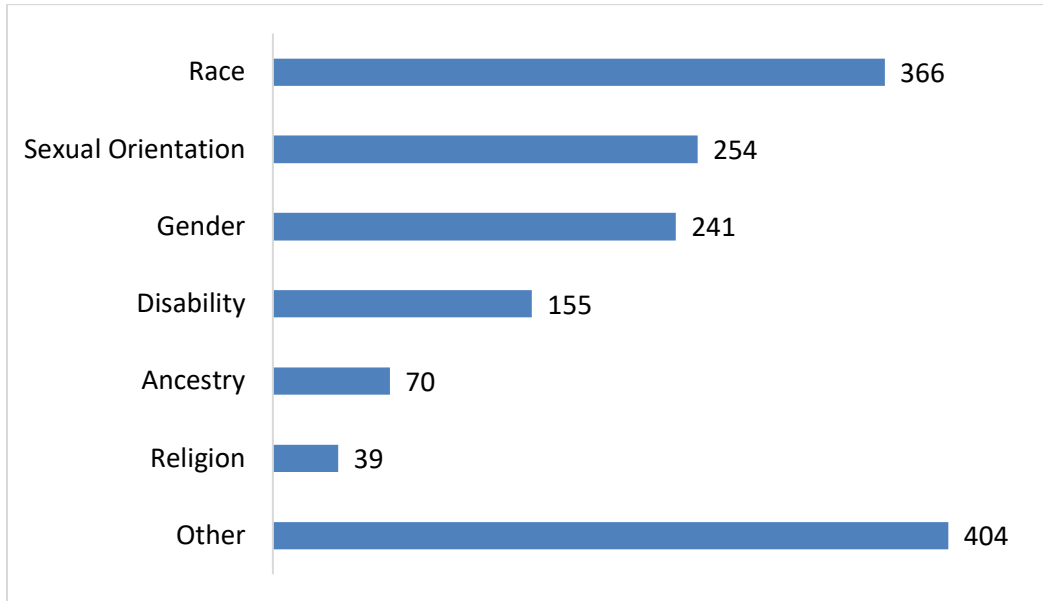
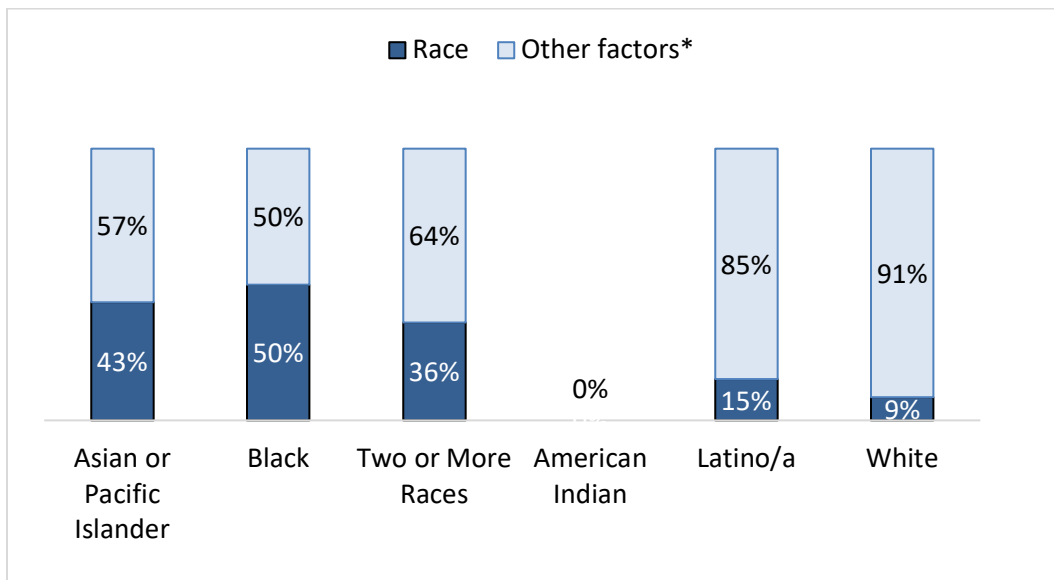
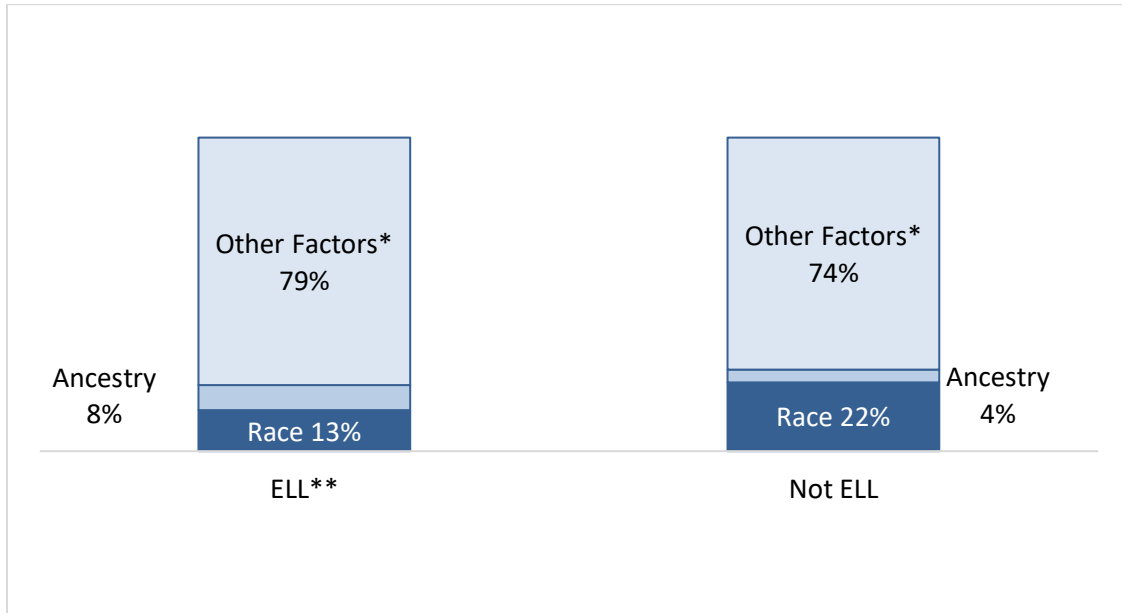


Figure 16. HIB Target by Race of Students and Nature of Bullying



***Other Factors:** e.g., color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or a mental, physical or sensory disability, or any other distinguishing characteristic

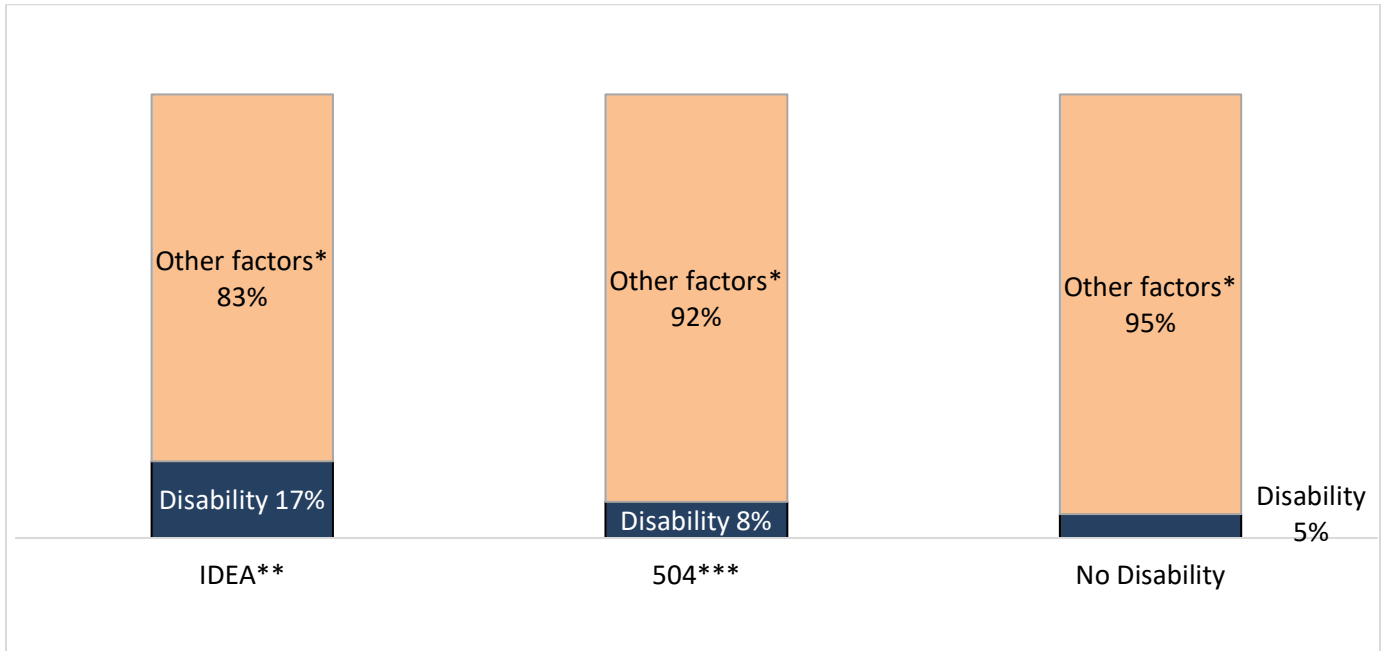
Figure 17. HIB Target by Student ELL Status and Nature of Bullying



***Other Factors:** e.g., color, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or a mental, physical or sensory disability, or any other distinguishing characteristic (e.g., weight, social status, skin blemishes, etc.).

****English language learners (ELLs):** ELLs are students for whom English is not his/her native or first language.

Figure 18. HIB Target by Student Disability Status and Nature of Bullying

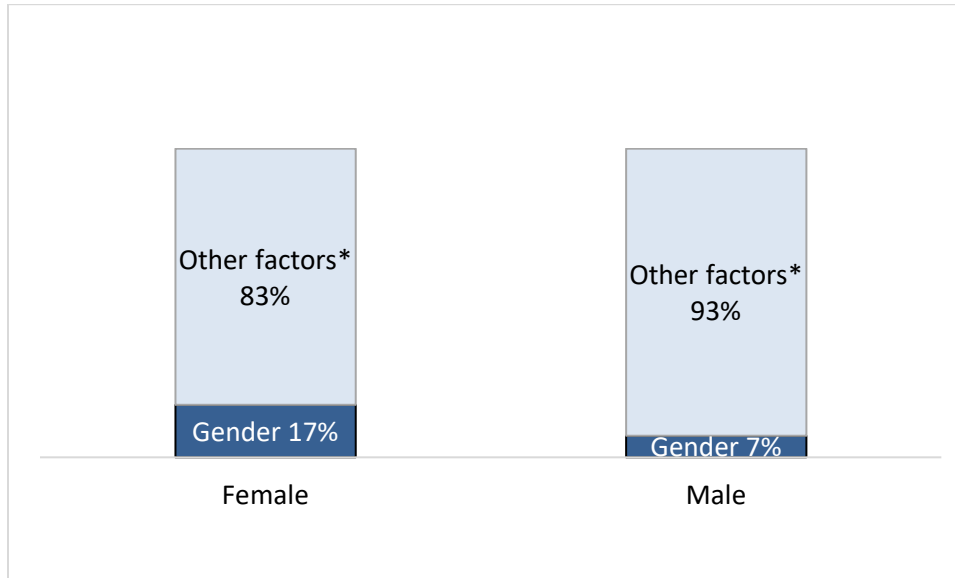


***Other factors:** e.g., race, color, religion, national origin gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression or any other distinguishing characteristic (e.g., weight, social status, skin blemishes, etc.)

****IDEA:** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities and ensures special education and related services to those children.

*****Section 504:** Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provides for formal plans that support students with disabilities in school.

Figure 19. HIB Target by Student Gender and Nature of Bullying



***Other Factors:** e.g., race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, sexual orientation or a mental, physical or sensory disability, or by any other distinguishing characteristic (e.g., weight, social status, skin blemishes, etc.).

HIB Trainings

Schools reported 18,524 HIB trainings in 2020-21. Most districts offered at least one training on the district’s HIB policy with bullying prevention instruction (88%) and most offered at least one training to key school staff members (88%), other school staff (82%), and district staff (79%).

Figure 20. Districts offering one or more HIB Trainings by Attendee Type

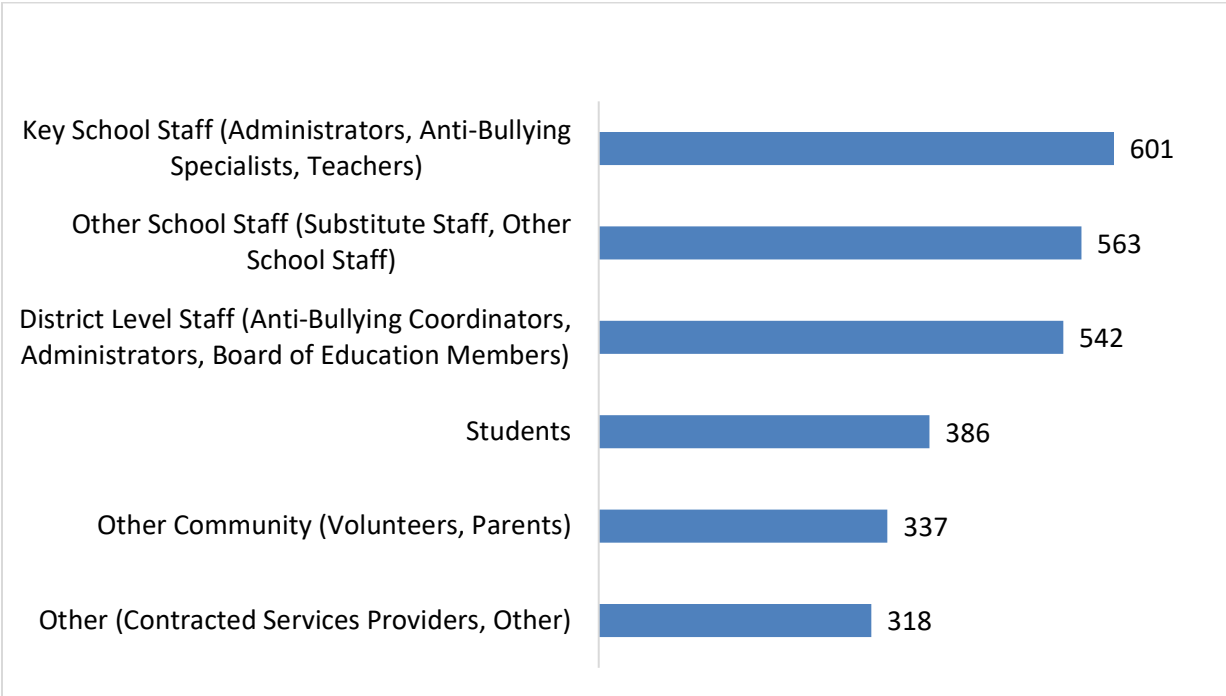
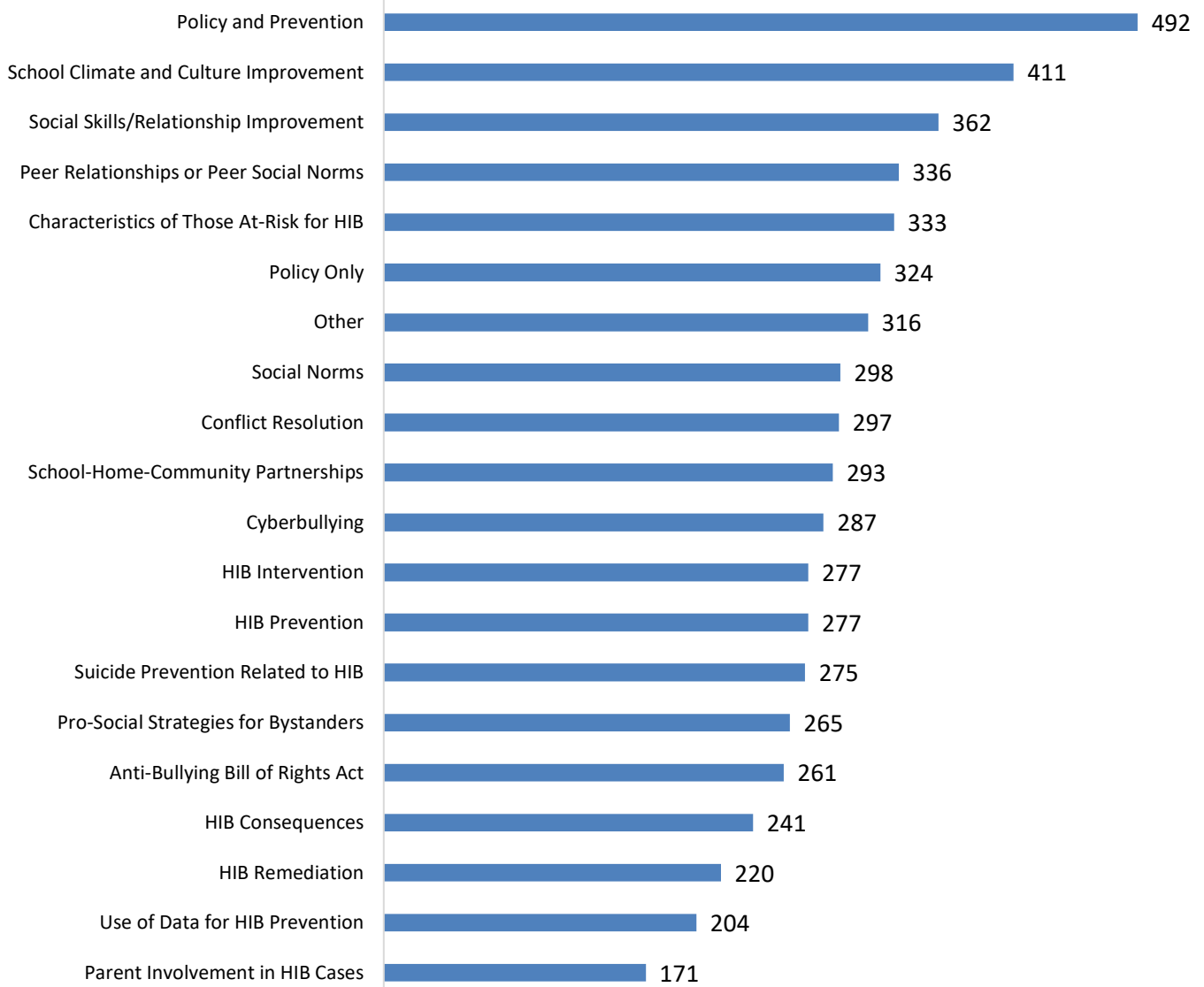


Figure 21. Districts offering one or more HIB Trainings by Training Type



HIB Programs

Schools reported 24,401 HIB programs in 2020-21. Most districts offered programs addressing various schoolwide conditions, especially morale in the school community (71%) and the emotional environment of the school (74%). Districts primarily offered these programs to students (73%) and key school staff (71%).

Figure 22. Number of districts offering one or more HIB Program by Program Goal

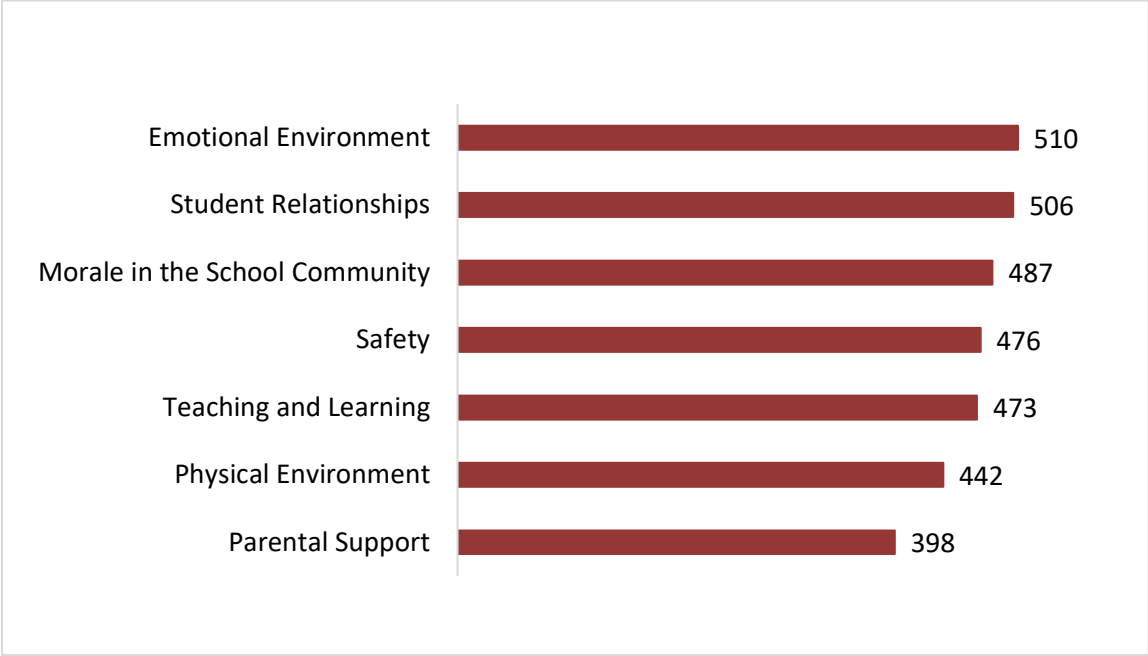
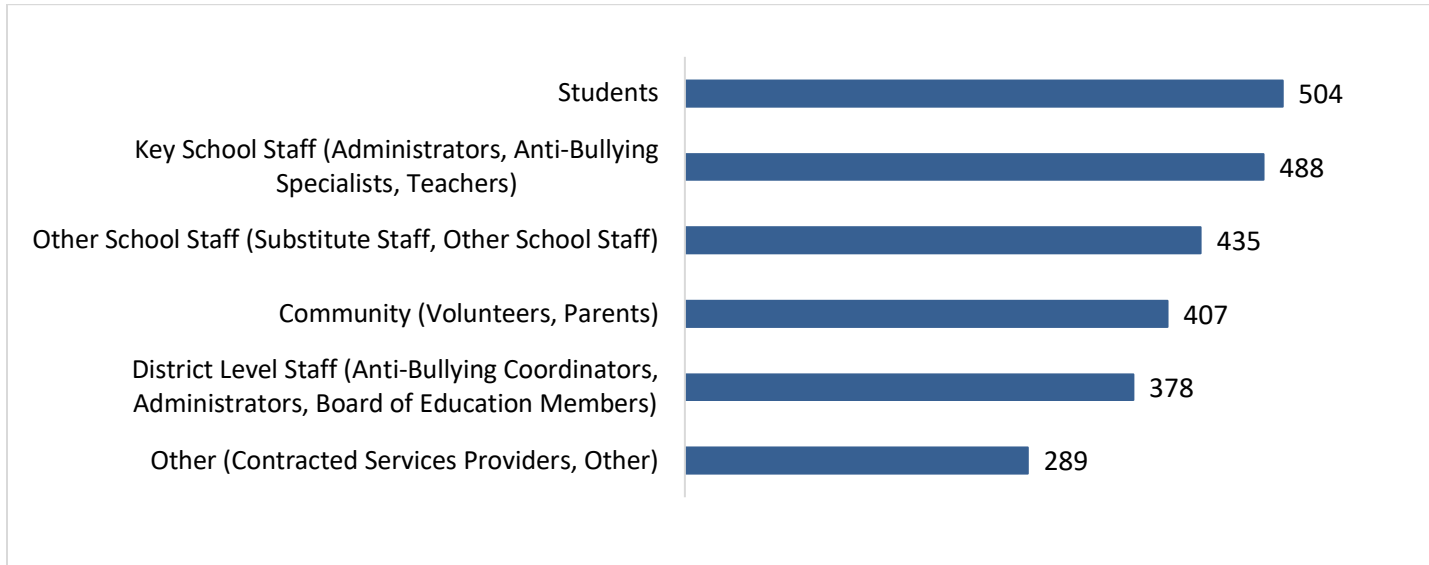


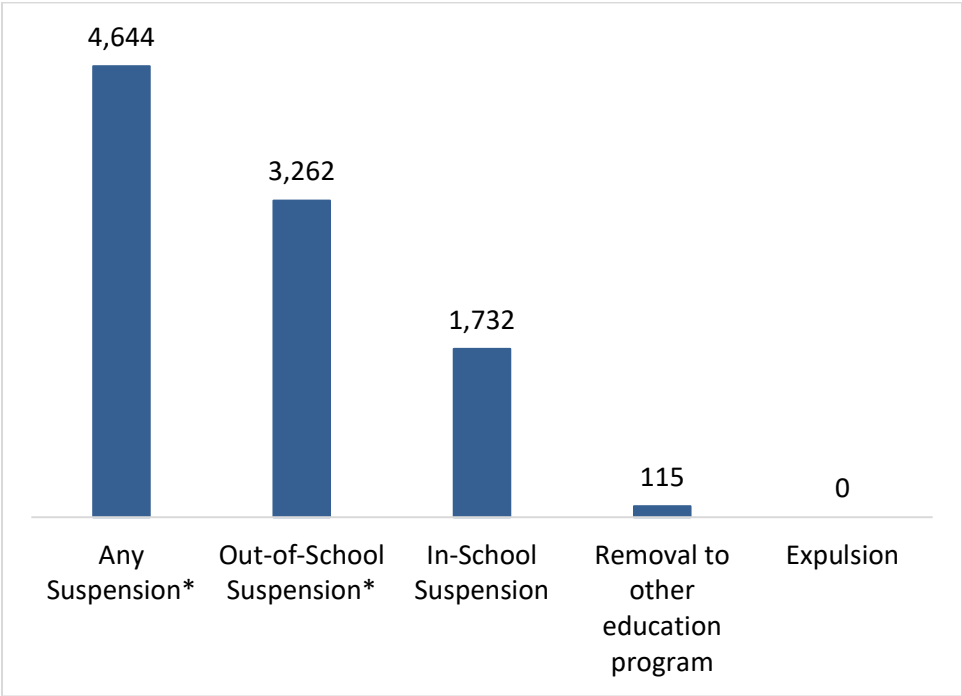
Figure 23. Districts offering one or more HIB Programs by Attendee Type



Disciplinary Actions

During the 2020-21 school year, 4,644 students were suspended from school on at least one occasion. Of the 4,644 students, 3,262 received one or more out-of-school suspension and 1,732 received one or more in-school suspensions. Among suspended students, most were suspended only once and for less than one week of school during the year, but many were suspended multiple times and for multiple days. In addition, 115 students were removed from school and sent to another school or other education program, and zero students were expelled from school. Males were more likely to be suspended than females, black students more likely than students of other races, and high school and middle school students more likely than students in elementary school.

Figure 24. Students Removed from School by Type of Removal



***Any Suspension:** These counts include students with disabilities who received unilateral removals or removals by a hearing officer.

Figure 25. Students Suspended by Total Number of Days Suspended during Year Update

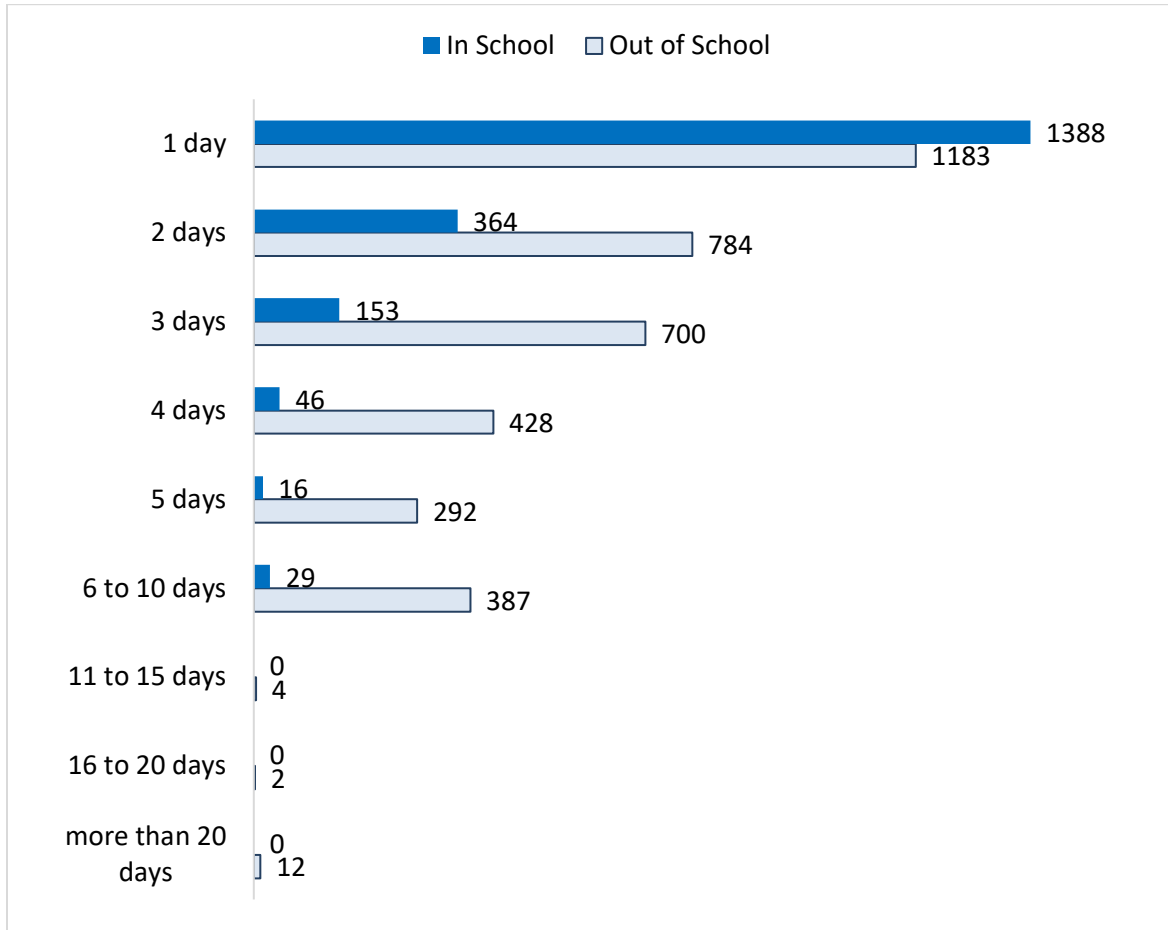
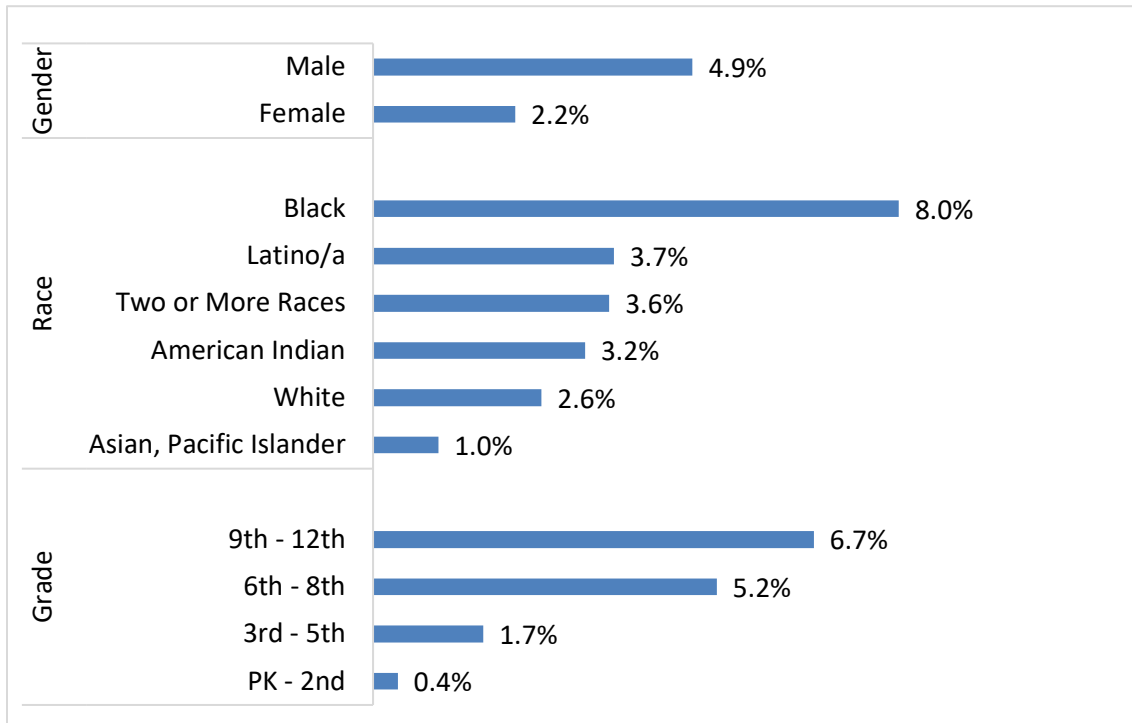


Figure 26. Student Suspension Rate by Offender Type Update



Initiatives to Improve School Safety

Department's Response

The Department's mission to ensure all of New Jersey's students have equitable access to high quality education and achieve academic excellence recognizes the importance of safe and nurturing learning environments to support positive student outcomes. The 2020-2021 school year began like no other and required new approaches to optimize teaching and learning in primarily virtual or remote settings. In response to the urgency required of the Department and the educational system as a whole, the Department increased its efforts to support districts in identifying programs, practices, and other resources to improve school climate and support social and emotional development and the mental health needs of students and educators. Some examples of this work includes the Department's ongoing focus on promoting [social and emotional learning](#), providing tools and training for improving school climate and positive behavioral supports, [mental health](#), increasing public data reporting using the SSDS, and expanding resources for New Jersey's tiered system of supports initiative, [NJTSS](#).

Over the 2020-2021 school year, the Department supported districts in providing accurate reporting and dedicating staff to responding to inquiries related to the SSDS. Further, the Department continues to provide guidance to districts, on navigating and populating the SSDS ([Student Safety Data System Guidance](#)).

Data Transparency and Quality

Each year, the Department issues School Performance Reports, required by the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, that provide educators, families, and community members with data school and district teams can use to identify areas of strength and areas in need of improvement. New Jersey School Performance Reports contain information on the school's reported violence, vandalism, weapons offenses, substance offenses, and HIB incidents. Beginning in 2018-19, the School Performance Reports were enhanced to include additional data from the Student Safety Data System including in-school suspensions, out-of-school

suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement, incidents of violence, and incidents of bullying and harassment.

New Jersey School Performance Reports provide information as collected through the SSDS that has not been reported prior to 2017-18. These data give educators, families, and community members key information for identifying school strengths and needs for school and district improvement planning. Reporting more data is also responsive to issues of current concern, such as race disparities in discipline reporting and reports to law enforcement.

Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act (ABR) Implementation

To support schools in enhancing implementation of the ABR, Chapter 16 of the New Jersey Administrative Code focuses on programs to support student development and includes the regulations detailing the requirements placed on schools and districts through the ABR. The regulations require both public schools and Approved Private Schools for Students with Disabilities (APSSD) to report incidents or alleged incidents of bullying involving a student. In addition, the regulations offer schools, districts and APSSDs guidance when there are incidents or allegations of bullying that occur involving both school districts and APSSDs. The regulations ensure all students have the opportunity to achieve academic and behavioral success in safe and supportive learning environments.

The Department's 21 county offices of education oversee and support the districts' implementation of the ABR. The county offices do this through a variety of ways, including convening county-wide meetings of the district Anti-Bullying Coordinators, to encourage dialogue and professional development around ways to improve school climate and address HIB incidents. Further, through the ABR, the county offices are charged with investigating district compliance with the ABR, and depending on the outcome of the investigation, corrective actions may be required, which can improve school climate and culture and reduce incidents of HIB. The county offices regularly communicate with districts and constituents, including victims and offenders of HIB, to assist in the improvement of school climate which can result in the reduction of incidents of HIB through education. The Department will continue to provide school districts with guidance, resources, and technical assistance in implementing the ABR.

New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum

The New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (QSAC) is the Department's monitoring and district self-evaluation system for public school districts. The system shifts the monitoring and evaluation focus from compliance to assistance, capacity-building and improvement. It is a single comprehensive accountability system that consolidates and incorporates the monitoring requirements of applicable state laws and programs and complements federally required improvements. The regulations governing QSAC, N.J.A.C. 6A:30, are reviewed every five years. The most recent re-adoption in the fall of 2017 includes indicators that clarify the requirements for districts related to bullying to be more robust, thus accounting for a greater number of points for a school's overall QSAC score.

The language of the indicator states, "The school district implements a process to ensure the school safety/school climate team in each school, with support from the CSA (Chief School Administrator):

- (1) reviews and takes action to strengthen school climate policies;
- (2) educates the community, including students, teachers, staff, and parents, to prevent HIB;
- (3) provides professional development opportunities that address effective practices of successful school climate programs or approaches; and
- (4) completes the HIB self-assessment. The CSA submits to the Department the statement of assurance and the district board of education approval date for the HIB self-assessment for each school in the school district by September 30. (N.J.S.A. 18A:17-46 and 18A:37-14 through 18 and N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.7)."

Further, NJQSAC requires that school districts have policies and procedures in place to ensure a coordinated system for planning, delivering, measurement and modification of intervention and referral services. The county review also includes a discussion around the implementation, evaluation and effectiveness of the intervention and referral services in each school building that address, learning, behavioral and health needs of all students. By reviewing

the policies and procedures with school districts, it provides an opportunity for the county offices to support districts in the area of school climate and culture and addressing individual student needs.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

The Department strongly believes in the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools and recognizes the research that students who were taught SEL skills were less likely to have conduct problems and engage in substance abuse. The Department continues to provide support for the implementation of SEL in schools and the integration of the NJ SEL Competencies and Sub-Competencies. The Department has recently published five learning modules to support the implementation of the NJ SEL Competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills. The modules can be used by individual educators seeking to integrate SEL into their classrooms or during professional learning communities (PLCs), where teams of educators can learn alongside one another on how to best integrate SEL into their classrooms. Each module includes a facilitator's guide and resources that support the content being presented.

Over the last year, the Department has released guidance encouraging districts to prioritize the social and emotional well-being of their staff and students. In the Department's guidance [*The Road Forward*](#), the Department included content in Principle 1 of its four principles to accelerate learning. The guidance includes actions to consider at the time the guidance was released, before reopening schools for the 2020-2021 school year, and at the start of the school 2020-2021 school year. In addition, there are examples of New Jersey school districts taking action to implement the principles. The overall sentiment of the guidance is to encourage districts to reflect on their practices to ensure they are attending to the social and emotional wellness of their students and staff.

School Climate Improvement

The Department has been active in supporting school climate improvement and proactively addressing student behavior by implementing the New Jersey Positive Behavior Supports in Schools ([NJ PBSIS](#)) initiative. NJ PBSIS provides comprehensive professional

development to support the implementation of tiered interventions for a range of school intervention needs including conduct, behavior and social and emotional wellness.

In the summer of 2019, the Department entered a new three-year memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University to continue the [School Climate Transformation Project \(SCTP\)](#). The MOU includes activities dedicated to improving the [New Jersey School Climate Survey](#), developing new tools and resources to support schools in their school climate improvement efforts, and highlighting effective school climate improvement efforts underway in select project schools. Additionally, schools participating in the project utilize the survey to assess the conditions for learning, and in response, develop and implement school climate improvement plans to address specific needs.

As part of the Department's collaboration with Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, in the facilitation of the School Climate Transformation Project (SCTP), the SCTP responded to the emerging needs of the project schools during the pandemic. In the Fall of 2020, the SCTP team hosted training sessions to provide participating schools guidance on navigating the school reopening and potential challenges students may present following the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The SCTP team, in collaboration with the Department, will continue to support schools in responding to school climate and social-emotional needs throughout the next year. As detailed in the agreement with Rutgers, the Department along with the SCTP team will release a new online school climate improvement platform, which will assist districts in assessing their school climate needs along with constructing data-driven and evidence-based plans to respond to the collected data.

New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS)

The NJTSS, New Jersey's model of a multi-tiered system of supports, is a framework for prevention, intervention and enrichment designed to improve results for all children, maximizing all students' receipt of effective instruction that is based on their skill needs. In addition, it is a mechanism to reduce unnecessary referrals for special education and to enhance the range of opportunities for students with IEPs to be educated alongside their general education peers. The Department, in collaboration with Rutgers University, developed

tools for districts to use to implement this tiered approach to prevention, intervention and enrichment in academics as well as behavior. Screening protocols and expansion of Tier 1 instructional strategies moved schools toward an integrated approach to supporting all students. Intensive, high-quality professional learning conducted by the Rutgers University project implementation team increased knowledge and capacity of state-level staff for empowering educators to apply the principles of improvement science and to use data to enhance services to students. Intensive, research-based coaching by project staff enhanced knowledge of district and school personnel in early reading development and essential components of the NJTSS, which aligns with most models of response to intervention (RTI) and MTSS.

Over the last year, the Department has leaned on the NJTSS Framework as the suggested way to deliver support and interventions to students demonstrating academic, social, emotional, and health needs. In Summer of 2020, the NJDOE in partnership with Rutgers released [instructional guidance](#), which sought to provide districts instructional strategies for identifying and supporting early reading needs that may have developed or widened due to the disruptions caused by the pandemic. The Department continues to refine its resources to aid districts in establishing and operating their own tiered systems of supports.

Mental Health

A priority need identified by Governor Murphy is the mental health of our students and educators. In February 2020, before the pandemic, Governor Murphy announced the formation of a Statewide Mental Health Working Group. Since its creation, the group has grown to over 50 members and has convened online as one group and in subcommittees to begin development of a comprehensive resource guide to address the mental health needs of all students.

When schools transitioned to remote learning in March 2020, the focus of the working group shifted to gathering data on the impact of remote learning on mental health and identifying supports and interventions relevant for remote learning and for the transition back to in-person instruction this fall. The Quick Reference Mental Health Guide (Quick Guide) was provided by the Mental Health Working Group in November 2020 to assist schools with building

a continuum of social-emotional and mental health supports for students and staff, within schools and with community partners.

The Quick Guide, developed collaboratively by the New Jersey Department of Education and the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, provided fundamental tools that schools could use to build an array of supports in an organized and systemic manner. It provided key resources teams could consider to enhance the array of services available both within schools and within the community.

Since then, Mental Health Working Group has continued its work to maintain a statewide focus on mental health and share more in-depth resources on models of service delivery that promote positive mental health and social-emotional wellbeing in a variety of educational contexts.

Department's Future Objectives

The Department will continue to support the initiatives and programs which provide districts with the necessary tools to address incidents of HIB and safety within schools, which include revising and updating the New Jersey School Climate Survey, promoting quality social and emotional learning, and advancing the New Jersey Tiered Systems of Supports (NJTSS) initiative.

Over the next year, the Department, in partnership with Rutgers University, will finalize an online school climate improvement platform. The platform incorporates the New Jersey School Climate Survey, which is designed to be disseminated to staff, students, and caregivers. After collecting the survey responses, the platform applies algorithms and guides districts in selecting school climate improvement strategies that best address the needs indicated by their school climate data. The platform will interact with users and identify areas of increased vulnerability based on the survey responses. Users will be able to develop comprehensive school climate improvement plans and progress reports all within the platform, which will likely improve data quality and encourage data-informed decision-making. As the platform continues to develop, the Department will rely on feedback solicited from districts across the State and school climate experts to refine the tool before its publicly available for all New Jersey schools.

Through the use of its Federal relief money, the Department has intensified its efforts to support the mental health and well-being of students and educators. The Department designated \$30 million from the State set-aside Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER II) funds for the provision of mental health services and supports. These funds will support schools in building a continuum of school-based mental health services and supports for students and educators, in coordination with existing county and local services. Allocations for these funds were based upon total LEA enrollment with a minimum of \$45,000 per LEA. Each LEA will spend at least 10% of the allocation on professional development that supports the provision of school-based mental health supports and services. The remaining amount can be invested in the further development of mental health supports and services within the school district and/or partnerships with community agencies to ensure that additional programming and supports can be provided to students, educators, and families.

In addition, the Department designated \$48 million from the American Rescue Plan (ARP ESSER) State set-aside funds for the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) Mental Health Support Staffing grant. Under this grant, LEAs will be required to allocate funds to develop and implement Tier II (targeted, small group interventions) and Tier III (intensive interventions) services in accordance with a multi-tiered system of supports framework that addresses students' and educators' mental health and social emotional needs through the hiring of staff, contracting with service providers, and/or providing professional development in effective implementation of Tier II and Tier III services.

Allocations for this grant will be made via a formula that assesses an LEA's need to enhance its mental health support services based on four indicators:

- Each LEA's average rate of chronic absenteeism over the last two years;
- Each LEA's average suspension rate over the last two years;
- Each LEA's average rate of violent incidents reported to the DOE over the last two years; and
- Each LEA's average rate of substance abuse incidents reported to the DOE over the last two years.

The entirety of the allocation will be designed to increase access to school-based mental health supports and services for students by building or enhancing a tiered intervention model of comprehensive school-based mental health supports and services that are sustainable after the life of the grant.

The Department acknowledges that due to school closures related to COVID-19 the data collected in this year's SSDS report may not portray the disciplinary rates typical of a traditional school year. Over the next year, the Department will improve upon its supports for implementing school climate improvement strategies in remote and hybrid settings as well as continue to consult with partners in higher education and national experts to inform strategies for maintaining and improving school climates.