



**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, 2021 to June 30, 2022

New Jersey Department of Education

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# 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 2021-22:

- School personnel reported incidents to the police on 8,170 occasions, 3,713 of which were mandatory referrals, leading to 552 student school-related arrests.
- Most HIB incidents occurred on school grounds, with 53 percent in middle schools.
- Schools reported 19,156 HIB trainings and 29,029 HIB programs in 2021-22.
- 52,135 students were suspended from school during the school year on at least one occasion.
- 894 students were removed from school and sent to another school or other education program, and 41 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 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 2021-22 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 fifth 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.

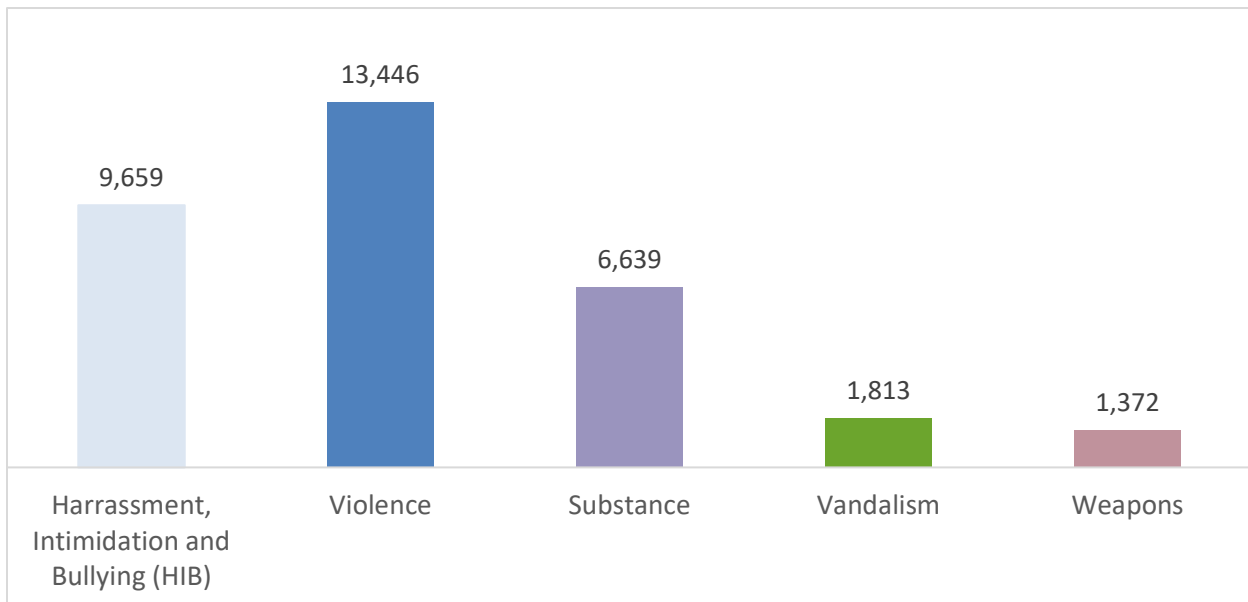
The SSDS collects incidents of violence, vandalism, weapons, substance use, and harassment, intimidation and bullying (HIB), as well as HIB trainings and programs. In addition, the system collects details on all allegations of HIB, along with all student suspensions and other removals from school, as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

# Key Findings

## SSDS Incidents

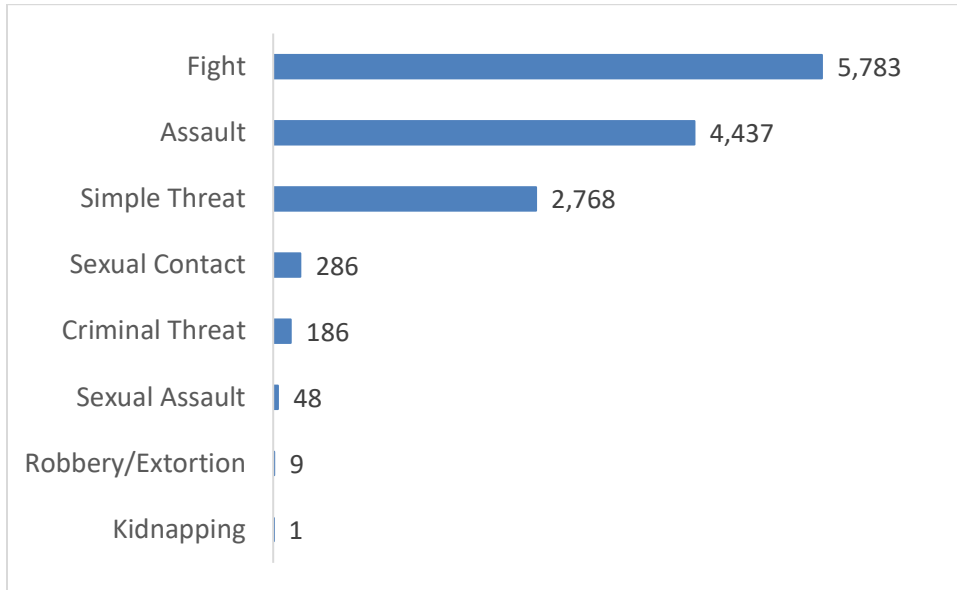
School districts in New Jersey reported 30,561 incidents of violence, vandalism, weapons, substance use, and harassment, intimidation and bullying in the 2021-22 school year. This is a unique count of incidents. As in the chart below, as well as other charts in this report, a single incident may consist 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.

**Figure 1. Incidents by Category**



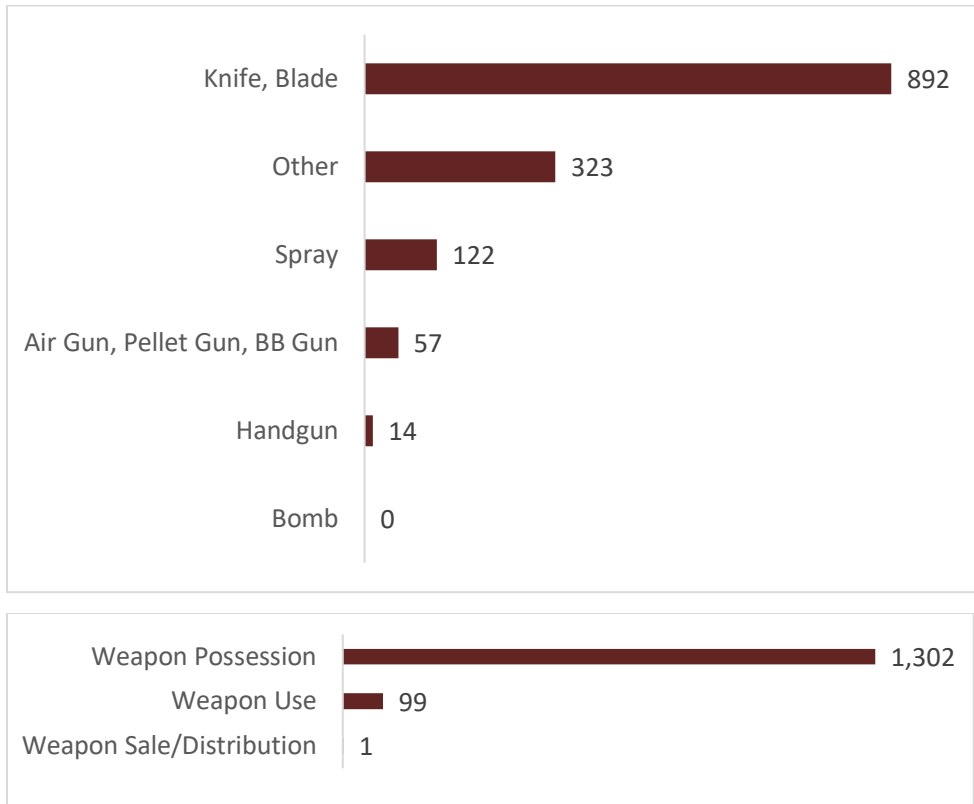
Note: Figure 1 shows the number of incidents reported by type. A single incident may consist of more than one incident type.

**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.

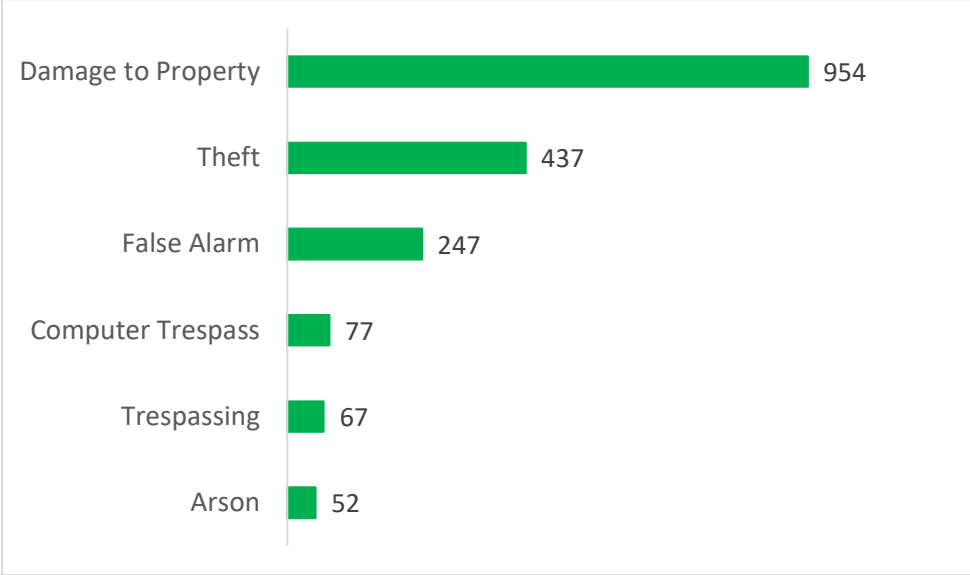
**Figure 3. Incidents of Weapons**



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.

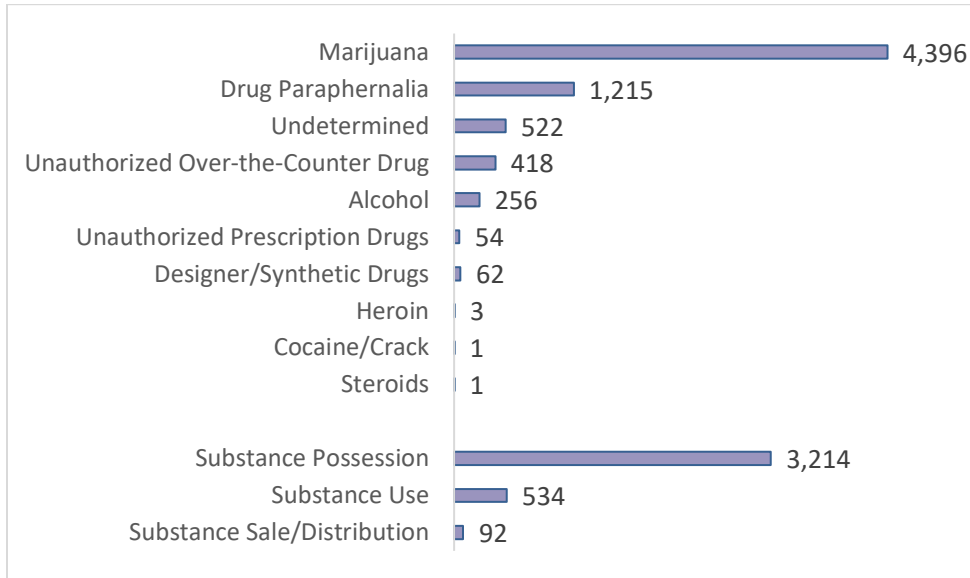


**Figure 4. Incidents of Vandalism**



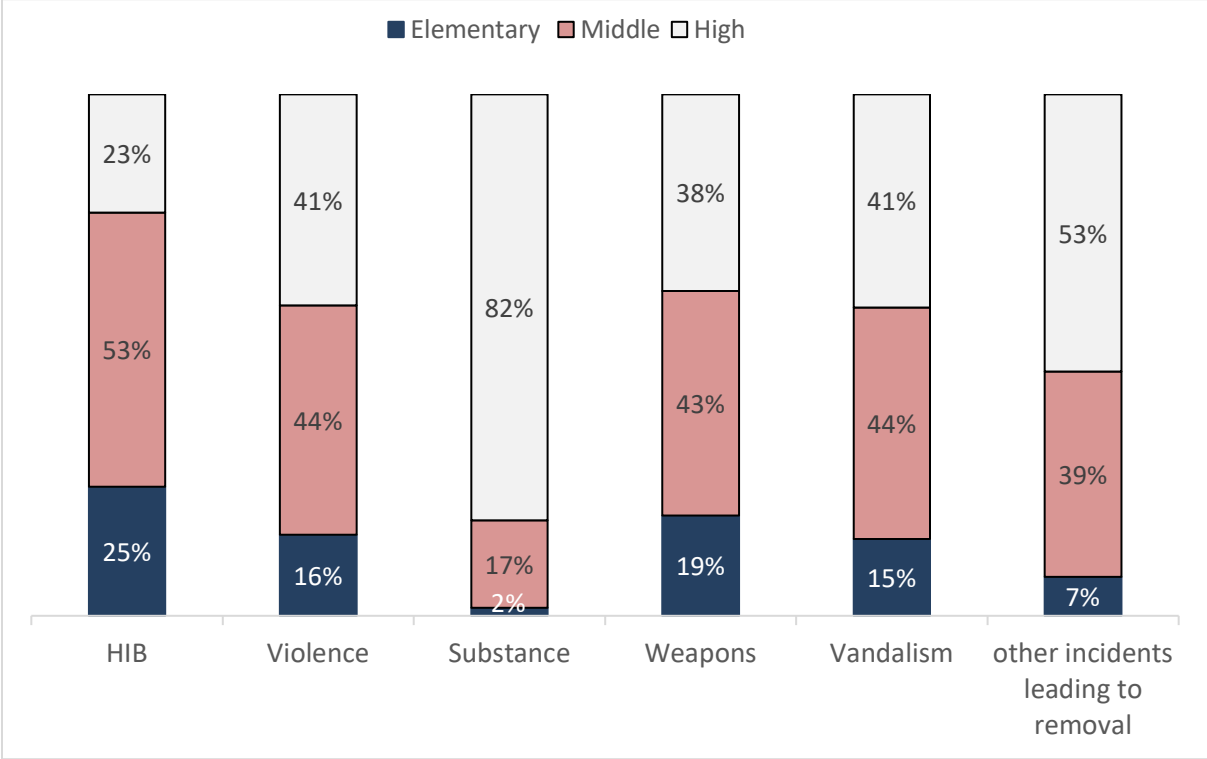
Note: Figure 4 shows the number of incidents reported by vandalism type. A single incident may consist of more than one vandalism type.

**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.

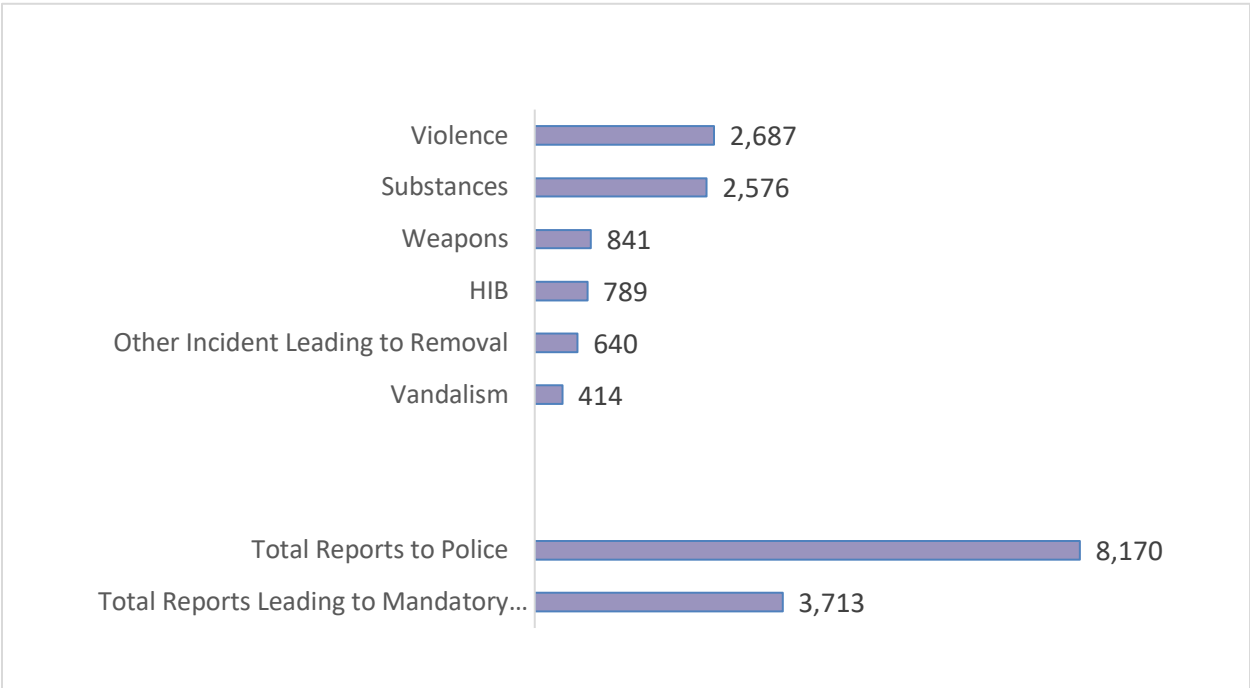
**Figure 6. Incident Types by School Type**



### School Police Reports

During the 2021-22 school year, school personnel reported incidents to the police on 8,170 occasions. In 640 instances, reports involved student infractions that did not fit into a category of violence, weapons, vandalism, substance, or HIB. Of all reports to police, 3,713 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. In addition, 552 student arrests occurred at school. Male offenders were more likely to be arrested than females for incidents reported to SSDS, high school were more likely than students in other grade levels, and students without disabilities more likely than students with disabilities.

**Figure 7. School-Related Reports to Police**

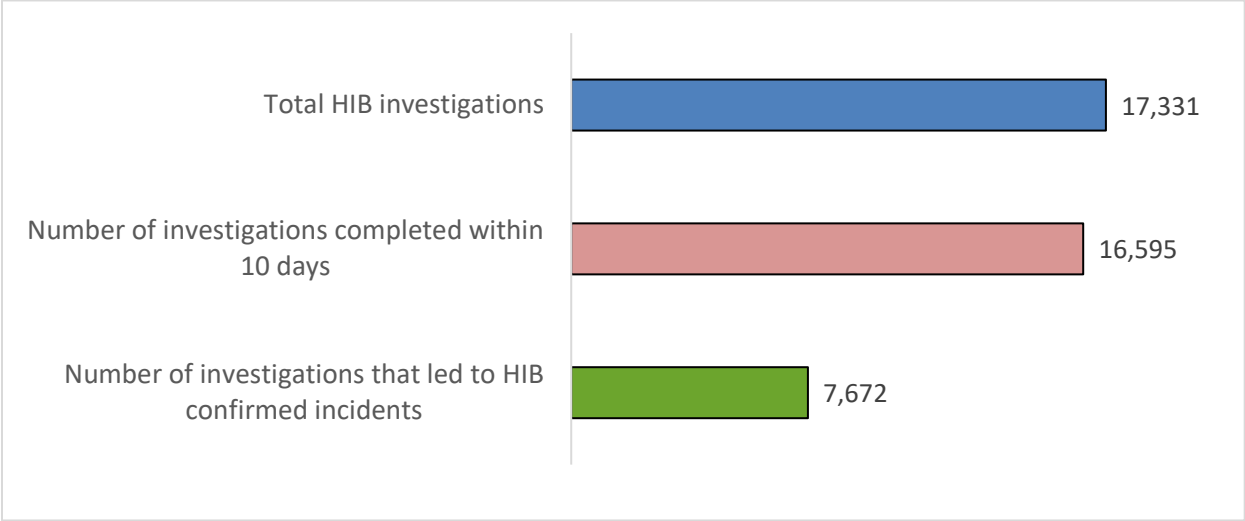


Note: More than one offender may be arrested per incident, and one student may be arrested more than one time per school year.

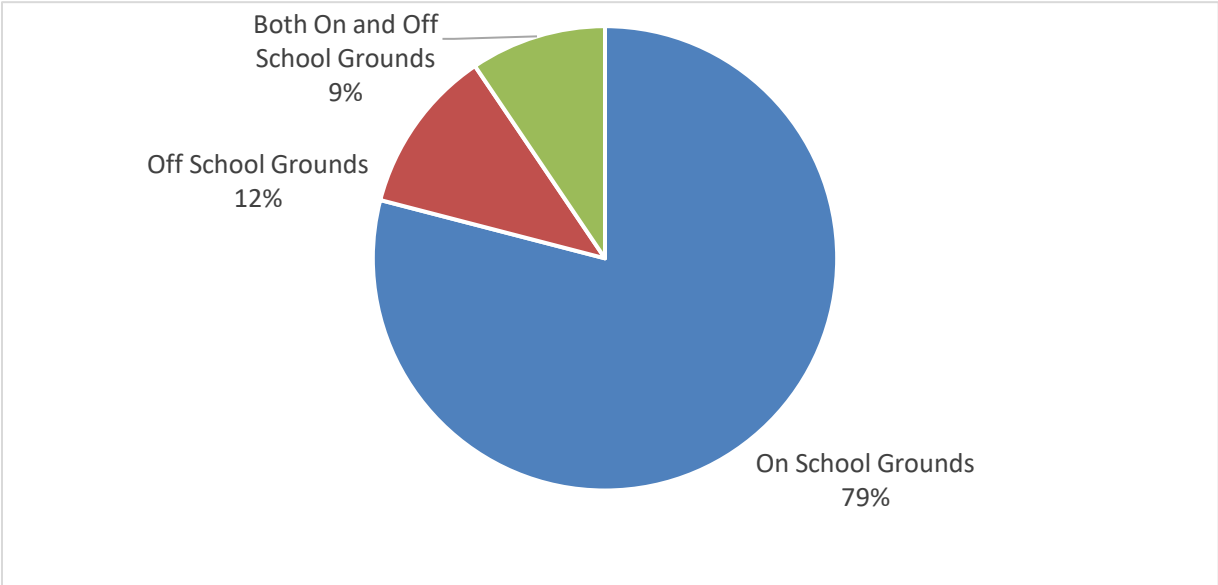
# HIB Investigations and Confirmed Incidents

There were 17,331 HIB investigations during the 2021-22 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.

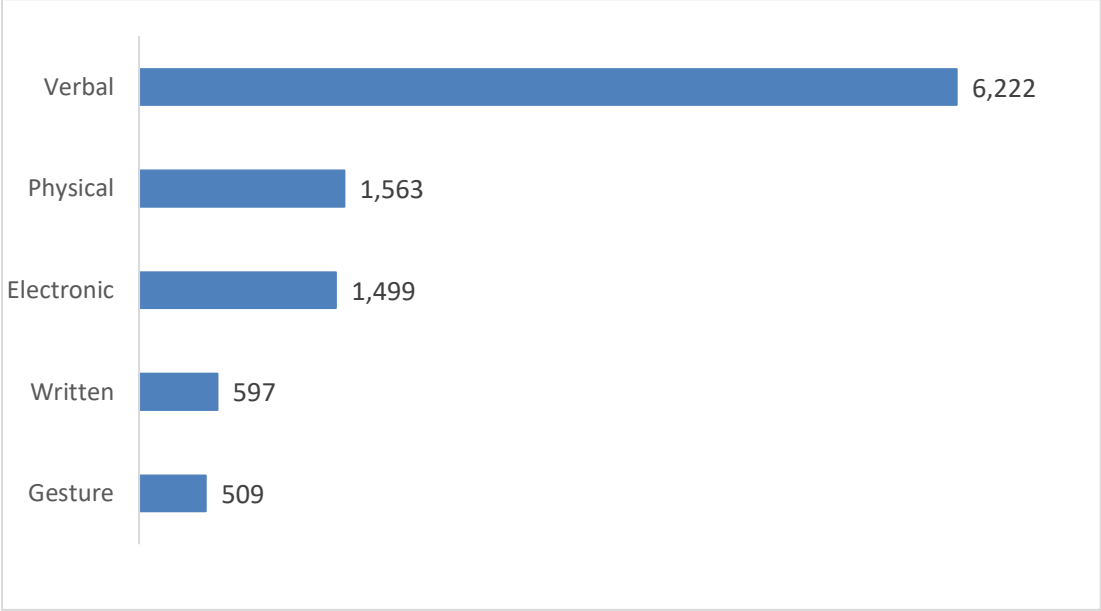
**Figure 8. HIB Investigations**



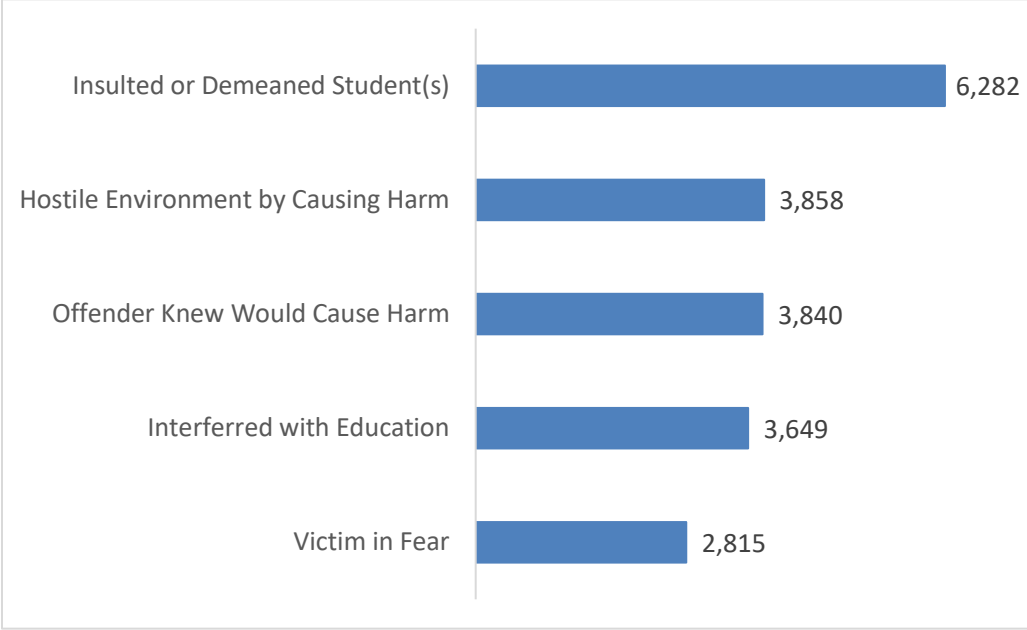
**Figure 9. HIB Incident Location**



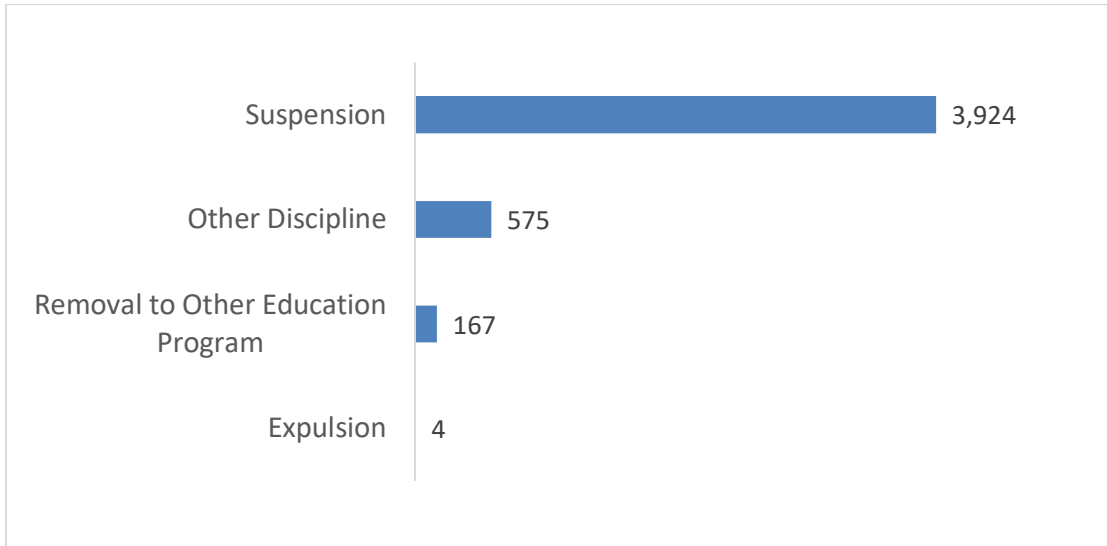
**Figure 10. HIB Mode**



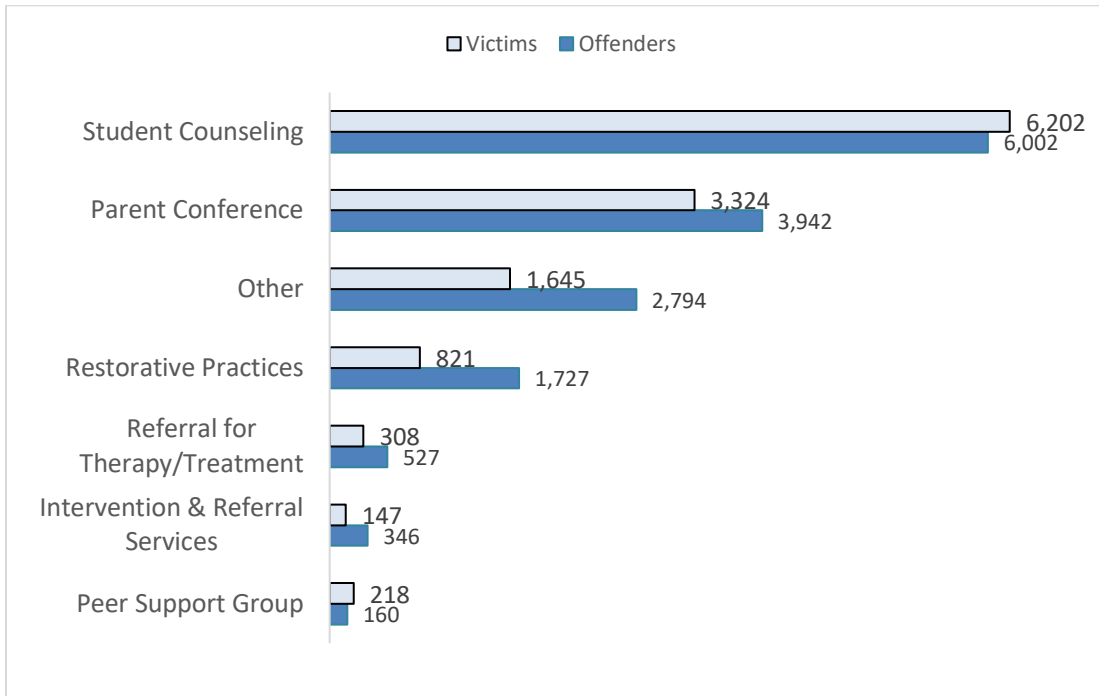
**Figure 11. HIB Effect**



**Figure 12. HIB Disciplinary Actions**



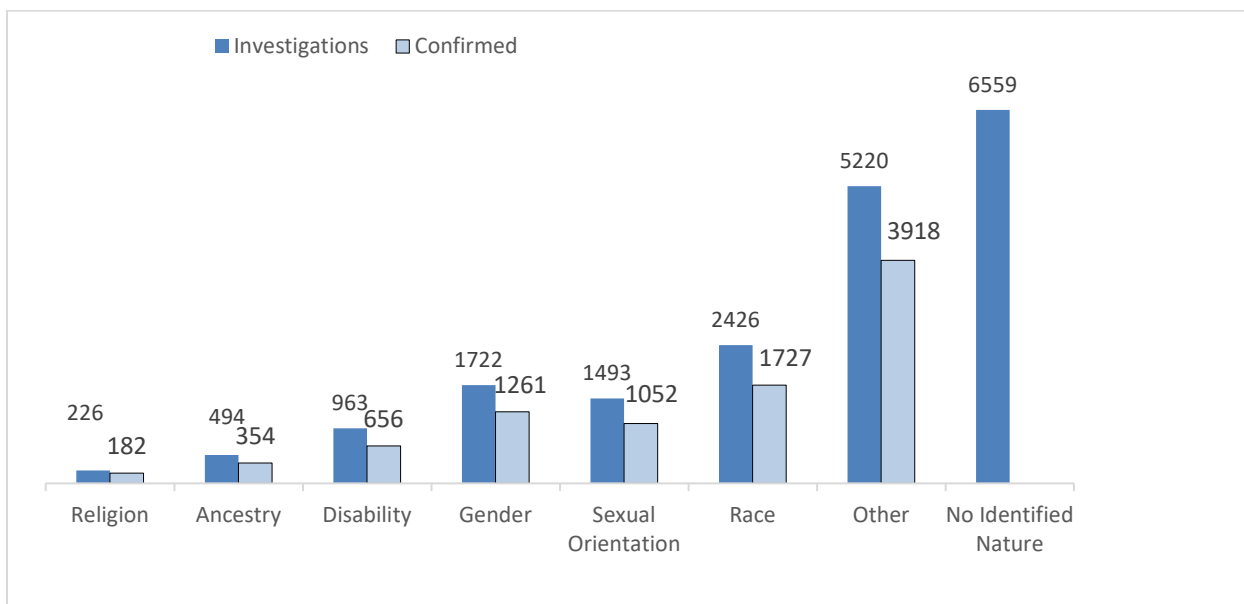
**Figure 13. HIB Remedial Actions**



## Nature of HIB

Forty-eight percent of HIB investigations led to confirmed HIB incidents. Cases involving certain protected categories were more likely to be affirmed, including gender (73%), ancestry (72%), sexual orientation (70%) or race (71%). 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.

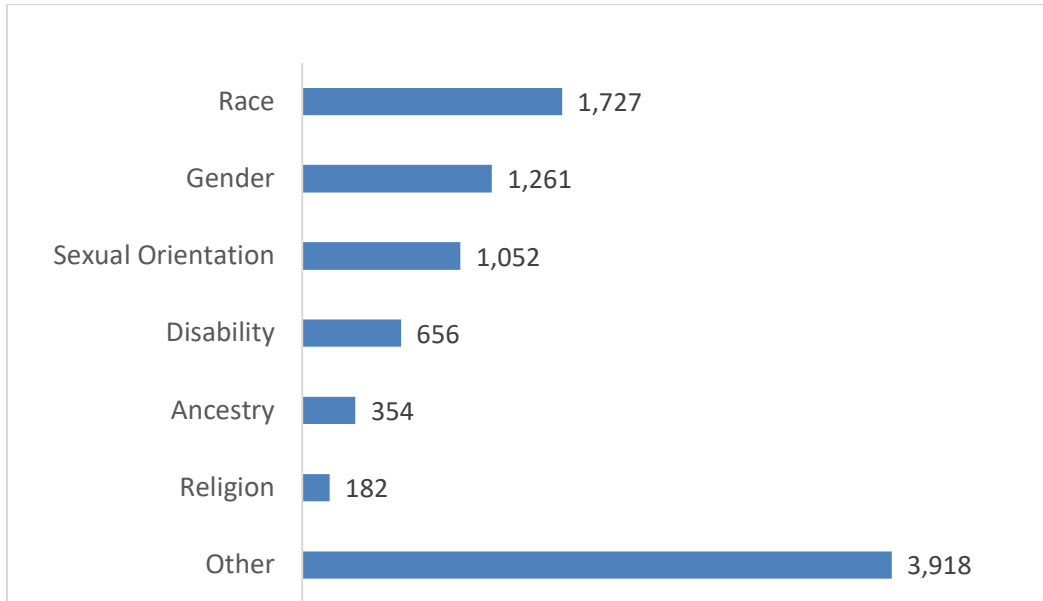
**Figure 14. HIB Investigations and HIB Confirmed by HIB Nature**



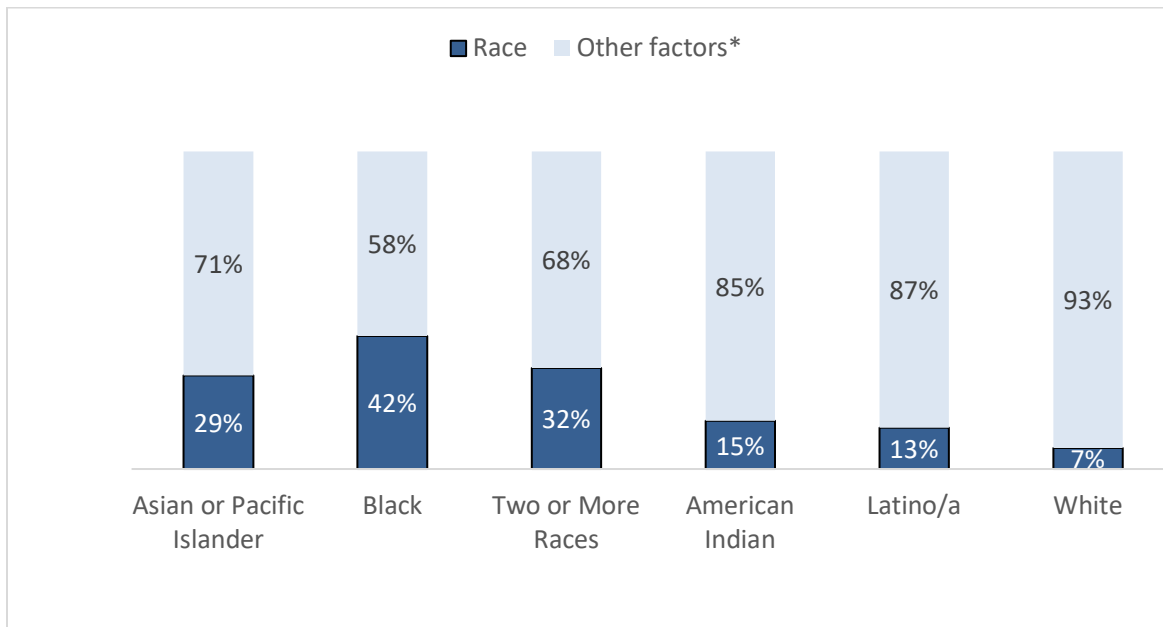
Pursuant to *N.J.S.A. 18A:37-14*, an HIB incident must be reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic, such as race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or a mental, physical or sensory disability,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



**Figure 15. HIB Nature of Bullying Incident**

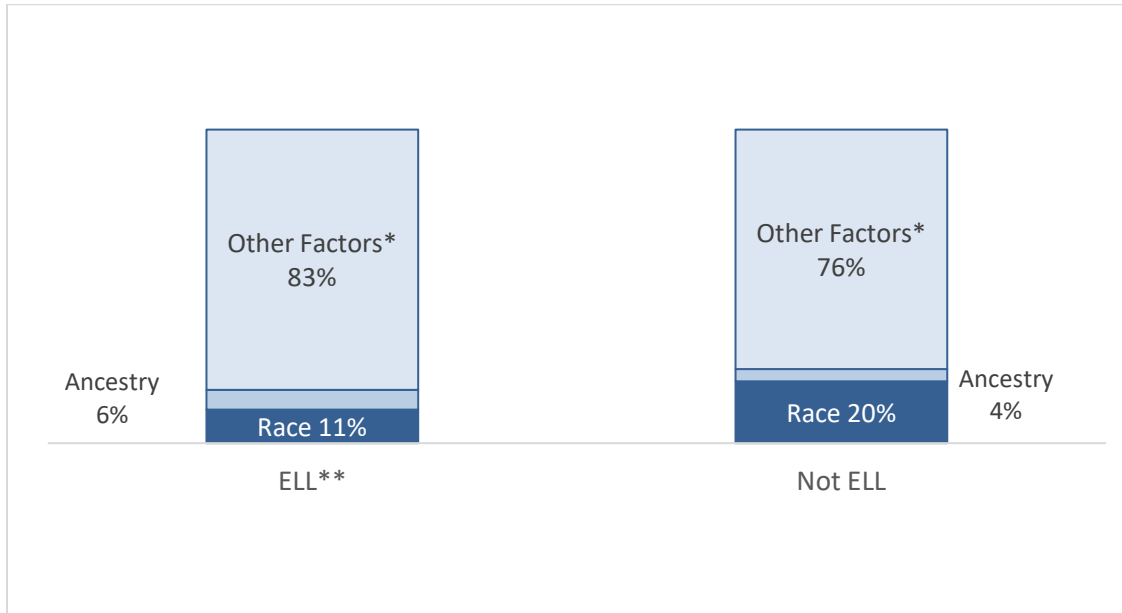


**Figure 16. HIB Target by Race of Students and Nature of Bullying**



**\*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 (e.g., weight, social status, skin blemishes, etc.)

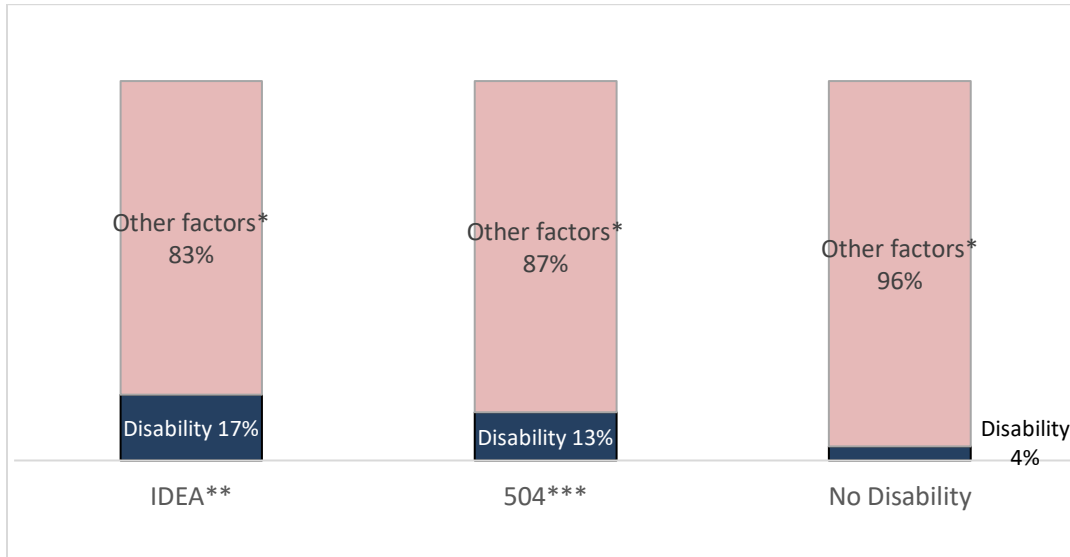
**Figure 17. HIB Target by Student ELL Status and Nature of Bullying**



**\*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**

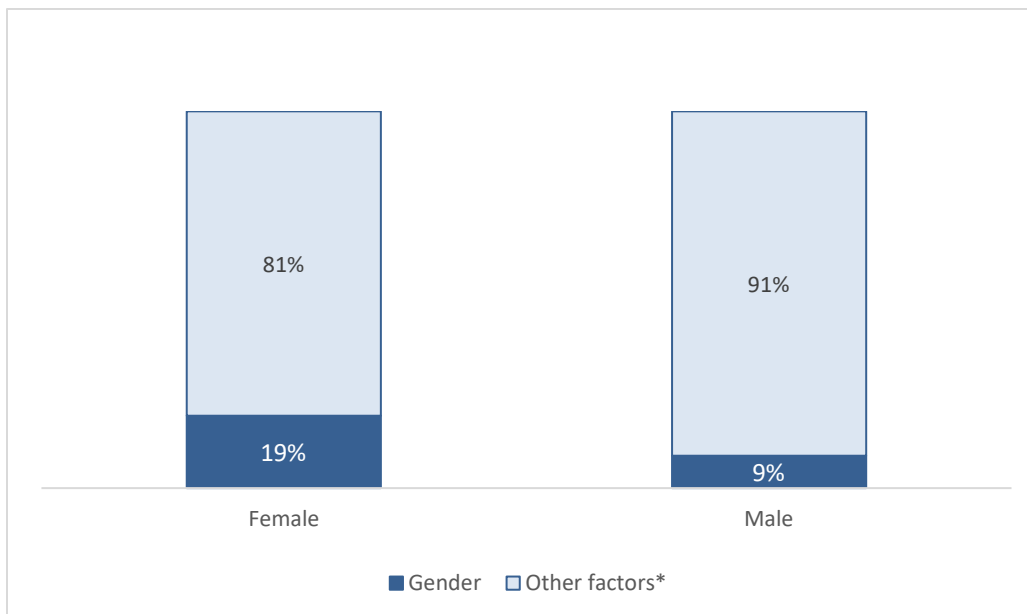


**\*Other factors:** e.g., race, color, religion, national origin gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression or any other distinguishing characteristic (e.g., weight, social status, skin blemishes, etc.)

**\*\*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**

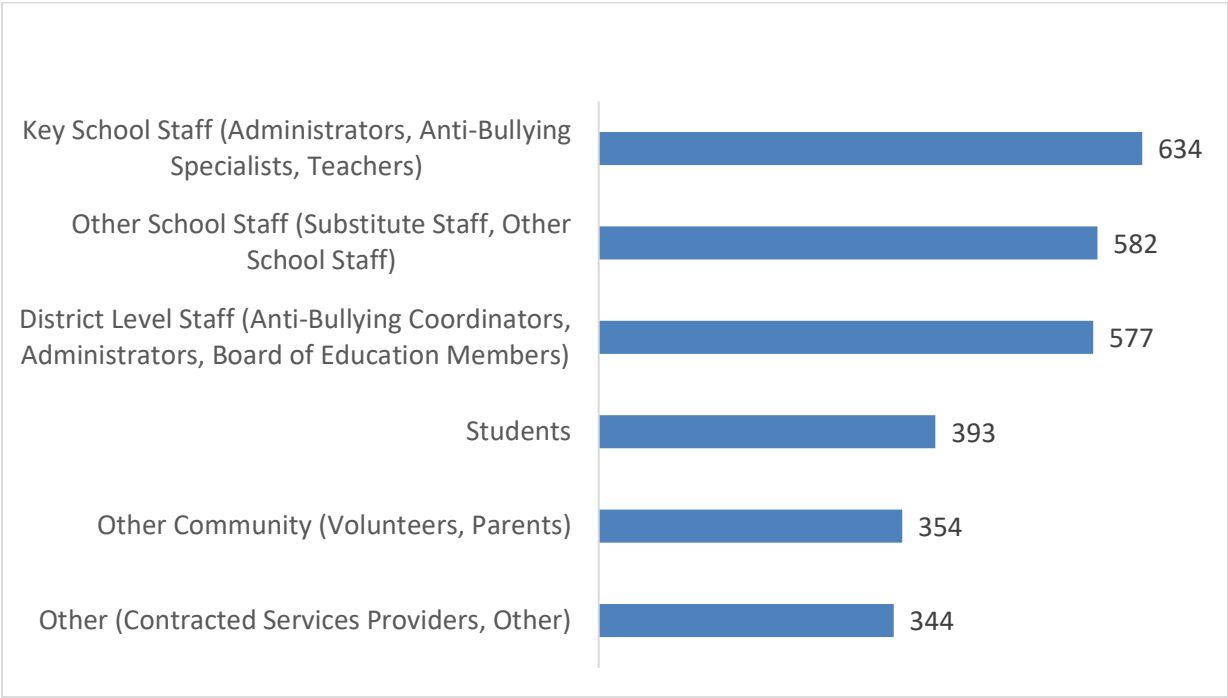


**\*Other Factors:** e.g., race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, sexual orientation or a mental, physical or sensory disability, or by any other distinguishing characteristic (e.g., weight, social status, skin blemishes, etc.)

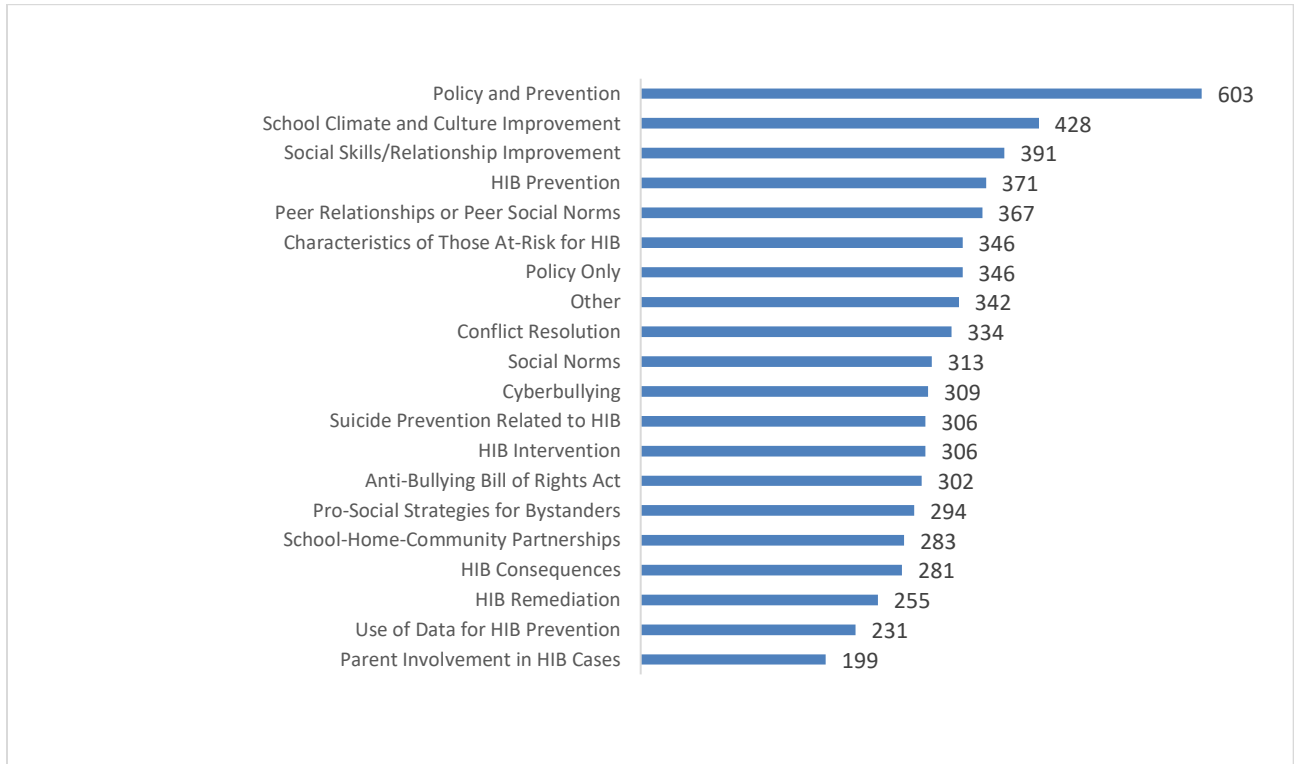
# HIB Trainings

Schools reported 19,156 HIB trainings in 2021-22. 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**



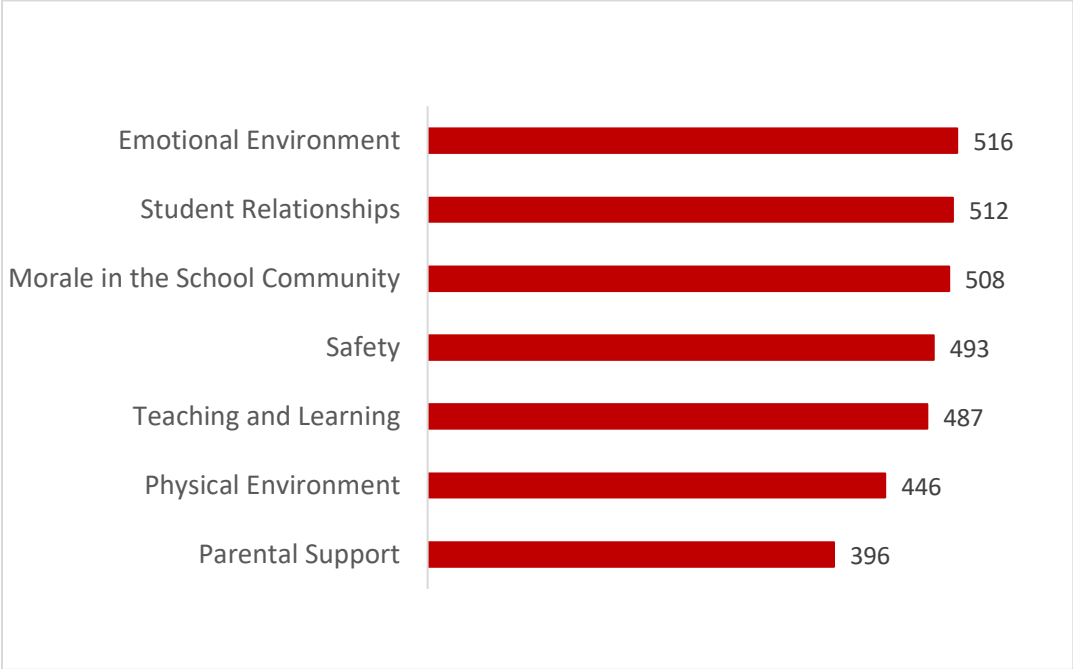
**Figure 21. Districts offering one or more HIB Trainings by Training Type**



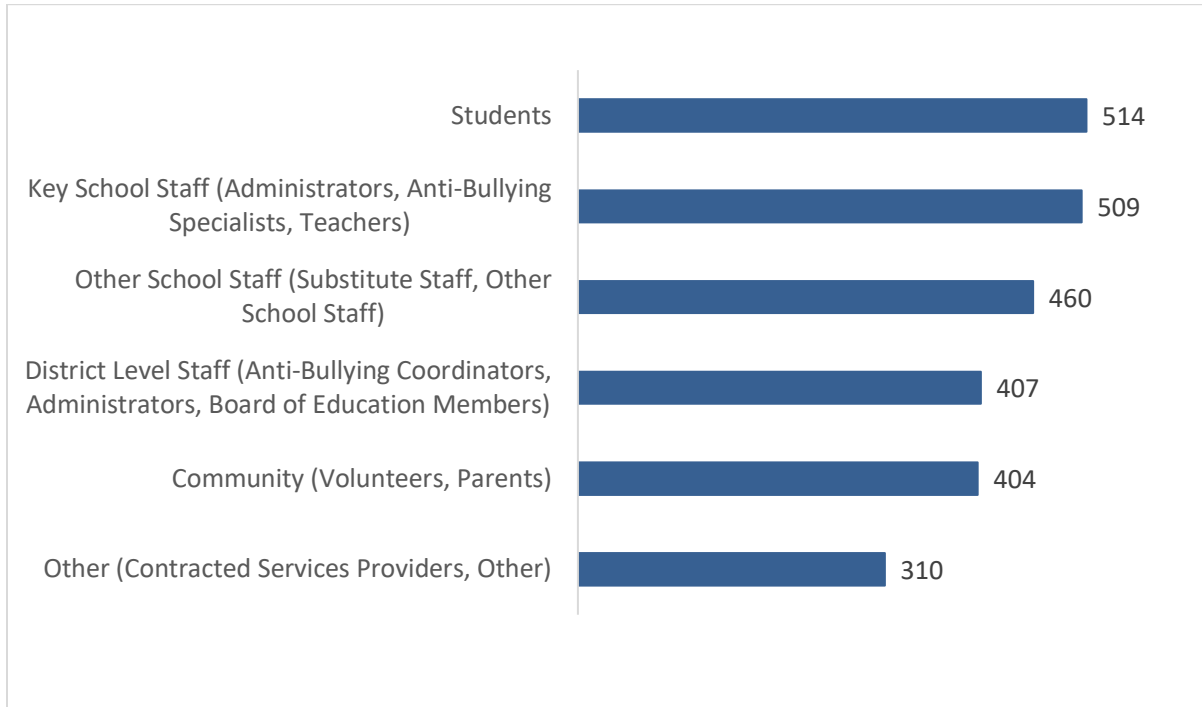
# HIB Programs

Schools reported 29,029 HIB programs in 2021-22. Most districts offered programs addressing various schoolwide conditions, especially morale in the school community (74%) and the emotional environment of the school (75%). Districts primarily offered these programs to students (75%) and key school staff (74%).

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



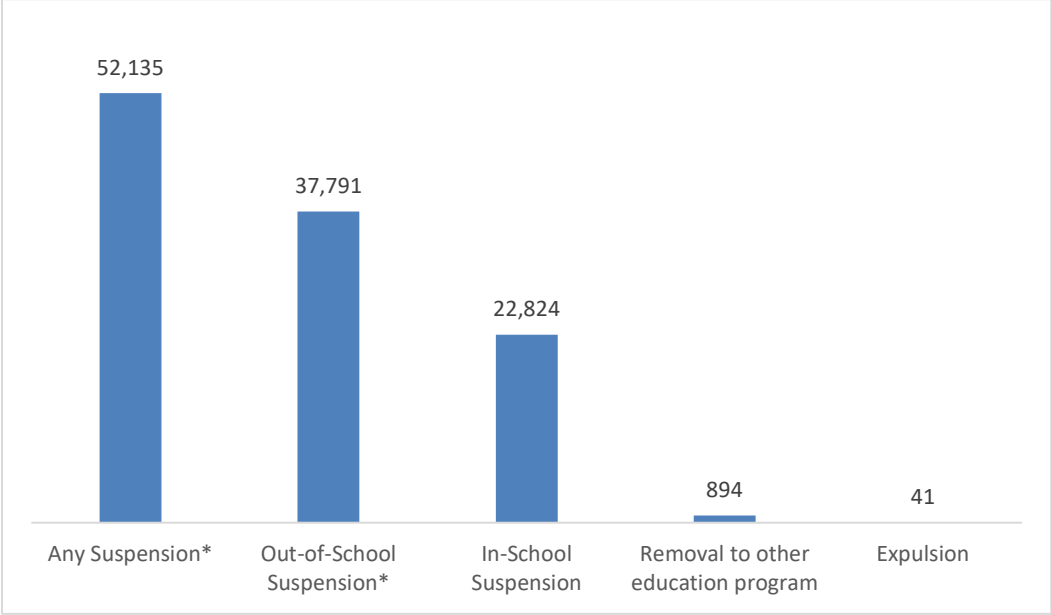
**Figure 23. Districts offering one or more HIB Programs by Attendee Type**



## **Disciplinary Actions**

During the 2021-22 school year, 52,135 students were suspended from school on at least one occasion. Of the 52,135 students, 37,791 received one or more out-of-school suspensions and 22,824 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, 894 students were removed from school and sent to another school or other education program, and 41 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.

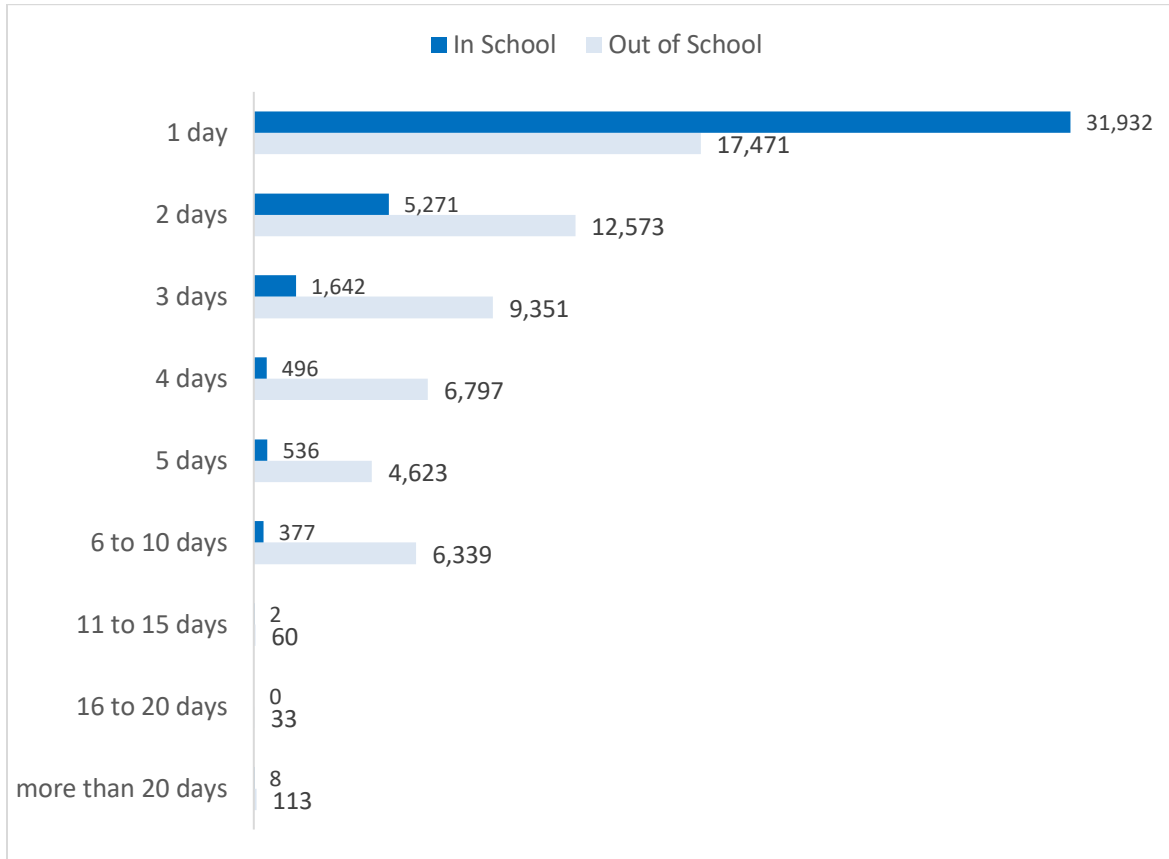
**Figure 24. Students Removed from School by Type of Removal**



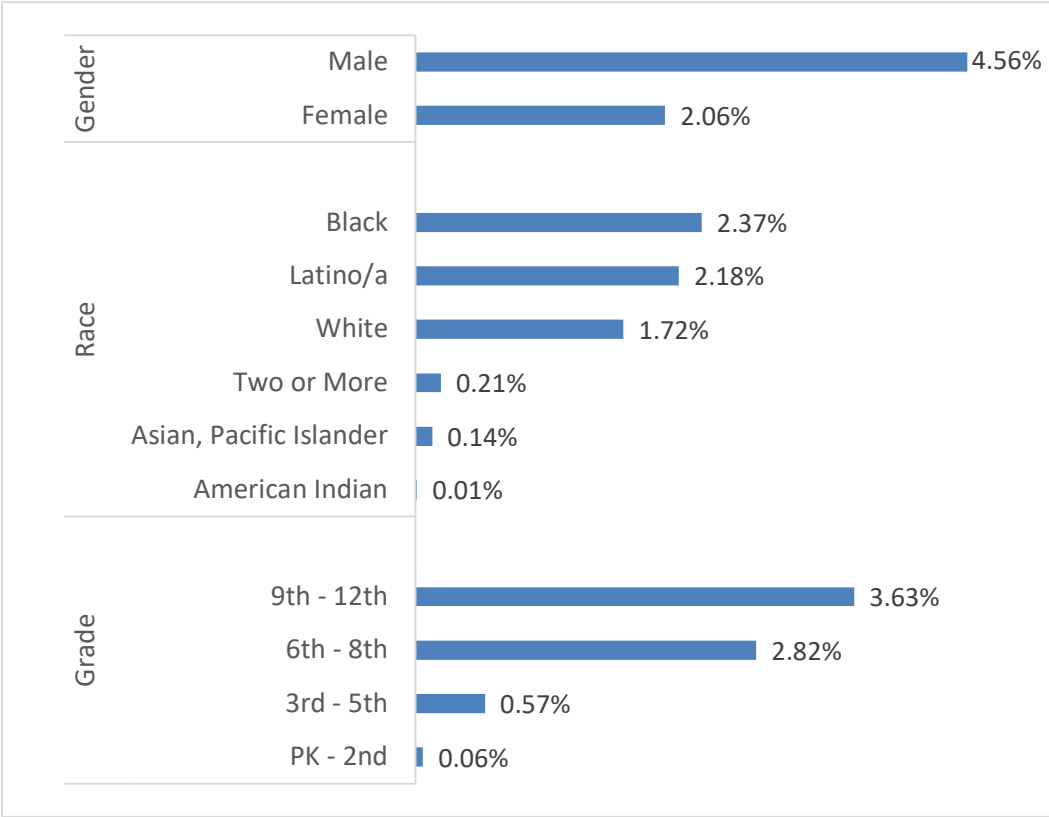
**\*Any Suspension:** These counts include students with disabilities who received unilateral removals or removals by a hearing officer.



**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 2021-2022 school year saw a return to in-person instruction coming off the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic's virtual and/or remote learning settings. With the return to full in-person instruction, the Department continued its efforts to support districts in identifying programs, practices, and other resources to improve school climate, support social and emotional development and support the mental health needs of students and educators. Some examples of this work include the Department's ongoing focus on supporting youth mental health, promoting social and emotional learning, and trauma-informed approaches, providing tools and training for improving school climate and positive behavioral supports, increasing public data reporting using the SSDS, and expanding resources for New Jersey's Tiered System of Supports initiative (NJTSS).

Over the 2021-2022 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.

## 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.

### **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, 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 climates which can result in the reduction of incidents of HIB through educational interventions. 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 misuse. With the return to in-person instruction, SEL had an even greater purpose. The time spent out of school for so many students had a significant impact on their mental health and their ability to navigate their relationships with others. In order to address this impact, 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 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.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department has released guidance encouraging districts to prioritize the social and emotional well-being of their staff and students. The Road Forward guidance provided up-to-date resources for school districts as they prepared to safely and empathetically welcome students back to in-person learning for the 2021-2022 school year. The Road Forward featured a series of initiatives that paved the way forward for our education community by investing heavily in identifying and addressing the academic and mental health impacts of COVID-19 on our students and educators. To continue supports for student learning, the Road Forward also released Summer Learning Guides which included a section specifically devoted to SEL.

## **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 into 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.

In collaboration with the School Climate Transformation Project at Rutgers University, the Department piloted the New Jersey School Climate Improvement (NJ SCI) survey and platform with a cohort of school districts in Spring 2022. Student surveys were made available in Arabic, English, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, and Spanish. NJ SCI will assist districts in assessing their school climate needs along with constructing data-driven and evidence-based plans to respond to the collected data. Information gathered from the pilot will be used to refine survey items and complete a rigorous validation study prior to statewide release.

### **New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS)**

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 additional tools for districts to use to implement this tiered approach to prevention, intervention, and enrichment in academics as well as behavior.

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. As described below, the Department recommends an approach to identifying and addressing student behavioral that adheres to the processes encompassed in the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports. The Department continues to refine its resources to aid districts in establishing and operating their own tiered systems of supports.

## **Mental Health**

As indicated by Governor Murphy, positive mental health is a priority for the State of New Jersey. Positive mental health is more than the absence of a mental illness but the ability to live and thrive positively and healthily. Moreover, we recognize that students are more likely to receive mental health care in school due to various community barriers to mental health support. As a result, schools are often one of the first places where mental health crises and the needs of students are recognized and initially addressed. Consequently, with the appropriate resources and training, schools are in a distinct position to recognize the early signs of mental, behavioral, and developmental disorders, provide social-emotional support services, and foster skills necessary to address challenges during the adolescent years.

To provide schools with guidance on establishing systems to support youth mental health, the Department's Mental Health Work Group developed the New Jersey Comprehensive School Mental Health Guide. Released in February 2022, this resource contains wide-ranging information to support schools, from developing a tiered framework to establishing universal support to developing community partnerships. In addition, there are chapters within the guide dedicated to suicide prevention and intervention, educator self-care, and a separate chapter on funding comprehensive school-based mental health systems. Lastly, each section of the guide has hyperlinks to additional resources. To further support use of the guide, the Department facilitated a webinar series on the guide's components and monthly office hours with the Department's mental health specialist. The webinars and office hours provided an opportunity for school-based mental health staff and district administrators to learn more about implementing extensive mental health systems.

Recognizing the increased need for mental health support and services within schools, the Department designated approximately \$78 million from the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act and the American Rescue Plan (ARP). The State allocated funds to provide mental health support and services directly to school districts with



guidance and technical assistance to implement mental health programming and services within schools. To date, the NJDOE has designated \$30 million from the CRSSA State set-aside grant to provide mental health services and support that meet school districts' needs. These funds will support school districts in building a continuum of school-based mental health services for students and educators in coordination with existing county and local services. As part of this grant, each LEA must spend at least 10% of the allocation on professional development that supports the provision of school-based mental health supports and services.

Additionally, the NJDOE has designated \$48 million from the ARP State set aside New Jersey Tiered System of Support (NJTSS) Mental Health Support Staffing Grant. Funds used in this grant increase access to school-based mental health supports and services at Tier 2 & 3 levels by developing or enhancing a sustainable school-based comprehensive mental health system. Overall, schools are using their allocated funds to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and reshape how they support their schools and communities by providing direct and indirect services to educators, families, and students.

### **Trauma-Informed Supports**

As touched upon in the previous section, helping youth manage the anxiety, stress, and fear that ensued as a result of the pandemic has been identified as a high priority need. Students may have been exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, if they experienced a traumatic event before the age of 18. Examples of traumatic events could include violence or abuse, household members struggling with substance use or mental health issues, loss of a loved one, or a serious or life-threatening illness. As one means to support students and educators returning to in-person instruction post-pandemic, the NJDOE partnered with the NJ Department of Children and Families (NJDCF) to provide a select number of school districts statewide with training and education in trauma-informed and healing-centered practices and supports through the Developing Resiliency with Engaging Approaches to Maximize Success, better known as the DREAMS Program.

The goal of this initiative is to promote healthy and healing school environments where educators are equipped with training and resources on how to build classrooms and school environments that are conducive to student learning. With a focus on building positive

connections and relationships, as well as increasing the self-awareness and self-management skills of staff and students alike, the DREAMS Program supports schools in the promotion of their SEL programming and development. The Department is exploring ways to continue to provide these services and supports to additional school districts.

## **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 supporting the statewide release of the new version of the New Jersey School Climate Survey, providing LEAs with guidance on the amendments to the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act, promoting quality social and emotional learning, and advancing the New Jersey Tiered Systems of Supports (NJTSS) initiative.

The Department will continue to support LEAs to effectively utilize the Federal COVID relief funds to support the mental health and well-being of students and educators. In addition, with support from programmatic and county offices, the Department will host a series of roundtables where LEAs have the opportunity to learn from their colleagues on ways to use the \$30 million from the CRSSA State set-aside for the provision of mental health services and supports and the \$48 million from the ARP State set-aside funds for the New Jersey Tiered System of Support (NJTSS) Mental Health Support Staffing grant.

While school closures related to COVID-19 impacted the data collected for the previous two school years, the discipline data in this year's SSDS report is similar to school years before the pandemic.