

## State comptroller says school bullying law being ignored

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Five years after the state Legislature passed a law addressing bullying and discrimination in schools, many school districts across the state are not following its key provisions, Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli wrote in a new audit.

The Dignity For All Students Act (DASA) requires districts to track and report on incidents of discrimination, harassment and bullying, including online bullying. Since the law went into effect in 2012, however, it has been apparent that not all schools understand that responsibility in the same way.

The audit, drawing mostly on publicly available data for schools outside New York City, shows that 31 percent of schools reported zero incidents of harassment for three straight years.

In many instances, schools reported nearly all their incidents as ‘other,’ rather than specifying them more precisely. Training for staff was often lacking, including even the district- appointed DASA coordinator, who in one instance was unable to demonstrate to the auditors how to enter a DASA incident into the computer.

Yonkers stood out, reporting zero incidents in its 39 schools. In Monroe County, Penfield and Irondequoit high schools both had incidents that should have been reported but were not, according to the audit; East High School in Rochester reported 841 incidents, all under the category ‘other,’ in 2014-15, then only 57 the following year, which is when the University of Rochester took over.

In a statement, the Penfield Central School District said it has reviewed its procedures and now believes it can achieve full compliance.

In West Irondequoit, which reported only a single DASA incident district-wide in 2015-16, Superintendent Jeff Crane said the district has been “as accurate as we possibly can.”

“Since its inception (DASA) has been somewhat confusing, and has needed this kind of study to ... help us all do the best job possible,” he said. “Based on what we’ve done to make sure the data is (correct), I’d say (having just one incident in 201516) is an accurate report.”

A 2015 investigation in the *DemocratandChronicle* showed

the same pattern in Rochesterarea schools, both under DASA and a related category, Violent and Disruptive Incident Reporting (VADIR). In the 2013-14 school year, 42 schools reported having zero incidents under DASA or VADIR; of the incidents that were reported, 89 percent fell under

‘other.’ “From what we know from multiple studies, bullying and harassment are common and it is nearly impossible for a school to have no incidents in an entire school year,” Amanda Nickerson, director of the Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention at the University of Buffalo, said then.

The most recent data, for the 2015-16 school year, shows the same pattern. Seventy schools in Monroe County, including five high schools, reported zero incidents under DASA.

They include Gates Chili and Irondequoit high schools, each with more than 1,200 students; and Vertus Charter School, which according to self-reported state data had a 44 percent suspension rate but zero instances of harassment or bullying.

Across the state, schools reported fewer than one incident per 1,000 students related to harassment over race, religion, ethnicity, weight or sexual orientation.

DiNapoli issued three recommendations to the state Education Department: to increase training for school officials on reporting requirements; to work with those officials to clarify “areas of confusion;” and to develop a risk assessment tool to identify when schools may be out of compliance.

DiNapoli unveiled the audit in Rochester at the Out Alliance, known until recently as the Gay Alliance.

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**New York state Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli wrote in an audit that laws are not being followed by schools.**

RICHARD DREW/AP

