

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, 2022 to June 30, 2023

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 2022-23:

- School personnel reported incidents to the police on 10,082 occasions, 4,842 of which were mandatory referrals, leading to 552 student school-related arrests.
- Most Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) incidents occurred on school grounds, with 49 percent in middle schools.
- Schools reported 20,774 HIB trainings and 33,900 HIB programs in 2022-23.
- 61,132 students were suspended from school during the school year on at least one occasion.
- 996 students were removed from school and sent to another school or other education program, and 21 students were expelled from school.

- As Figure 26 indicates, males were more likely to be suspended than females, Black students are 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 2022-23 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 are 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 sixth year of data from the SSDS, due to school closures related to COVID-19, the overall number of reported incidences decreased and, therefore, comparing 2019-20 and 2020-21 to previous years is not recommended.

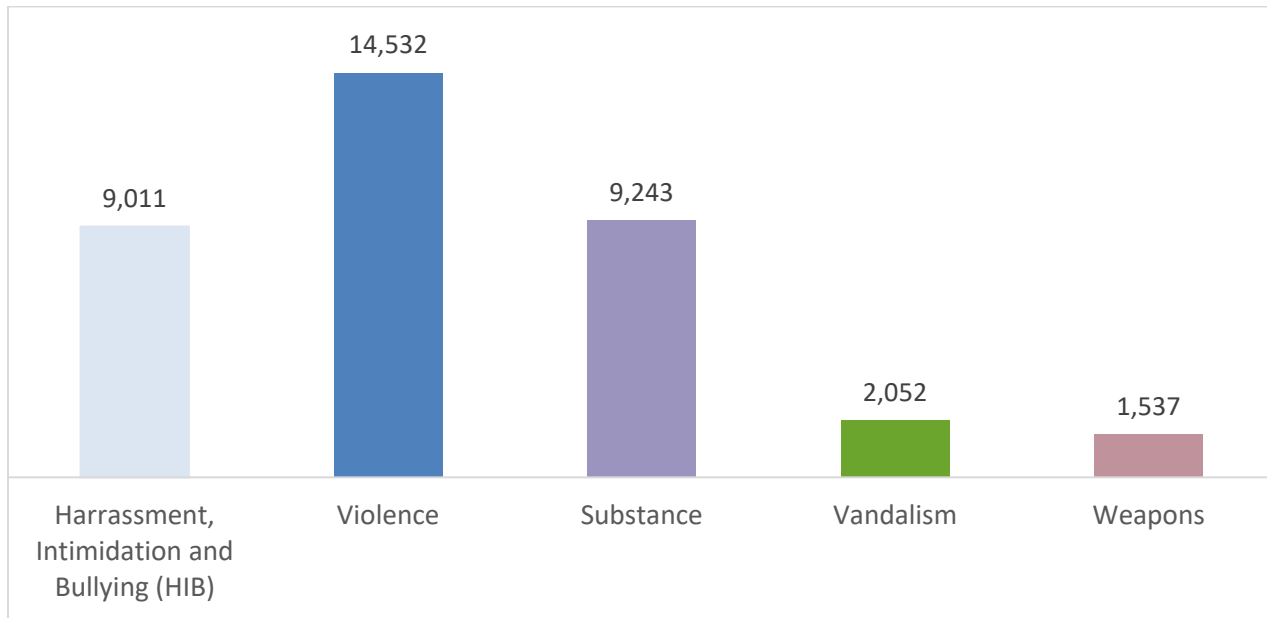
The SSDS collects incidents of violence, vandalism, weapons, substance use, restraint, seclusion and harassment, intimidation and bullying (HIB), as well as HIB trainings and programs. In addition, the system collects details on all allegations of HIB, along with all student suspensions and other removals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

# Key Findings

## SSDS Incidents

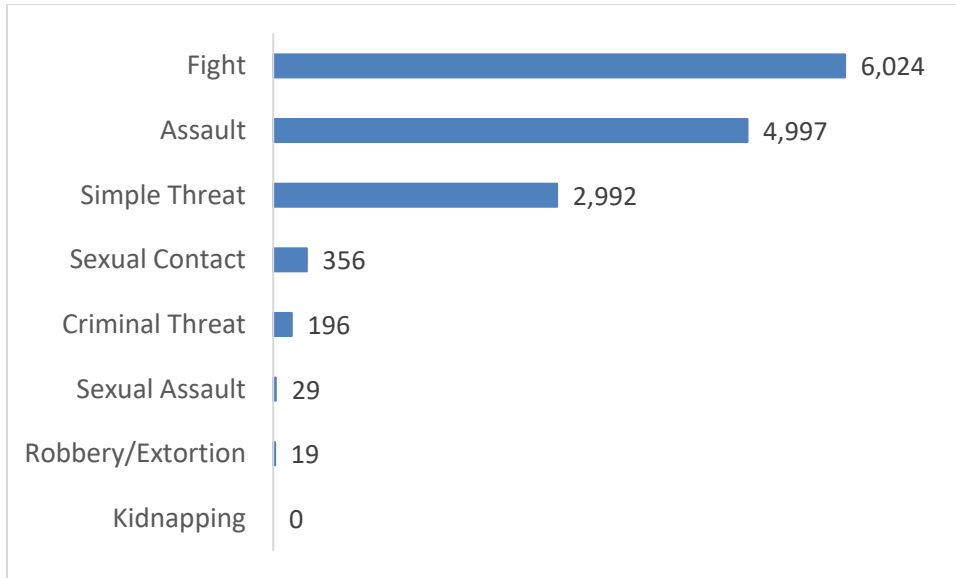
School districts in New Jersey reported 36,039 incidents of violence, vandalism, weapons, substance use, and harassment, intimidation and bullying in the 2022-23 school year. This is a unique count of incidents. As in the chart below, as well as other charts in this report, a single incident may consist 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**



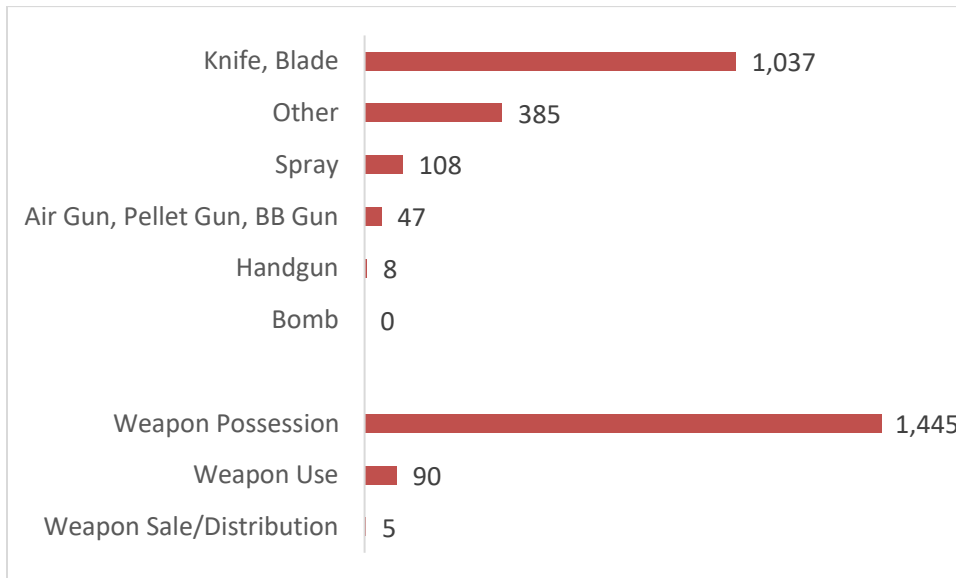
Note: Figure 1 shows the number of incidents reported by type. A single incident may consist of more than one incident type.

**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 type of violence.

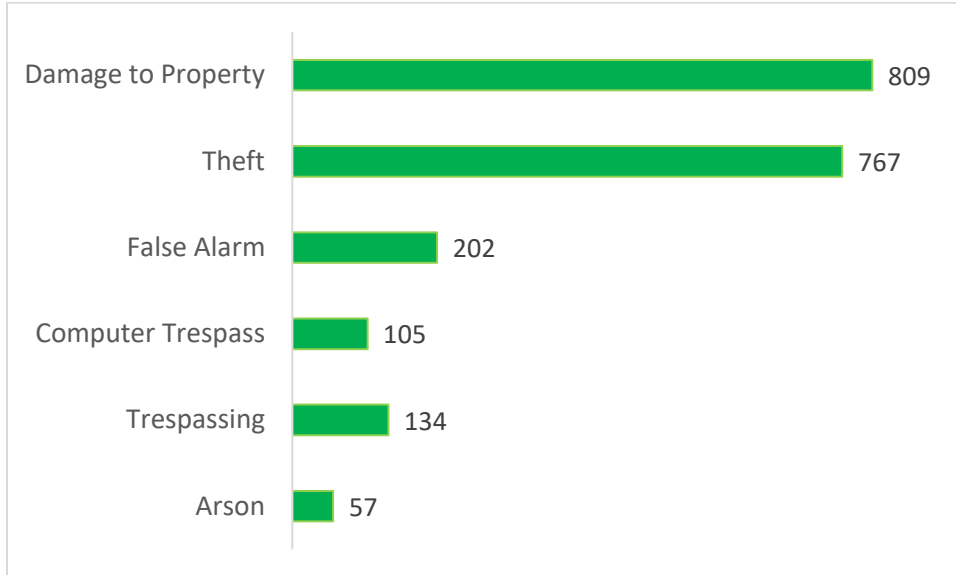
**Figure 3. Incidents of Weapons**



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.

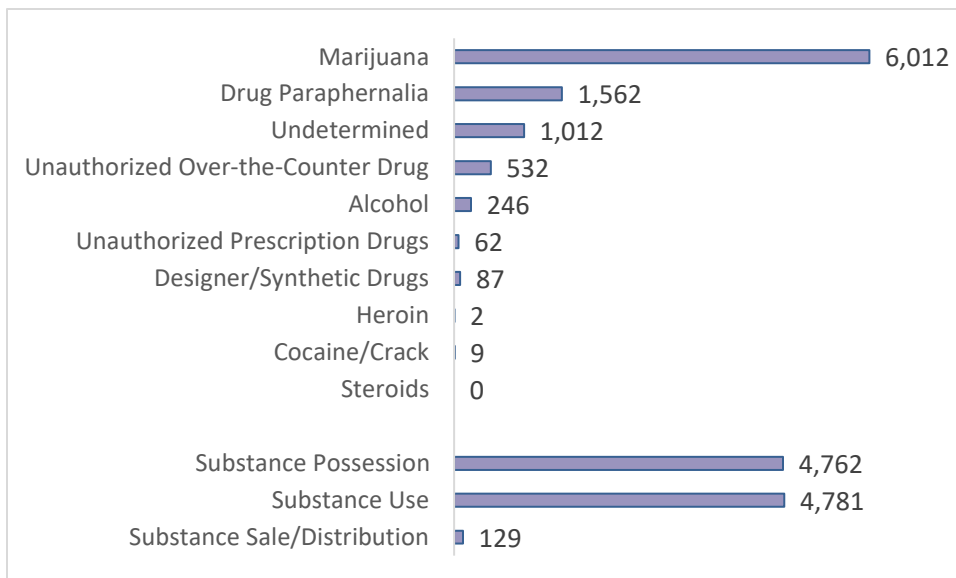


**Figure 4. Incidents of Vandalism**



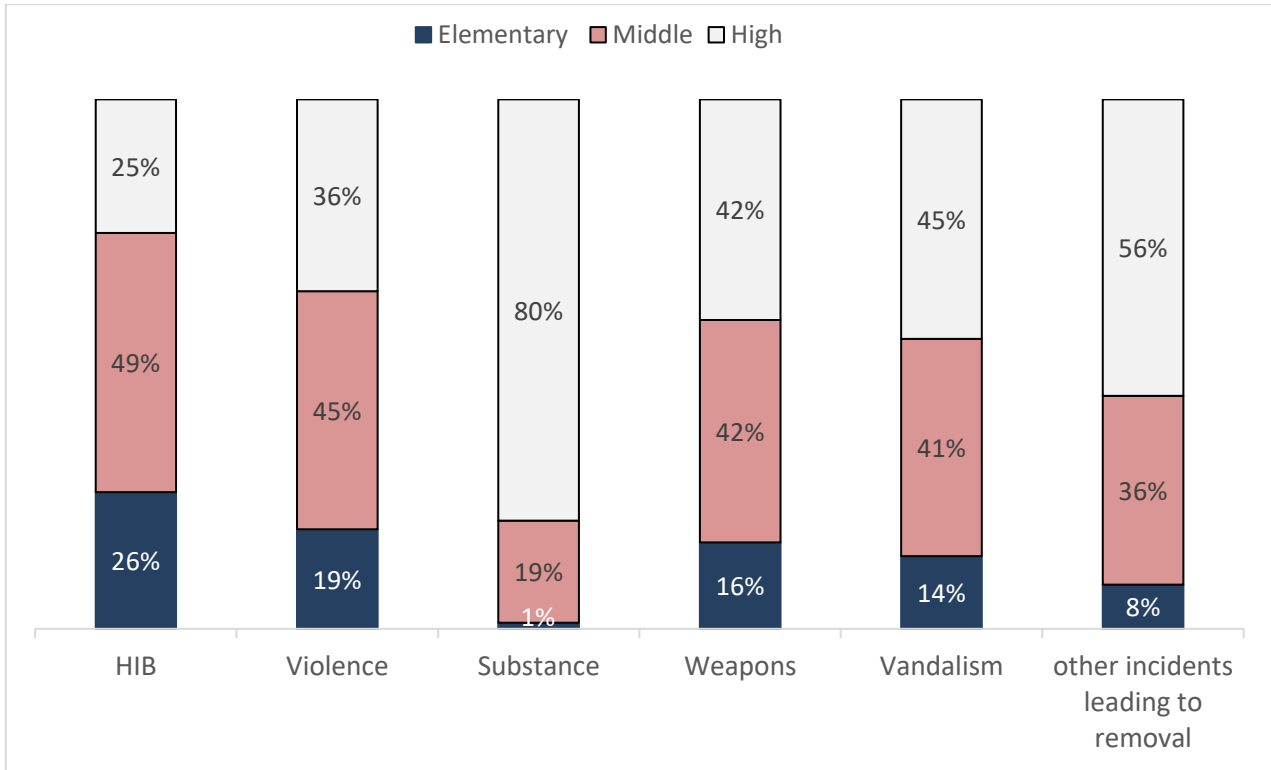
Note: Figure 4 shows the number of incidents reported by vandalism type. A single incident may consist of more than one vandalism type.

**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.

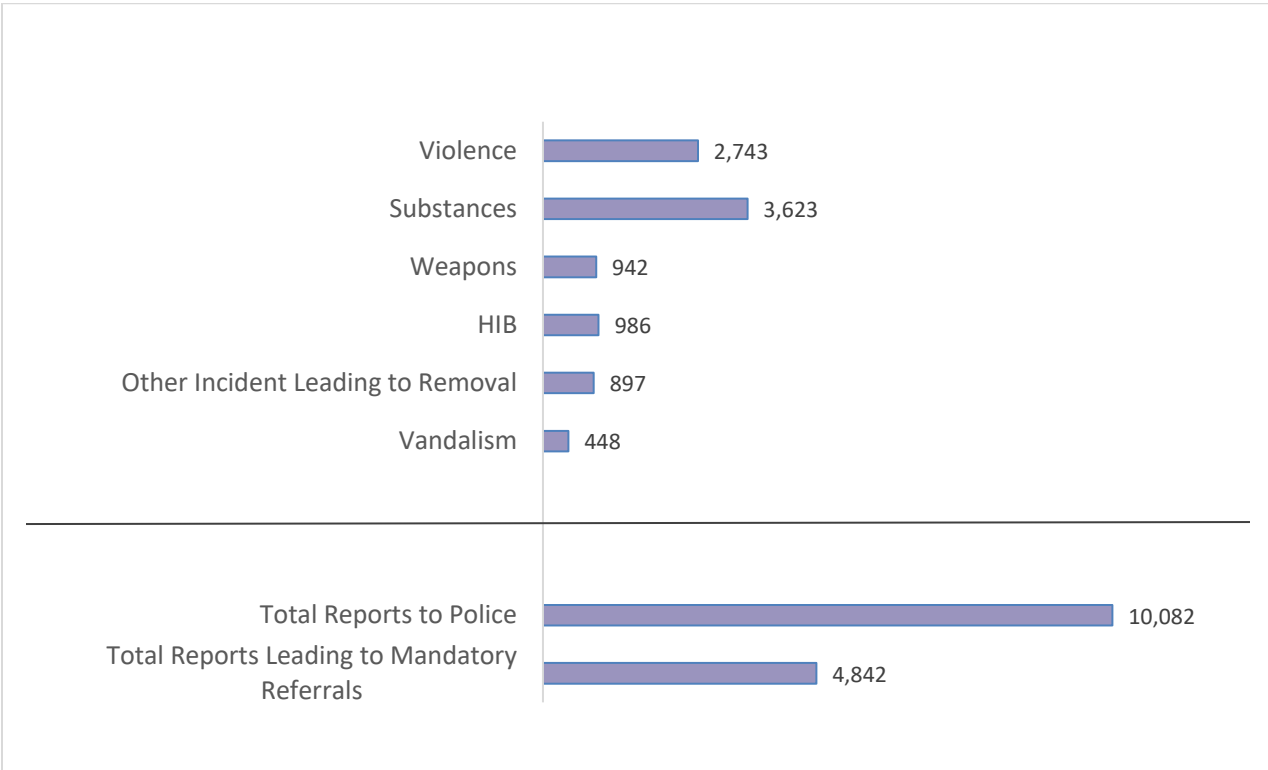
**Figure 6. Incident Types by School Type**



# School Police Reports

During the 2022-23 school year, school personnel reported incidents to the police on 10,082 occasions. In 897 instances, reports involved student infractions that did not fit into a category of violence, weapons, vandalism, substance, or HIB. Of all reports to police, 4,842 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**

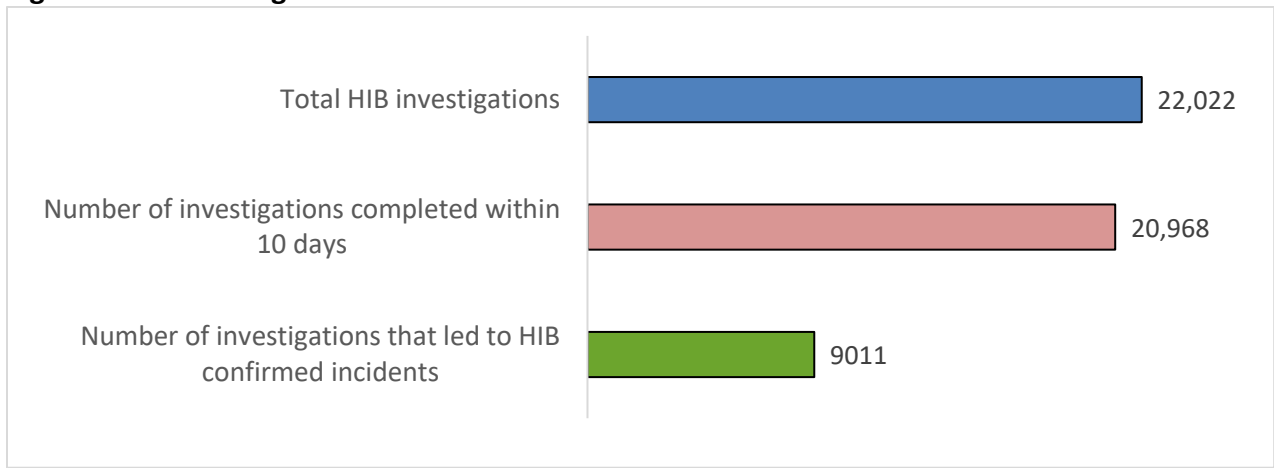


Note: More than one offender may be reported to police per incident, and one student may be reported to police more than one time per school year.

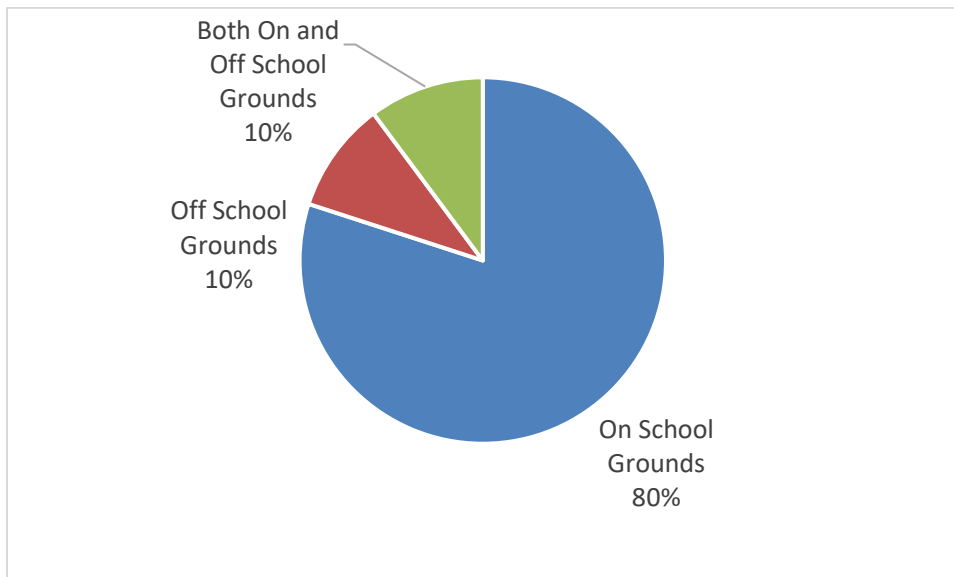
## HIB Investigations and Confirmed Incidents

There were 22,022 HIB investigations during the 2022-23 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.

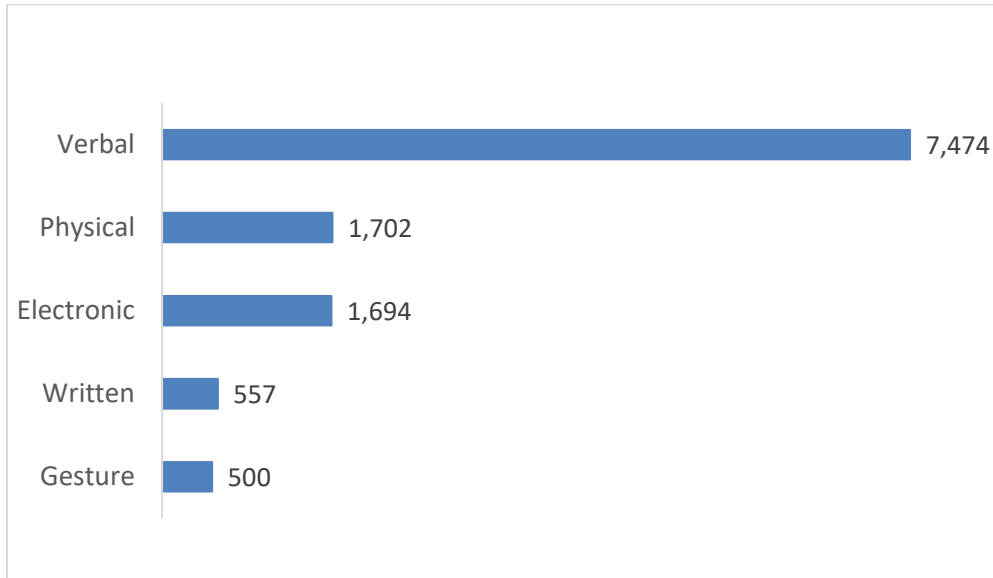
**Figure 8. HIB Investigations**



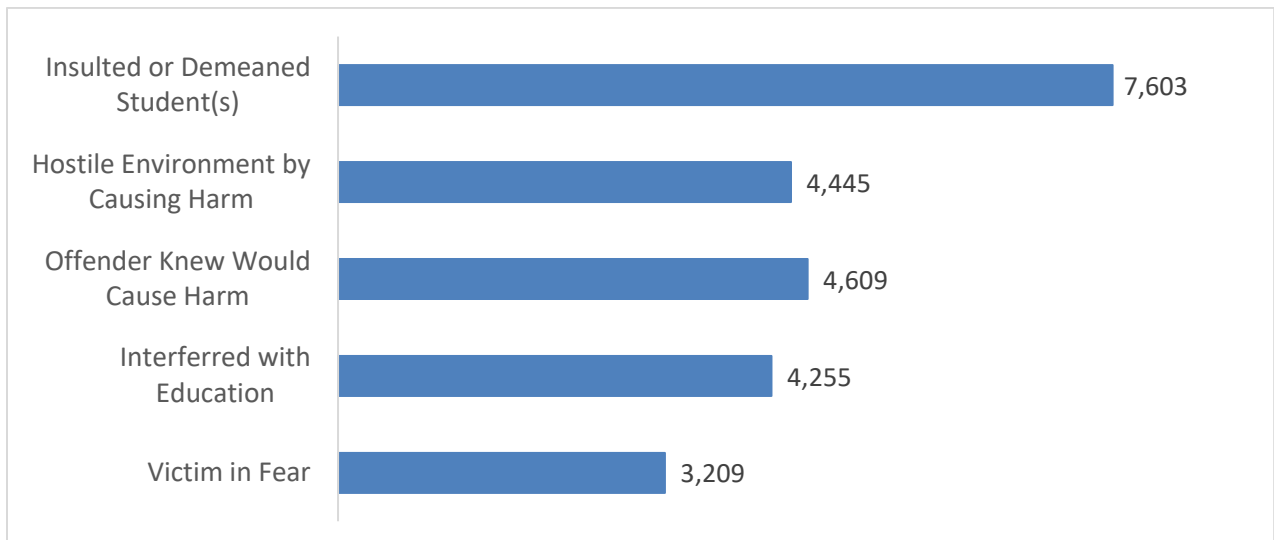
**Figure 9. HIB Incident Location**



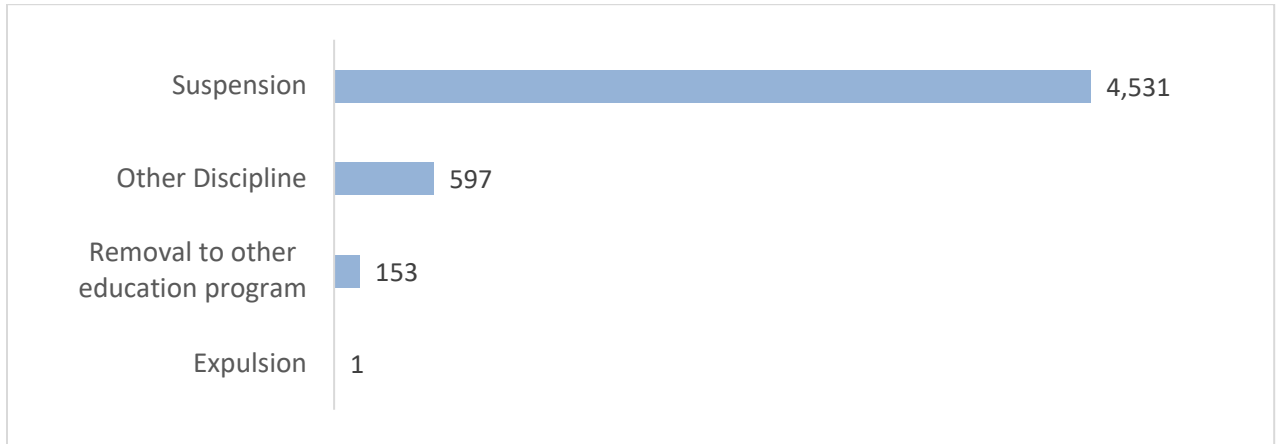
**Figure 10. HIB Mode**



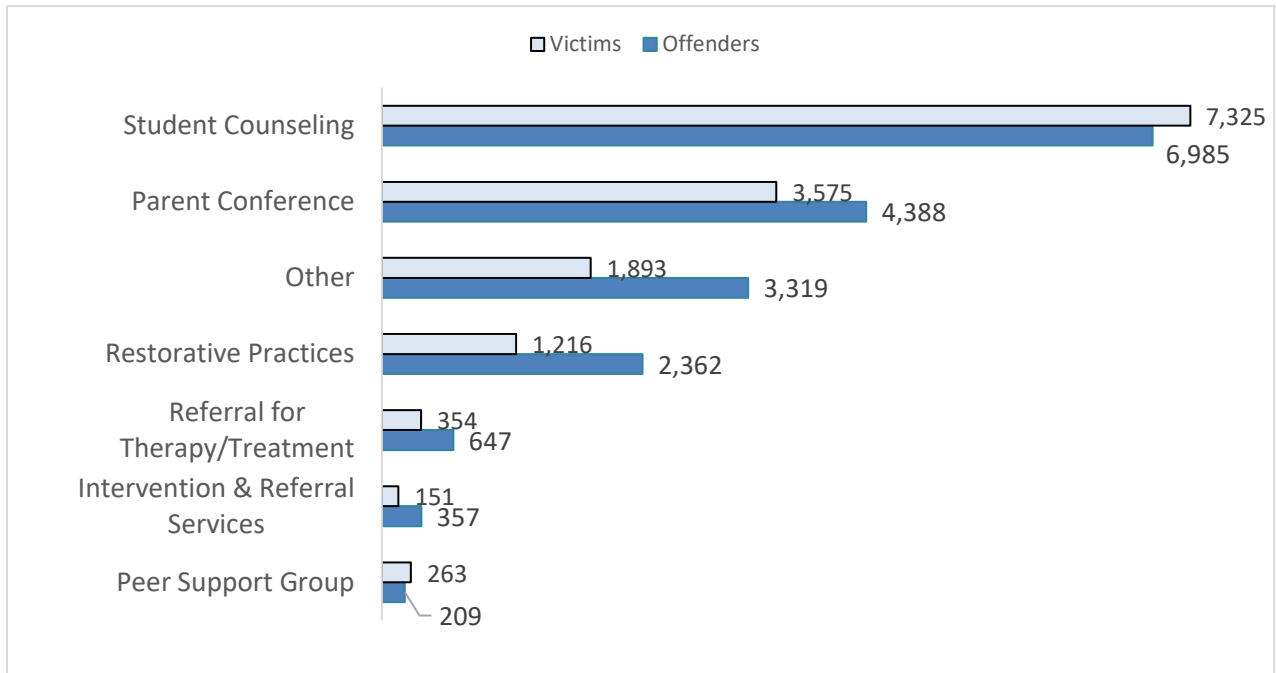
**Figure 11. HIB Effect**



**Figure 12. HIB Disciplinary Actions**



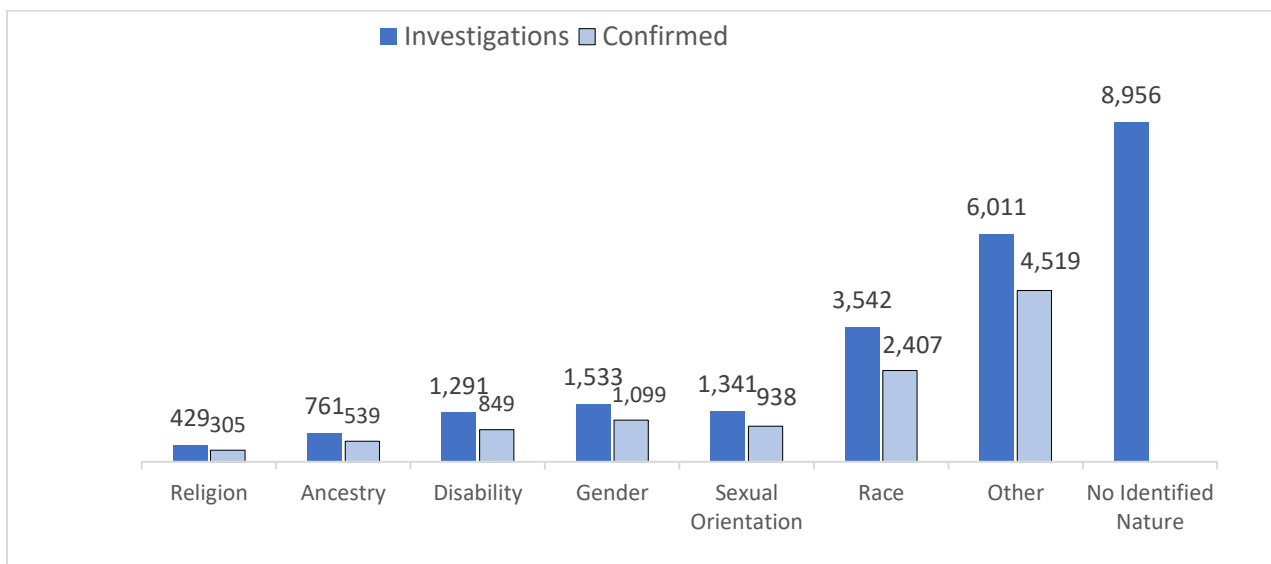
**Figure 13. HIB Remedial Actions**



## Nature of HIB

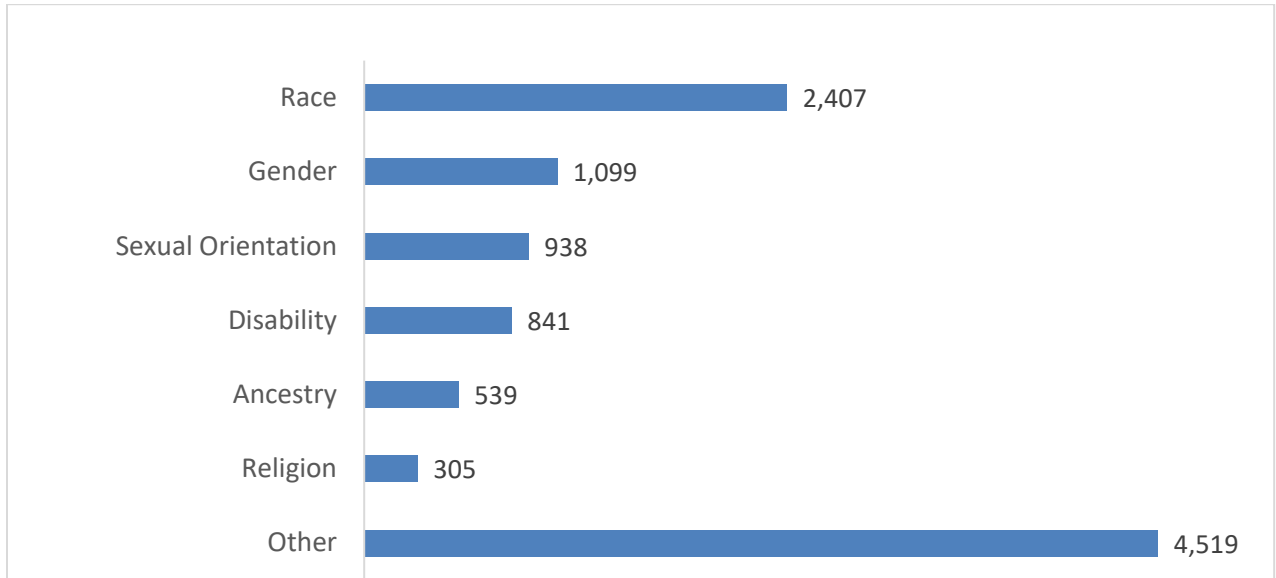
Forty five percent of HIB investigations led to confirmed HIB incidents. Cases involving certain protected categories were more likely to be affirmed, including gender (72%), ancestry (71%), sexual orientation (70%) or race (68%). District reported data indicates that Asian and Black students were more 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**

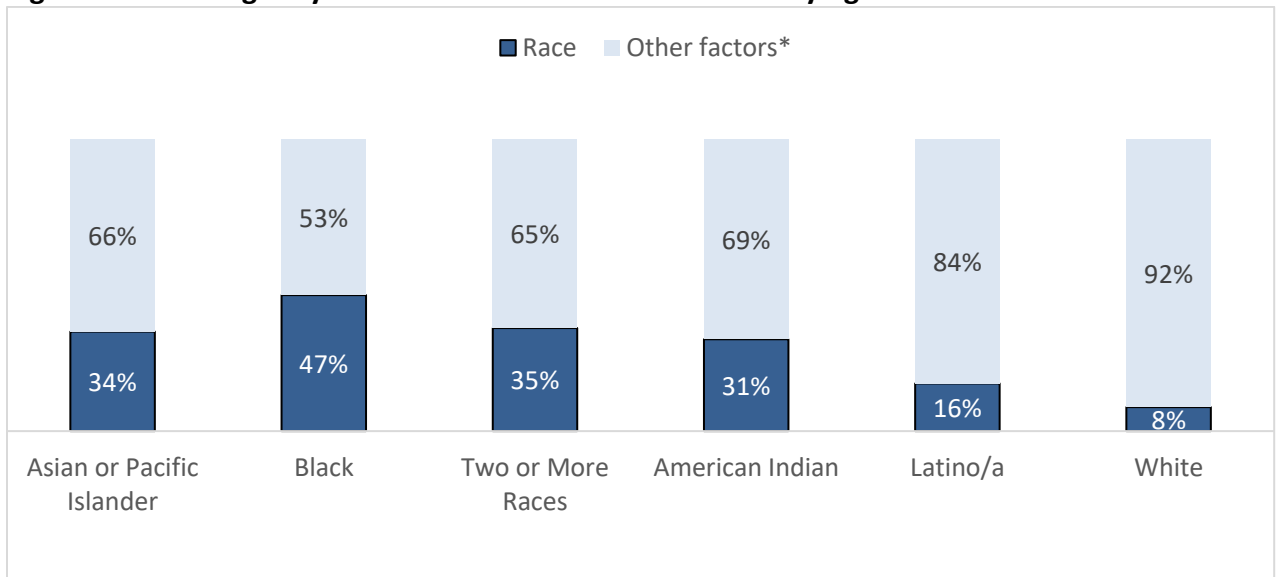


Pursuant to *N.J.S.A. 18A:37-14*, an HIB incident must be reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic, such as race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or a mental, physical or sensory disability,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

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



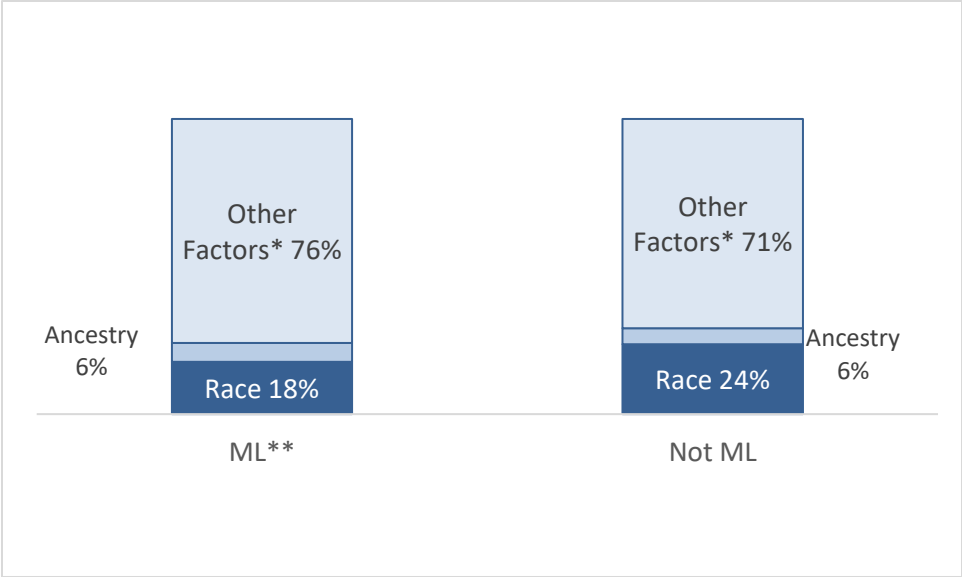
**Figure 16. HIB Target by Race of Students and Nature of Bullying**



**\*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



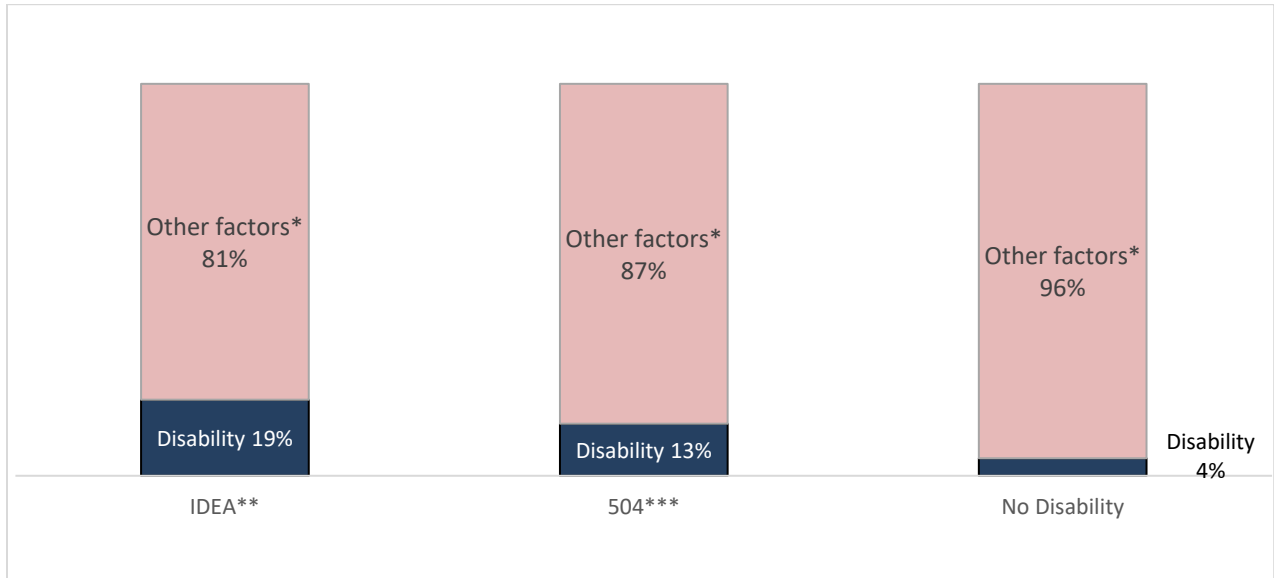
**Figure 17. HIB Target by Student Multilingual Learner (ML) Status and Nature of Bullying**



\***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.).

\*\***Multilingual Learners (ML):** MLs are students for whom English is not their native or first language.

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

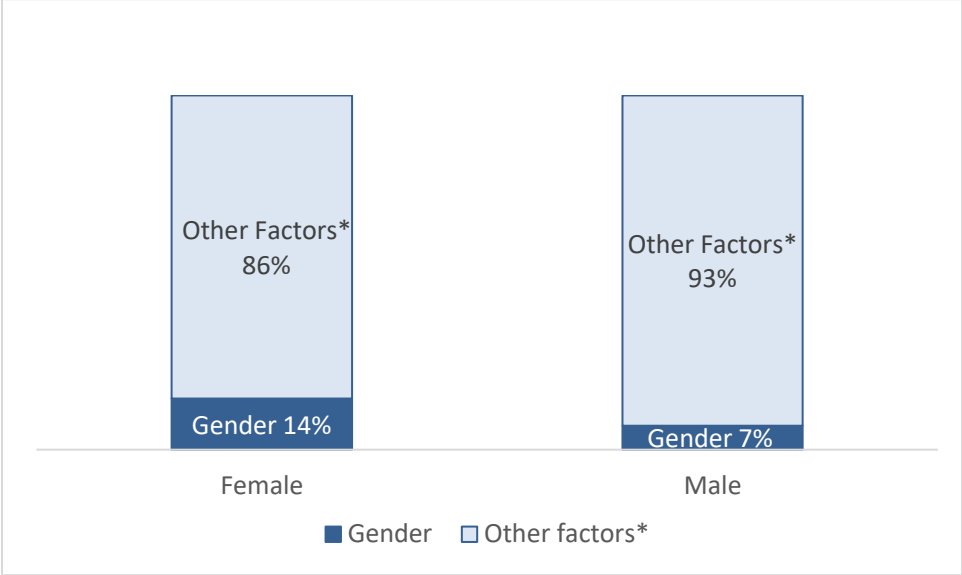


**\*Other factors:** e.g., race, color, religion, national origin gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression or any other distinguishing characteristic (e.g., weight, social status, skin blemishes, etc.)

**\*\*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**

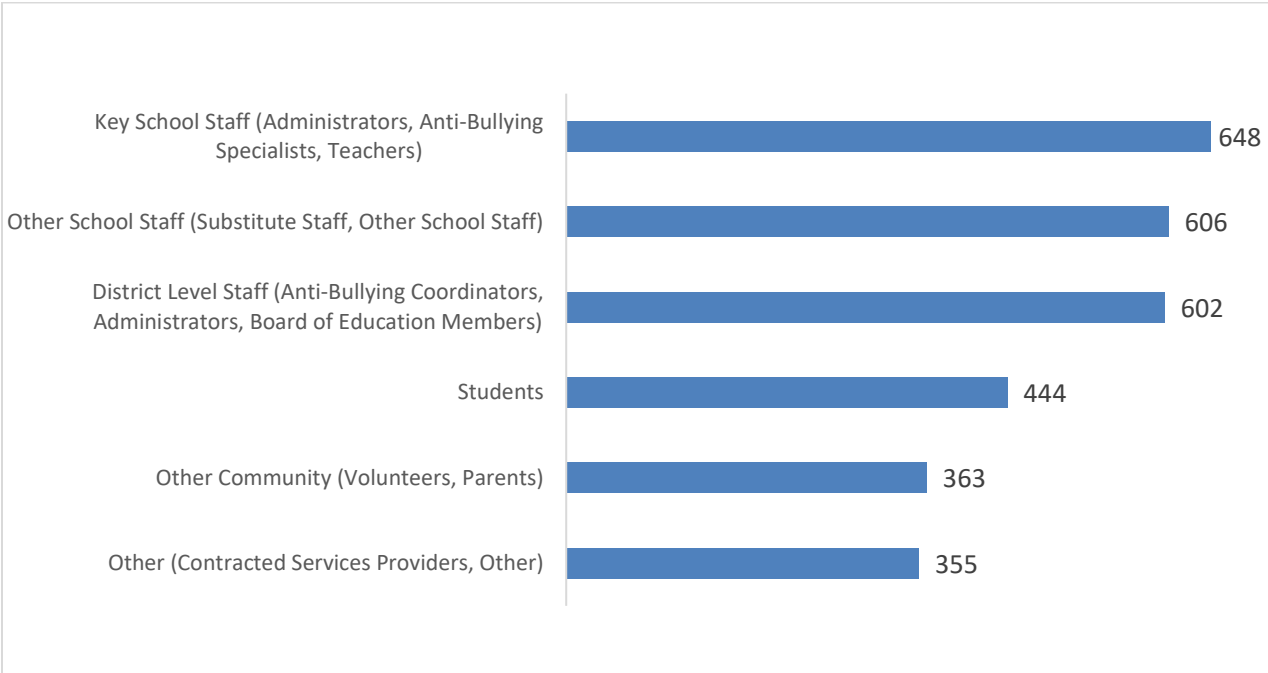


**\*Other Factors:** e.g., race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, sexual orientation or a mental, physical or sensory disability, or by any other distinguishing characteristic (e.g., weight, social status, skin blemishes, etc.).

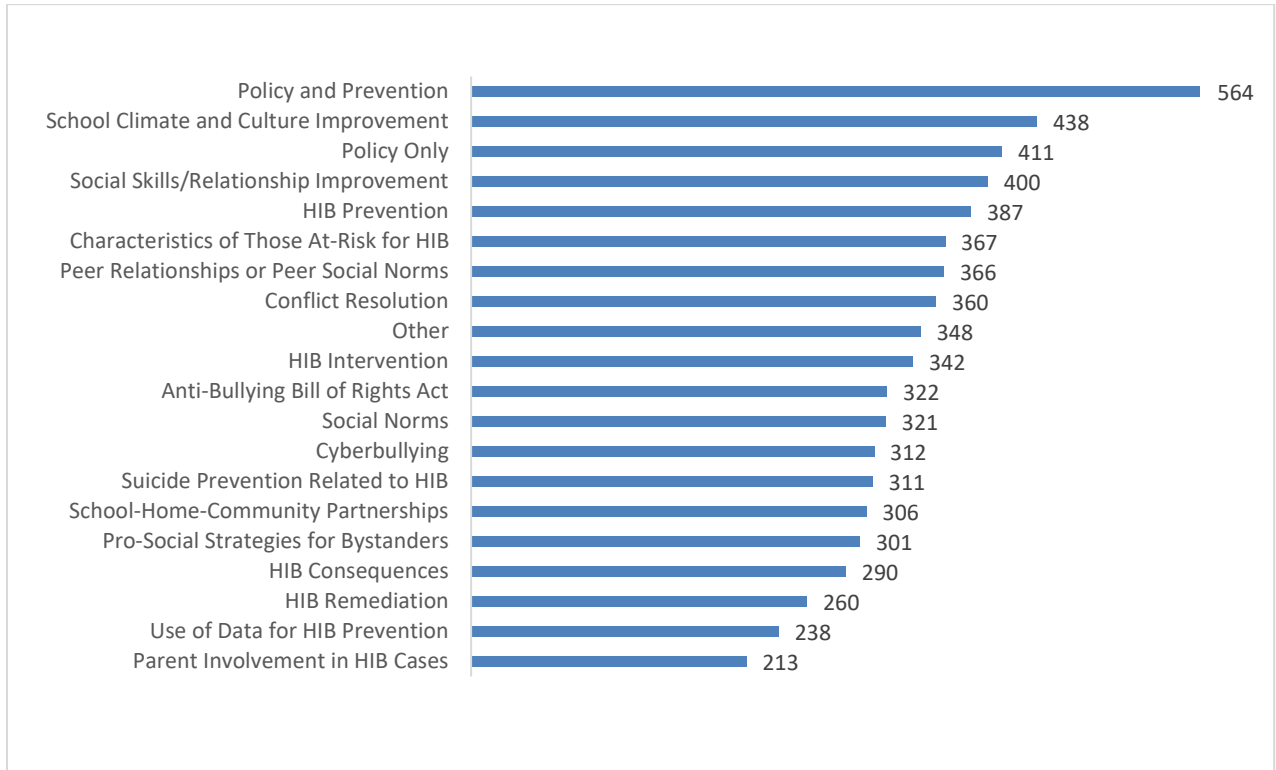
# HIB Trainings

Schools reported 20,779 HIB trainings in 2022-23. Most districts offered at least one training on the district’s HIB policy with bullying prevention instruction (82%) and most offered at least one training to key school staff members (94%), other school staff (88%), and district staff (88%).

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



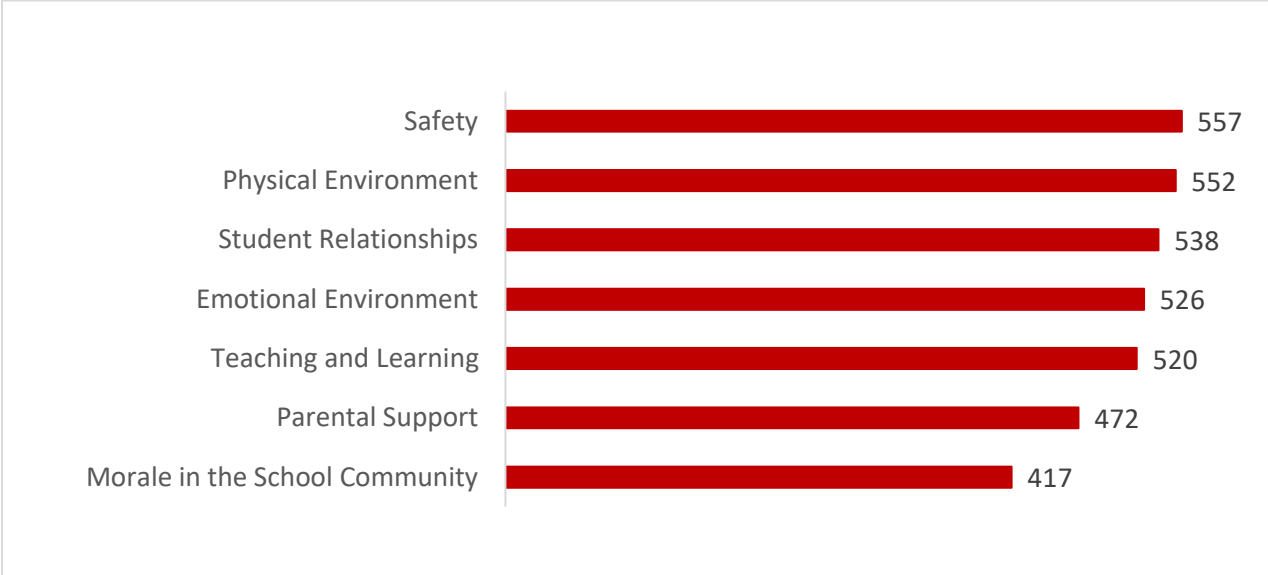
**Figure 21. Districts offering one or more HIB Trainings by Training Type**



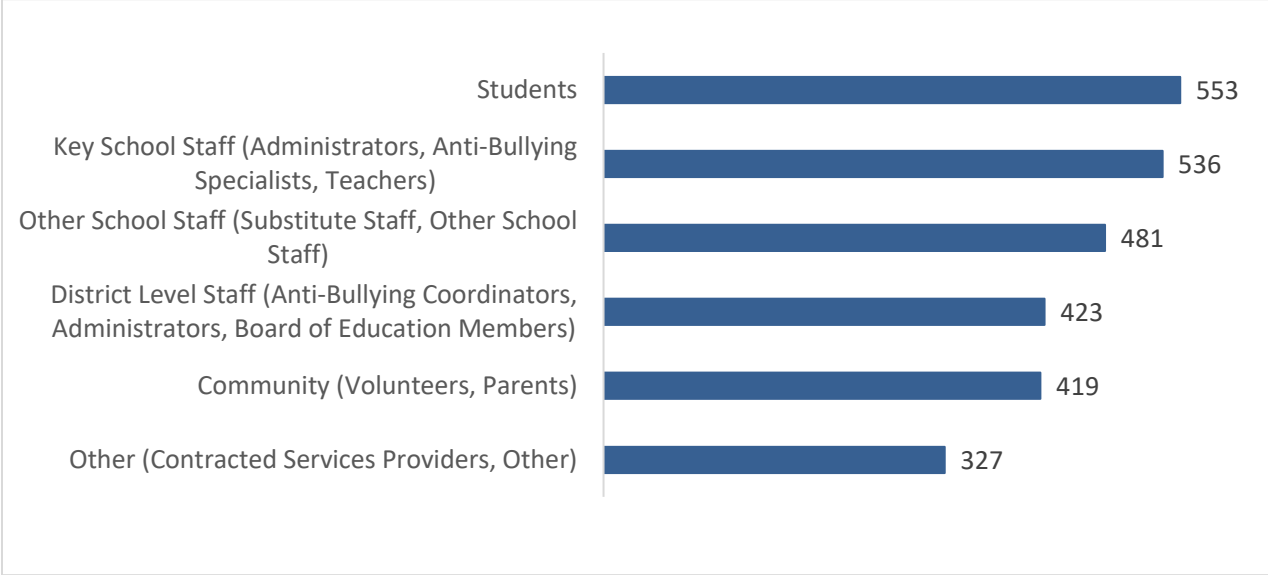
# HIB Programs

Schools reported 33,899 HIB programs in 2022-23. Most districts offered programs addressing various schoolwide conditions, especially morale in the school community (61%) and the emotional environment of the school (77%). Districts primarily offered these programs to students (75%) and key school staff (88%).

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



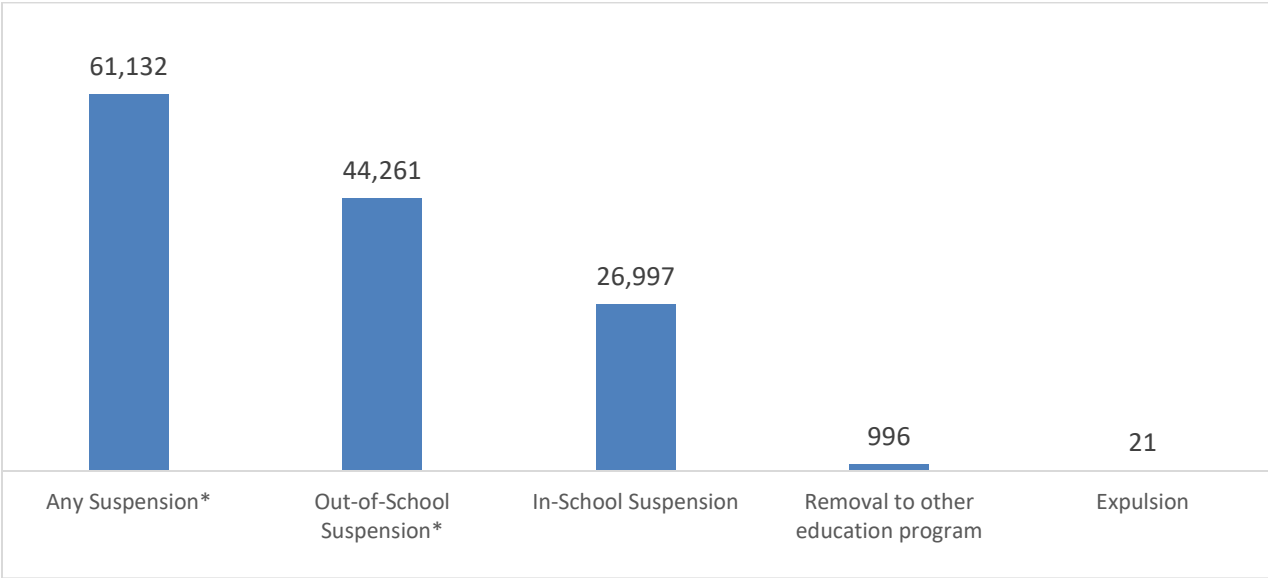
**Figure 23. Districts offering one or more HIB Programs by Attendee Type**



# Disciplinary Actions

During the 2022-23 school year 61,132 students were suspended from school on at least one occasion. Of the 61,132 students, 44,261 received one or more out-of-school suspension and 26,997 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, 996 students were removed from school and sent to another school or other education program, and 21 students were expelled from school. Males were more likely to be suspended than females, Black students were more likely than students of other races, and high school and middle school students more likely than students in elementary school.

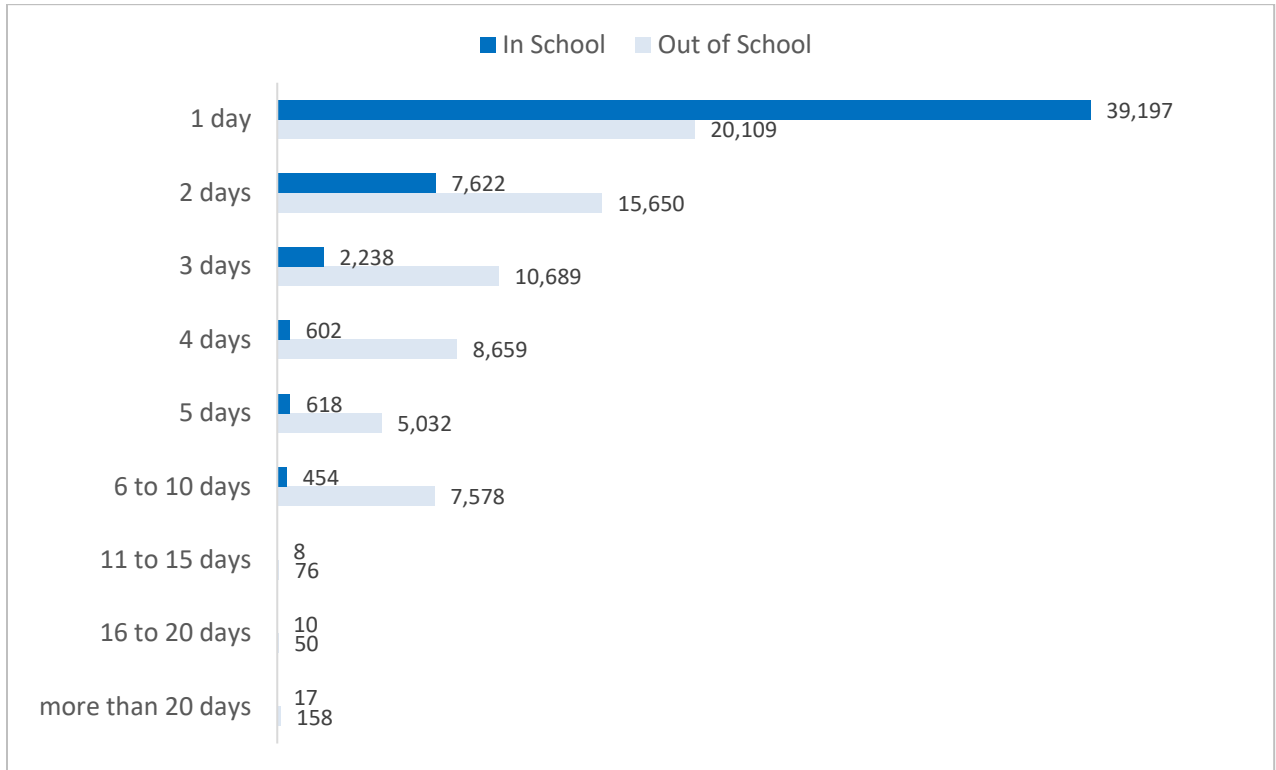
**Figure 24. Students Removed from School by Type of Removal**



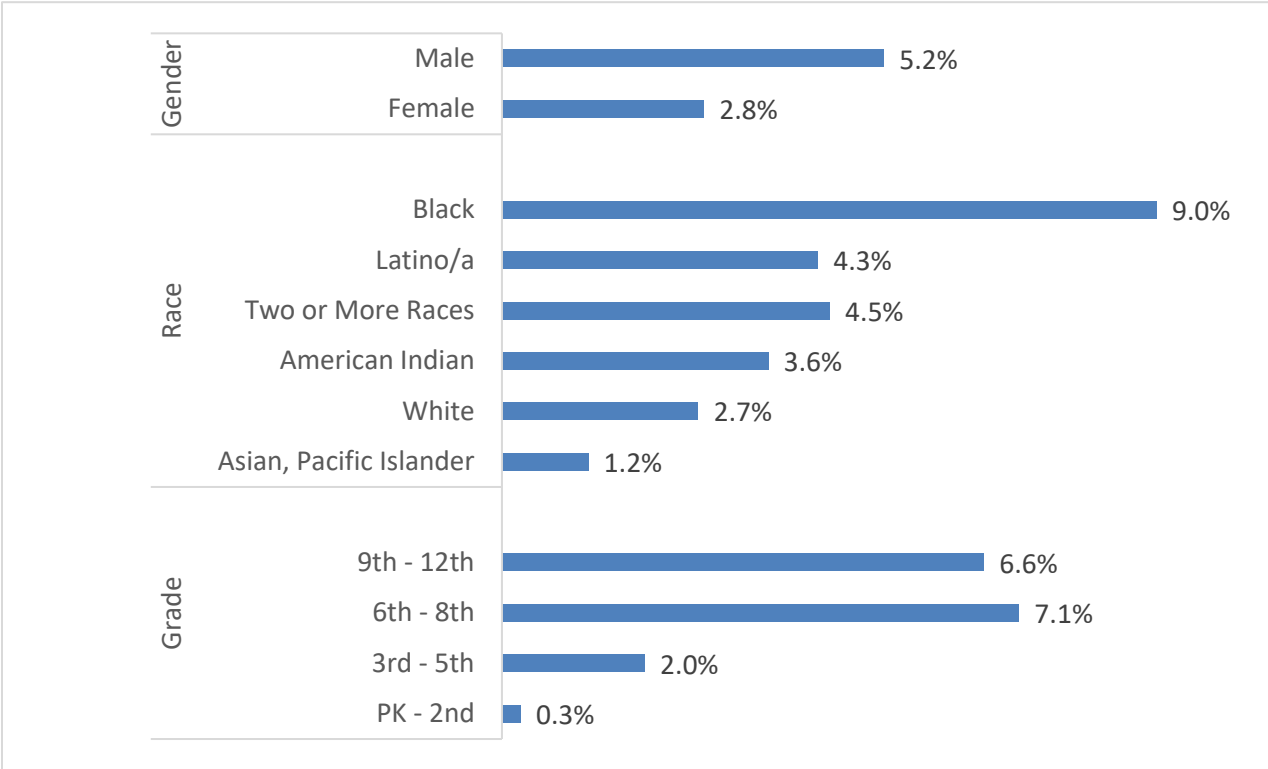
**\*Any Suspension:** These counts include students with disabilities who received unilateral removals or removals by a hearing officer.



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



**Figure 26. Student Suspension Rate by Offender Type Update**



## Restraint and Seclusion

On January 18, 2022, Governor Murphy signed a bill to amend *N.J.S.A. 18A:17-48, the Annual report to the Legislature*, to require the Commissioner of Education to include data on the use of physical restraint and seclusion techniques in this report. In alignment with the United States Department of Education, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) holds that every effort should be made to structure environments and provide support so that restraint and seclusion techniques are unnecessary.

Restraint or seclusion techniques should never be used as punishment, discipline nor as a means of coercion, retaliation, or convenience. However, these techniques may be appropriate in situations in which a child's behavior poses an imminent danger of serious physical harm to self or others. When restraints and seclusions are necessary to keep students safe, teachers and other personnel must be trained in their safe use.

Schools report the use of restraint and seclusion to the NJDOE in three categories:

- Occasions of restraint (which includes physical, mechanical, or incidents in which both physical and mechanical restraint was used);
- Occasions of seclusion; and
- Occasions in which both restraint and seclusion were used.

This report provides information on the number of students who were restrained, who were secluded, and who were both restrained and secluded during an occasion.

During the 2022-23 school year, 2,470 students were subjected to restraint and/or seclusion on at least one occasion. Of the 2,470 students, 2,311 were subjected to restraint, 305 were subjected to seclusion, and 179 were subjected to both restraint and seclusion during an occasion. Of the students subjected to restraint and/or seclusion, 85 percent were students with disabilities.

Of the 2,311 students subjected to restraint, 2,310 were subjected to physical restraint, 5 were subjected to mechanical restraint and 2 were subjected to both physical and mechanical

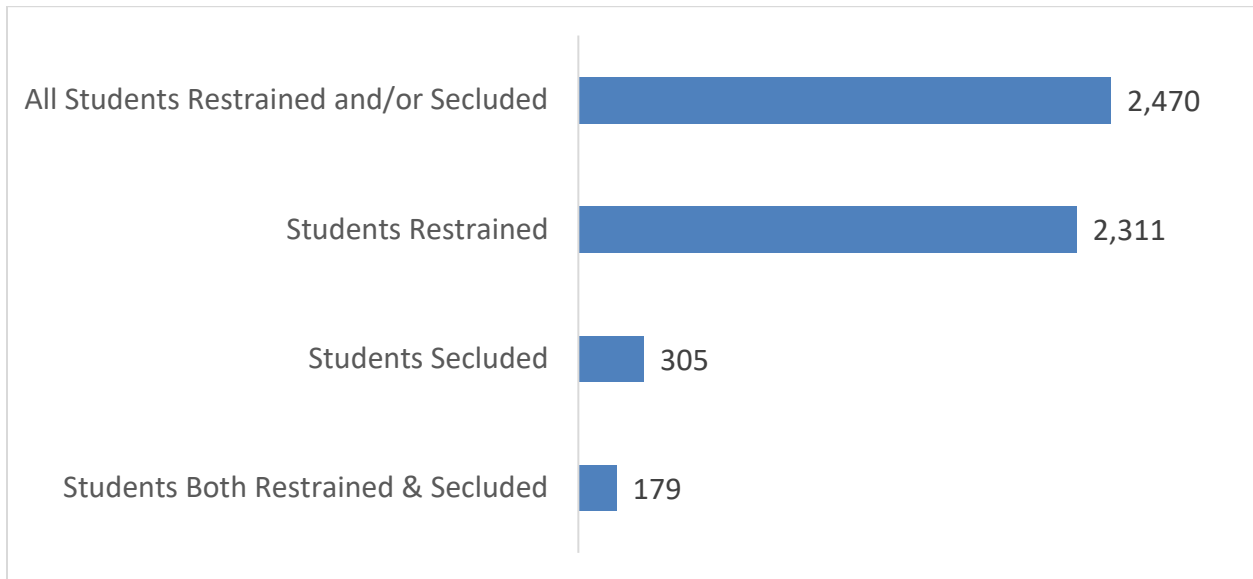
restraint during an occasion. Restrained students were most often subjected to restraint on one occasion, with the median being two occasions over the school year. Most instances of restraint lasted five minutes or less. Students with disabilities make up 85 percent of the students subjected to physical restraint and 80 percent of students subjected to mechanical restraint.

Of the 305 students who were subjected to seclusion, most were secluded on one occasion, with the median being two occasions over the school year. Most instances of seclusion lasted between six and ten minutes. Students with disabilities make up 92 percent of the students subjected to seclusion.

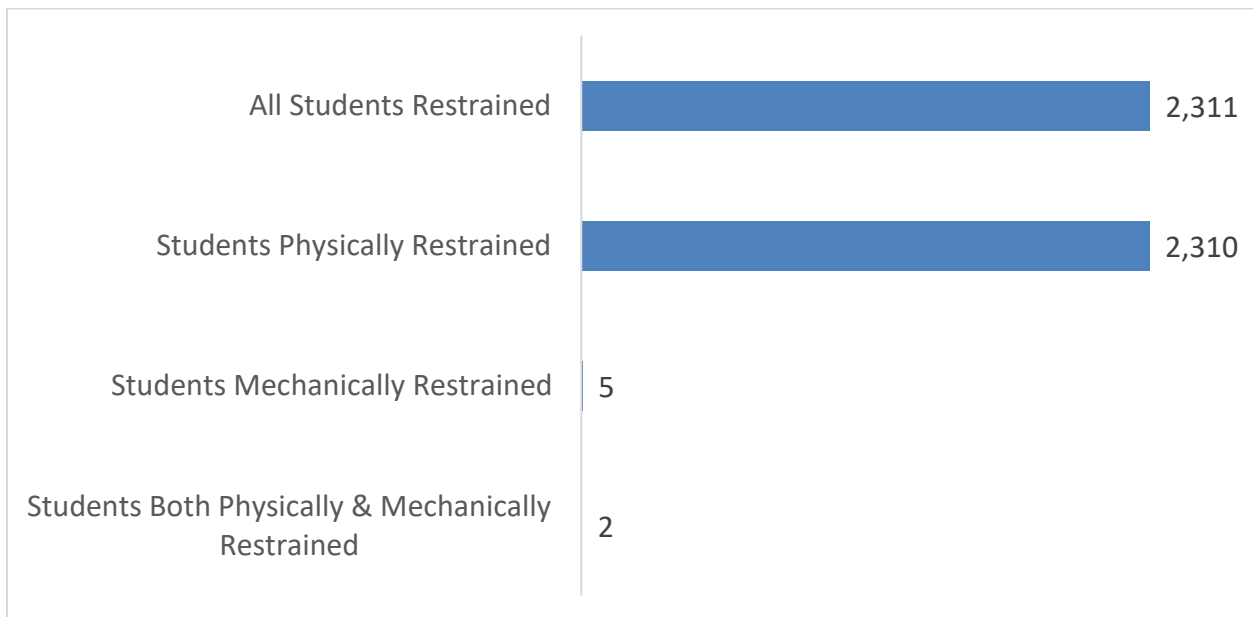
Of the 179 students who were subjected to both restraint and seclusion during an occasion, 179 were subjected to physical restraint, 0 were subjected to mechanical restraint and 3 were subjected to both physical and mechanical restraint on an occasion. Most often, students who were subjected to both restraint and seclusion during an occasion experienced this once, with the median being one time over the school year. During these occasions, most experiences of restraint lasted five minutes or less, and most periods of seclusion lasted between six and ten minutes.

Males were nearly five times more likely than females to be subjected to restraint and/or seclusion. More White students were restrained and/or secluded than any other racial/ethnic group, although a greater proportion of Black students were subjected to restraint and/or seclusion (0.29 percent of Black students compared to 0.16 percent of White students). Students in preschool through second grade were more likely to be restrained and/or secluded than students in other grade levels.

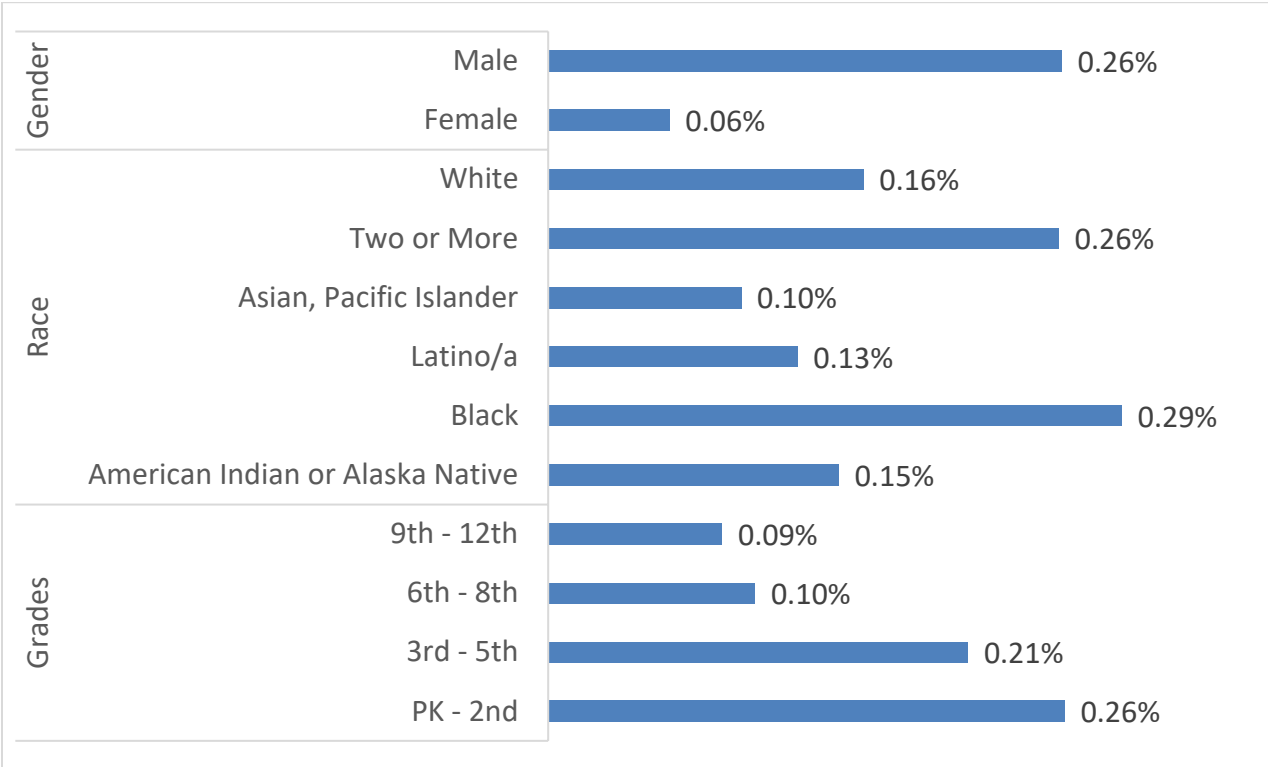
**Figure 27: Students Restrained, Secluded or Both**



**Figure 28: Students Restrained by Restraint Type**



**Figure 29: Students Restrained and/or Secluded by Student Group**



# 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. During the 2022-23 school year the Department continued to allocate resources to support school districts to address the needs that were a direct result of the pandemic, including efforts to improve school climate, support social and emotional learning, and increase mental health supports for 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 2022-2023 school year, the Department supported school districts in providing accurate reporting and dedicated staff to respond to inquiries related to the SSDS. Further, the Department continues to provide guidance to school districts on navigating and populating the SSDS [on the data collection's landing page on Homeroom](#).

## Data Transparency and Quality

Each year, the Department issues School Performance Reports, required by the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, that provide 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 incidents that took place on school grounds and were reported to the NJDOE including incidents of violence, vandalism, weapons offenses, substance offenses, restraints, seclusion and HIB incidents. The reports also provide information on police notifications; HIB investigations, and student disciplinary removals. These data give educators, families, and community members key information for identifying school strengths and needs

for school and district improvement planning. To fulfill new reporting requirements enacted under *N.J.S.A. 18A:7E-3* as amended in 2022, the school year 2022-2023 School Performance Reports include a link to a database that provides information on student disciplinary removals at each school by student demographics. 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.

Amendments to the ABR, which required school districts to revise their HIB policies and use a new standardized incident reporting form, went into effect beginning with the 2022-2023 school year. To support school district implementation, the Department created a dedicated [website of resources](#). Resources included a newly updated Model Policy for Prohibiting HIB and frequently asked questions and answers. As required in the amendments, the Department developed a standardized incident reporting form for use in all school districts called the HIB 338 Form. There are two versions of the form, one for school district staff and one for families, to collect information pertinent to each impacted group. To promote access, the Department translated the HIB 338 Form for Families in multiple languages. The Department also sought feedback on the design and implementation of the form during Fall 2022. This information will be extensively reviewed and may result in changes to the HIB 338 Forms for the 2023-2024 school year to best meet the needs of the field.



Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:37-37.1, in January 2023, the Department created the role of the School Climate State Coordinator who serves as a resource to parents, students, and educators by providing information on the ABR as well as best practices for the development of positive, school climates. In addition to supporting the revision of the HIB 338 Forms and the School Self-Assessment for Determining HIB Grades, the School Climate State Coordinator completed a review of currently available resources and guidance document materials to identify needs and areas for improvement.

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 serving as a resource to Anti-Bullying Coordinators and other school and district leaders in the area of HIB prevention, school climate improvement, and addressing incidents of HIB. 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.

Additionally, in June 2023, the Department supported the establishment of the Anti-Bullying Task Force pursuant to *P.L. 2019, c. 179*. The task force was established in order to 1) examine and evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of the ABR; 2) examine any unintended consequences resulting from implementation of the ABR and the regulations promulgated pursuant to the act including, but not limited to, impacts of the law on athletic coaches; and 3) present any recommendations deemed necessary and appropriate to modify or update the ABR and its implementing regulations. The task force will issue a final report of its findings and recommendations to the Governor, and to the Legislature within 180 days or organizing. The Department looks forward to supporting the task force to complete their charge.

## **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 role that social emotional skill development plays in increasing our youth's protective factors to buffer against things such as substance use, violence, abuse, and mental health risks. Similarly, research has shown that students who were taught SEL skills were less likely to have conduct problems and engage in substance use. 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 *NJDOE SEL Modules for Educators: Competencies for School, Work, and Life*, are a set of six learning modules available to all school staff 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.

Furthermore, to strengthen the work already being done, the Department was awarded funding to develop a course to support school leaders in systemically implementing SEL across their schools or district. Once released, this will prove a valuable resource for schools statewide as systemic SEL supports the creation of an equitable learning environment where all grades, Pre-K through 12, can be actively engaged in learning and practicing associated competencies to lead them to success.

## **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 cohort schools over a three-year period that supports the establishment and implementation of a tiered system of interventions to address the conduct, behavior and social and emotional needs of participating schools.

As part of a multi-year memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University, the Department continued collaboration with the [School Climate Transformation Project \(SCTP\)](#) to support the development of the New Jersey School Climate Improvement ([NJ SCI](#)) Survey and Platform. NJ SCI, a no-cost, school climate survey and online platform available to all public schools in New Jersey, supports district- and school-level school climate improvement efforts. NJ SCI is designed to help schools identify school climate strengths and needs, and then use their school climate data to create strategic plans to improve conditions for teaching and learning. NJ SCI also supports school and district users to disaggregate data by various categories (e.g., grade, gender, race/ethnicity) and to easily compare similar domains and items across respondent groups (e.g., students, staff, parents/caregivers) to support their efforts to foster positive school climates for all students.

After piloting NJ SCI with a cohort of school districts and completing a validity and reliability study, the Department announced the release of NJ SCI through a broadcast memo. Beginning in March 2023, all public-school districts can access NJ SCI and all accompanying resources. The Department and the SCTP team will focus efforts on promoting the use of this comprehensive tool to support school climate improvement.

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

NJTSS is an evidence-based framework designed to enhance academic, behavioral, and health outcomes for all students. This framework aligns with national models of Multi-Tiered

System of Supports (MTSS) and encompasses a comprehensive range of strategies and practices to support a holistic approach to student learning and well-being. 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, has developed tools for school districts to use to implement this tiered approach to prevention, intervention and enrichment in academics, behavior, and health. Screening protocols and expansion of Tier 1 strategies or universal interventions include core instructional and behavioral practices for all students. Tier 2 or Targeted interventions for students who are identified as at-risk through universal screenings and continuous monitoring are more focused and may be delivered in small group settings. Tier 3 or intensive, individualized interventions for students with significant academic or behavioral challenges are often delivered in one-to-one settings and at a higher dosage of previous interventions.

This year, the Department has focused its efforts on demonstrating the application of NJTSS in addressing various student needs. The Department continued to increase supports for student mental health through webinars and trainings related to the New Jersey Comprehensive School-Based Youth Mental Health Resource Guide which provides a roadmap for LEAs to implement a multi-tiered system of supports for addressing youth mental health needs. This guide is the foundation for all related mental health programs implemented by the Department.

In June 2023, the Department released a guidance document titled [Data-Based Decision Making for Chronic Absenteeism](#). This guidance was developed to provide schools and LEAs with guidance on preventing and responding to chronic absenteeism. The guidance incorporates New Jersey-specific rules and regulations, and available resources. This guidance was developed in partnership with educators and related experts in the fields of public health, youth mental health, and school district operations. Schools and LEAs can refer to this resource to develop research-based action plans that include strategies that specifically target barriers contributing to students' absences. This resource also provides a step-by-step guide that begins

with identifying key district members, collecting and analyzing actionable data, and supports district in installing and operating a tiered model to address student absenteeism and encourage regular attendance.

Through the 2022 school year, NJDOE's guidance has been instrumental in assisting districts and schools in establishing and refining their intervention or NJTSS processes. The focus for the Department has been on building capacity, fostering sustainability, and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the system to ensure that all New Jersey students receive the support they need to achieve academic and social-emotional success.

## **Mental Health**

Throughout the 2022 school year, the NJDOE's efforts in supporting youth mental health have been comprehensive and multifaceted. The Department has demonstrated a strong commitment to ensuring that mental health is prioritized within the educational environment, recognizing its fundamental role in the overall well-being and success of students. Through training, resource allocation, and collaborative efforts, the NJDOE has sought to create a supportive and responsive framework for addressing the mental health needs of New Jersey's youth.

The NJDOE has implemented several initiatives demonstrating its ongoing commitment to improving educational environments to better support youth mental health. Through the Enhancing School Mental Health Services Project, the Department, in collaboration with the Rutgers Center for Comprehensive School Mental Health (CCSMH), provides extensive training and professional development to school-based mental health professionals and local school teams to equip staff with the necessary skills to implement comprehensive school-based mental health systems that assist educators to recognize mental health concerns, provide initial support, refer students to appropriate services, and when necessary, escalate mental health concerns to outside providers that can offer more intensive intervention. In May 2023, school districts were encouraged to apply for an opportunity to participate in this project. Over the course of two years, 50 participating schools will receive intensive training and technical

assistance to develop and implement a comprehensive school mental health framework that includes the completion of a comprehensive needs assessment. Through this project, the Department and the Rutgers CCSMH aim to foster a culture of mental health support in New Jersey schools, ultimately enhancing the well-being of students and educators.

Recognizing the need for direct mental health support within schools, the NJDOE has supported the expansion of school-based mental health services through the School-Based Mental Health Services Grant Program. This includes increasing the number of school counselors, psychologists, and social workers. This grant was awarded to the NJDOE in December 2022, and initial activities included developing a sub-grant opportunity for districts demonstrating increased need in New Jersey to apply to participate. Districts were selected in June of 2023.

The Department continued to collaborate with and advise districts in using emergency relief funds to support youth mental health. This included ongoing support for districts to implement the American Rescue Plan Funded Mental Health Support Staffing Grant. Under the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS) Mental Health Support Staffing Grant, LEAs are 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. The NJDOE monitors the rate in which funds are spent by the LEAs and targets assistance to LEAs that are not spending funds at the expected rate. Through technical assistance the Department advises districts on different strategies the districts can employ to utilize their funds.

## **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 school districts to effectively utilize NJ SCI to analyze data from stakeholders in an effort to develop school climate improvement plans, 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 continue refinement of the NJ SCI platform and the development of resources to support educators to use a school climate change process to foster learning environments that support the positive development of students and prevent HIB. Additionally, the Department will engage in meaningful dialogue with county offices of education and school districts to promote the use of the NJ SCI resource for school climate improvement efforts.

The Department will continue to support school districts to implement the ABR and subsequent amendments by developing resources for educators and families. Additionally, the Department will support the work of the newly established Anti-Bullying Task Force as they evaluate the current implementation of the ABR and make recommendations regarding any appropriate changes or updates to the law or regulations. At the conclusion of the task force, the Department anticipates reviewing all recommendations for consideration.

The Department has 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 are currently 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. The Department is considering an amendment to expand the uses of these funds to allow LEAs to continue to invest in Tier 1 services for their students.

Allocations for this grant were 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 will monitor, support, and identify strategies on how school districts can effectively use federal funds to enhance positive mental health support.

The Department recently revised its [Behavior Supports and Interventions](#) website to include a number of resources available to administrators, educators, and parents regarding best practices and evidence-based approaches to addressing student conduct and behavior. For example, if schools seek to plan more individualized and effective behavior interventions, a Functional Behavior Assessment is recommended to determine the factors contributing to the maladaptive behavior. General Information for school employees on [Conducting a Functional Behavior Assessment](#) was released in 2023 to clarify the process of assessing behavior in schools as well as to promote evidence-based practices in behavioral assessment and intervention.

In the 2023-24 school year, the Office of Special Education created a working group to assist in the creation of the Emotional and Behavioral Program Quality Indicators (EBPQI) which will be available for all schools and APSSDs to access. The EBPQI will provide guidance to schools implementing behavior programs that serve students with disabilities who exhibit challenging behaviors with the goal of schools using the quality indicators to self-evaluate programming towards more effective and preventative practices. The [Autism Program Quality Indicators \(APQI-R\)](#) were revised in 2023 with the similar goal of improving the quality of

programs that serve students who are typically restrained and secluded at higher rates so that, ultimately, those interventions are only used when absolutely necessary.

The Department has also begun to map out a three-tiered plan to support districts statewide utilizing existing resources, developing new resources, and through the provision of targeted supports to districts who are utilizing restraint and/or seclusion interventions at comparably high rates. Tier 1 resources will include website materials and guidance documents as well as new resources around topics such as: the negative impacts of restraint and seclusion, guidance on developing policies and procedures, prevention practices, guidance on finding appropriate training for educators regarding the use of restraint and seclusion, and engaging parents and families around this topic. Through an annual process of reviewing the statewide data, schools having elevated numbers of incidents will be identified for Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports. Tier 2, or “early warning” schools will have access to additional trainings provided by the Department and its program partners.

The Department has also established a plan for identifying districts in need of Tier 3 intensive support and will implement a system of targeted monitoring during the 2023-2024 school year. Once identified, districts will be assigned a monitor from the Office of Special Education who will review policies and procedures to ensure compliance with legislation. Once the review is conducted, a report will be generated and, if areas of noncompliance are identified, the monitor will develop a corrective action plan. The district will also be provided with a timeline for completion of the corrective action plan and follow-up monitoring will be conducted. Corrective action may include development of policies and procedures, support with resources around topics such as: the negative impacts of restraint and seclusion, guidance on developing policies and procedures, preventative practices, guidance on finding appropriate training for educators regarding the use of restraint and seclusion, and engaging parents and families around this topic.

This monitoring process is designed to be informative, supportive and collaborative and to promote transparency, reduce suppression of incident reporting, and provide professional development and training resources when appropriate.