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Under an anti-harassment policy passed by the Anniston Board of Education Wednesday, students are explicitly protected from bullying based on their race, gender, religion or disability. Sexual orientation? Not so much. With Wednesday's unanimous vote, Anniston joined school systems across the state in passing an official policy for dealing with bullying and harassment. The move is required by the Student Harassment Prevention Act, passed by the Alabama Legislature in the wake of a wave of bullying-related suicides across the country.

Shortly after the law was passed, the state released a model anti-harassment policy that has since been adopted almost word-for-word in many school districts. The model policy explicitly bans harassment based on race, disability and religion, but is silent on anti-gay bullying. That's a big problem for anti-bullying advocates, who say that anti-gay slurs and violence make up a significant portion of the bullying most students experience in school.

"When you leave the most common form of bullying out of your policy, that's problematic," said Carly Friedman, an assistant professor of psychology at Mississippi State University. Friedman studies school bullying, and worked as a research consultant to the Alabama Safe Schools Coalition, an anti-bullying group that campaigned for a sexual orientation clause in the state policy.

Formerly a professor at Samford University, Friedman said her studies found that 49 percent of Alabama students hear anti-gay slurs multiple times per day, and 60 to 70 percent hear at least one anti-gay slur per day. It's not just a problem for gay students, Friedman said. "What we're talking about is bullying based on real or perceived sexual orientation," Friedman said. "A significant number of students who identify as heterosexual experience anti-gay harassment."

One sponsor of the bill, state Sen. Ted Little (D-Auburn), said gay issues were left out of the bill because "there was a feeling that the legislation had the potential of picking up some significant opposition." Little said he became a proponent of anti-bullying policies after taking part in a state task force on school violence a few years ago.

"One particular theme that came up consistently was the need to address bullying," Little said. "What we've seen since then, across the country, are a number of incidents where bullying has

actually led to the self-inflicted death of a child.? Little acknowledged that anti-gay bullying was an element in some recent bullying-related suicides. But he said it was important to create a bill that would pass. ?We wanted to pass something that was worthwhile, knowing we could work on it in the future,? he said. ?We would have been derelict if we continued to do nothing about bullying.?

Local school leaders say that despite the wording of the state model policy, no bullying of any sort will be tolerated in local schools. ?Our goal in passing this was to make sure our policy was in line with what was required by the state,? said Judy Stiefel, superintendent of Calhoun County Schools. Like Anniston, Calhoun County passed the state?s model policy almost word-for-word. Stiefel said the policy simply adds to what is already in the county?s student code of conduct.

Calhoun County?s includes specific policies for dealing with sexual harassment and racial issues, but not anti-gay harassment. The code does explicitly ban students from engaging in anti-gay bullying, however. Anniston superintendent Joan Frazier said she considered anti-gay bullying to fall under the category of sexual harassment ?- something already covered in Anniston?s policies. Frazier said the new policy could be valuable even in school systems that already have an anti-bullying program in place. ?It solidifies it, from a policy standpoint,? she said. ?Instead of having several specific policies, we have one overarching policy to deal with bullying.?

Frazier said that administrators want firm footing when they discipline a child for misbehavior, and the state model policy gives them a consistent framework to work from. The Star attempted to contact superintendents in Jacksonville, Oxford and Piedmont, but calls were not returned. The law doesn?t prevent school districts from adding policies on anti-gay bullying to the state?s model policy. At press time, it was unclear whether any district had written policies of that sort. Friedman, the psychologist, continues to hope that they will. ?I hope people will come to understand that this is a very real problem,? she said.

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