



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

October 21, 2014

Dear Colleague:

While there is broad consensus that bullying is wrong and cannot be tolerated in our schools, the sad reality is that bullying persists in our schools today, and especially so for students with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the U.S. Department of Education (Department) has received an ever-increasing number of complaints concerning the bullying of students with disabilities and the effects of that bullying on their education, including on the special education and related services to which they are entitled. This troubling trend highlights the importance of OCR's continuing efforts to protect the rights of students with disabilities through the vigorous enforcement of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II). It also underscores the need for schools to fully understand their legal obligations to address and prevent disability discrimination in our schools.

Today's guidance follows a long history of guidance issued by the Department in this critical area of disability discrimination. In 2000, OCR and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) issued joint guidance informing schools that disability-based harassment may deny a student equal educational opportunities under Section 504 and Title II.<sup>2</sup> The 2000 guidance also noted the responsibilities of schools under Section 504 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to ensure that students receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE),

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<sup>1</sup> These students are bullied or harassed more than their nondisabled peers. *See* Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) 2013 Dear Colleague Letter on Bullying of Students with Disabilities, <http://www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/bullyingdcl-8-20-13.doc>, at page 2 ("Students with disabilities are disproportionately affected by bullying."). That letter explains that, "[b]ullying can involve overt physical behavior or verbal, emotional, or social behaviors (e.g., excluding someone from social activities, making threats, withdrawing attention, destroying someone's reputation) and can range from blatant aggression to far more subtle and covert behaviors. Cyberbullying, or bullying through electronic technology (e.g., cell phones, computers, online/social media), can include offensive text messages or e-mails, rumors or embarrassing photos posted on social networking sites, or fake online profiles." *Id.* Throughout this guidance, the terms "bullying" and "harassment" are used interchangeably to refer to these types of conduct. *See* Office for Civil Rights (OCR) 2010 Dear Colleague Letter on Harassment and Bullying, <http://www.ed.gov/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.pdf>, at page 3 ("The label used to describe an incident (e.g., bullying, hazing, teasing) does not determine how a school is obligated to respond. Rather, the nature of the conduct itself must be assessed for civil rights implications.").

<sup>2</sup> OCR-OSERS 2000 Dear Colleague Letter: Prohibited Disability Harassment, <http://www.ed.gov/ocr/docs/disabharassltr.html>.

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and alerted schools that harassment of a student based on disability may adversely impact the school's provision of FAPE to the student.<sup>3</sup> In 2010, OCR issued a Dear Colleague Letter on Harassment and Bullying that provided further guidance concerning when a school's inappropriate response to bullying or harassment of a student based on disability constitutes a disability-based harassment violation under Section 504 and Title II.<sup>4</sup> In 2013, OSERS issued a Dear Colleague Letter on Bullying of Students with Disabilities that, in turn, provided additional guidance to schools that the bullying of a student with a disability on *any* basis can result in a denial of FAPE under IDEA that must be remedied.<sup>5</sup>

Building on OSERS's 2013 guidance, today's guidance explains that the bullying of a student with a disability on *any* basis can similarly result in a denial of FAPE under Section 504 that must be remedied; it also reiterates schools' obligations to address conduct that may constitute a disability-based harassment violation and explains that a school must also remedy the denial of FAPE resulting from disability-based harassment. Following an overview of the federal protections for students with disabilities in schools, the guidance elaborates on the elements of a disability-based harassment violation and a FAPE violation, discusses how OCR generally analyzes complaints involving bullying of students with disabilities on each of these bases, and then concludes with a series of hypothetical examples that illustrate varying circumstances when conduct may constitute both a disability-based harassment violation and FAPE violation, a FAPE violation, or neither. Although by no means exhaustive, in the context of this discussion, the guidance also offers some insight into what OCR might require of a school to remedy instances of bullying upon a finding of disability discrimination. OCR urges schools to consider these hypothetical resolution agreement provisions in proactively working to ensure a safe school environment, free from discrimination, for all students.<sup>6</sup>

## **I. Overview of Federal Protections for Students with Disabilities in Schools**

OCR enforces Section 504 and Title II, both of which prohibit disability discrimination. Section 504 prohibits disability discrimination by recipients of Federal financial assistance.<sup>7</sup> OCR enforces Section 504 against entities that receive Federal financial assistance from the Department, including all public schools and school districts as well as all public charter schools and magnet schools. Under Section 504, recipients that operate a public elementary or secondary education program must

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<sup>3</sup> The terms "school" and "school district" are used interchangeably in this letter and refer to public elementary and secondary schools that receive financial assistance from the Department.

<sup>4</sup> OCR 2010 Dear Colleague Letter on Harassment and Bullying, <http://www.ed.gov/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> OSERS 2013 Dear Colleague Letter on Bullying of Students with Disabilities, <http://www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/bullyingdcl-8-20-13.doc>.

<sup>6</sup> This guidance addresses only student-on-student bullying and harassment. Under Section 504 and Title II, students with disabilities are also protected from bullying by teachers, other school employees, and third parties. Such bullying can trigger a school's obligation to address disability-based harassment, remedy a denial of FAPE, or both. *See* 34 C.F.R. §§ 104.4, 104.33; 28 C.F.R. pt. 35. OCR recommends that States and school districts consult with legal counsel regarding their responsibilities and duties in cases of bullying that involve school personnel.

<sup>7</sup> 29 U.S.C. § 794; 34 C.F.R. pt. 104.

provide students with disabilities equal educational opportunities. Among other things, this means they must ensure that students with disabilities receive FAPE, defined as the provision of regular or special education and related aids and services that are designed to meet the individual educational needs of students with disabilities as adequately as the needs of students without disabilities are met and that satisfy certain requirements concerning educational setting, evaluation, placement, and procedural safeguards.<sup>8</sup> Schools also have an obligation under Section 504 to evaluate students who need or are believed to need special education or related services. Further, schools have an obligation to ensure that Section 504 FAPE services are provided in an educational setting with persons who do not have disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the student with a disability.<sup>9</sup> Schools often document these services in written plans, sometimes referred to as Section 504 plans, or, if the child is receiving IDEA FAPE services, through the required individualized education program (IEP).<sup>10</sup>

Title II prohibits disability discrimination by public entities, including all public schools and school districts, as well as all public charter schools and magnet schools, regardless of whether they receive Federal financial assistance.<sup>11</sup> OCR, along with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), enforces Title II in public elementary and secondary schools. Title II is generally construed to provide no less protection than Section 504. Therefore, violations of Section 504, including the failure to provide needed regular or special education and related aids and services to students with disabilities, also constitute violations of Title II.<sup>12</sup>

IDEA is another key Federal law addressing the needs of students with disabilities. OSERS, not OCR or DOJ, administers IDEA.<sup>13</sup> OCR, however, enforces the Section 504 and Title II rights of IDEA-eligible students.<sup>14</sup> Under Part B of IDEA, the Department provides Federal funds to State educational agencies and through them to local educational agencies (school districts), to assist

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<sup>8</sup> For Section 504 and Title II, the term “disability” means a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of an individual; a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment. 29 U.S.C. § 705(9)(B), (20)(B); 42 U.S.C. § 12102. The Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (Amendments Act), Pub. Law No. 110-325, amended the disability definition for Section 504 and Title II. Most notably, the Amendments Act required that “disability” under these statutes be interpreted broadly. More information about the Amendments Act is available from OCR’s website at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201109.html> and <http://www.ed.gov/ocr/docs/dcl-504faq-201109.html>.

<sup>9</sup> In this letter, the term “Section 504 FAPE services” is used to refer to the regular or special education and related aids and services provided to students with disabilities as specified in 34 C.F.R. § 104.33(b). The term “IDEA FAPE services” is used in this letter to refer to the special education and related services provided to students with disabilities that meet the requirements of 34 C.F.R. pt. 300, as specified in 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.17 (FAPE), 300.39 (special education), and 300.34 (related services).

<sup>10</sup> Students with disabilities who are IDEA-eligible also have rights under Section 504 and Title II. The Department’s Section 504 regulations provide that implementation of an IEP developed in accordance with IDEA is one means of providing Section 504 FAPE services. 34 C.F.R. § 104.33(b)(2).

<sup>11</sup> 42 U.S.C. §§ 12131-12134; 28 C.F.R. pt. 35.

<sup>12</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 12201(a). To the extent that Title II provides greater protection than Section 504, covered entities must comply with Title II’s requirements.

<sup>13</sup> For more information about OSERS, please visit <http://www.ed.gov/osers>.

<sup>14</sup> This letter only addresses Federal law; other State or local laws and policies may apply.

school districts in providing FAPE to eligible children with disabilities through the provision of special education and related services.<sup>15</sup> School districts must ensure that IDEA FAPE services in the least restrictive environment are made available to all eligible children with disabilities through a properly developed IEP that provides a meaningful educational benefit to the student. In addition, school districts must locate, identify, and evaluate children suspected of having disabilities who may need special education and related services.

## **II. Schools' Obligations to Address Disability-Based Harassment**

Bullying of a student on the basis of his or her disability may result in a disability-based harassment violation under Section 504 and Title II.<sup>16</sup> As explained in OCR's 2010 Dear Colleague Letter on Harassment and Bullying, when a school knows or should know of bullying conduct based on a student's disability, it must take immediate and appropriate action to investigate or otherwise determine what occurred.<sup>17</sup> If a school's investigation reveals that bullying based on disability created a hostile environment—i.e., the conduct was sufficiently serious to interfere with or limit a student's ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or opportunities offered by a school—the school must take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the bullying, eliminate the hostile environment, prevent it from recurring, and, as appropriate, remedy its effects. Therefore, OCR would find a disability-based harassment violation under Section 504 and Title II when: (1) a student is bullied based on a disability; (2) the bullying is sufficiently serious to create a hostile environment; (3) school officials know or should know about the bullying; and (4) the school does not respond appropriately.<sup>18</sup>

As explained in Section III, below, for the student with a disability who is receiving IDEA FAPE services or Section 504 FAPE services, a school's investigation should include determining whether

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<sup>15</sup> 20 U.S.C. §§ 1400-1419; 34 C.F.R. pt. 300. IDEA establishes 13 disability categories: autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment. 34 C.F.R. § 300.8(c).

<sup>16</sup> These legal protections extend to all students with disabilities, including students who are regarded as having a disability or who have a record of a disability and students with disabilities who are not receiving services under Section 504 or IDEA. In addition to being protected from harassment on the basis of disability, students with disabilities, like all students, are entitled to protection from harassment on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex (including sexual violence), and age under the Federal civil rights laws that OCR enforces. For more information about other types of discriminatory harassment, see [OCR's 2010 Dear Colleague Letter](#) referenced in note 4.

<sup>17</sup> Schools know or should know about disability-based harassment when, for example, a teacher or other responsible employee of the school witnesses the conduct. For more information about how to determine when knowledge of such conduct will be imputed to schools, refer to the OCR 2001 Revised Sexual Harassment Guidance: Harassment of Students by School Employees, Other Students, or Third Parties, <http://www.ed.gov/ocr/docs/shguide.pdf> at page 13; and [OCR 2010 Dear Colleague Letter on Harassment and Bullying](#), at page 3 and note 11.

<sup>18</sup> This is the standard for administrative enforcement of Section 504 and in court cases where plaintiffs are seeking injunctive relief. It is different from the standard in private lawsuits for money damages, which, many courts have held, requires proof of a school's actual knowledge and deliberate indifference. See *Long v. Murray Cnty. Sch. Dist.*, 522 Fed. Appx. 576, 577 & n. 1 (11th Cir. 2013) (applying the test enunciated in *Davis v. Monroe Cnty. Bd. of Ed.*, 526 U.S. 629, 643 (1999)).

that student's receipt of appropriate services may have been affected by the bullying.<sup>19</sup> If the school's investigation reveals that the bullying created a hostile environment and there is reason to believe that the student's IDEA FAPE services or Section 504 FAPE services may have been affected by the bullying, the school has an obligation to remedy those effects on the student's receipt of FAPE.<sup>20</sup> Even if the school finds that the bullying did not create a hostile environment, the school would still have an obligation to address any FAPE-related concerns, if, for example, the school's initial investigation revealed that the bullying may have had some impact on the student's receipt of FAPE services.

### **III. Bullying and the Denial of a Free Appropriate Public Education**

The bullying on *any* basis of a student with a disability who is receiving IDEA FAPE services or Section 504 FAPE services can result in the denial of FAPE that must be remedied under Section 504. The OSERS 2013 Dear Colleague Letter clarified that, under IDEA, as part of a school's appropriate response to bullying on any basis, the school should convene the IEP team<sup>21</sup> to determine whether, as a result of the effects of the bullying, the student's needs have changed such that the IEP is no longer designed to provide a meaningful educational benefit. If the IEP is no longer designed to provide a meaningful educational benefit to the student, the IEP team must determine the extent to which additional or different IDEA FAPE services are needed to address the student's individualized needs and then revise the IEP accordingly. Any decisions made by the IEP team must be consistent with the IDEA provisions addressing parental participation and should keep the student with a disability in the original placement or setting (e.g., the same school and classroom) unless the student can no longer receive FAPE in that placement or setting. Under IDEA, schools have an ongoing obligation to ensure that a student with a disability who is the target of bullying continues to receive FAPE in accordance with his or her IEP—an obligation that exists whether the student is being bullied based on his or her disability or is being bullied based on other reasons.

Similarly, under Section 504, schools have an ongoing obligation to ensure that a qualified student with a disability who receives IDEA FAPE services or Section 504 FAPE services and who is the target of bullying continues to receive FAPE—an obligation that exists regardless of why the student

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<sup>19</sup> As stated in [OCR 2010 Dear Colleague Letter on Harassment and Bullying](#) at page 2, "The specific steps in a school's investigation will vary depending upon the nature of the allegations, the source of the complaint, the age of the student or students involved, the size and administrative structure of the school, and other factors." When a student with a disability who receives Section 504 FAPE services is being bullied, an appropriate "other factor" is whether that student's receipt of services has been affected by the bullying.

<sup>20</sup> When a student with a disability has engaged in misconduct that is caused by his or her disability, the student's own misconduct would not relieve the school of its legal obligation to determine whether that student's civil rights were violated by the bullying conduct of the other student. For example, if a student, for reasons related to his disability, hits another student and other students then call him "crazy" on a daily basis, the school should, of course, address the conduct of the student with a disability. Nonetheless, the school must also consider whether the student with a disability is being bullied on the basis of disability under Section 504 and Title II.

<sup>21</sup> The IEP team is the group of persons specified in IDEA that determines the appropriate IDEA FAPE services for an IDEA-eligible student. 34 C.F.R. § 300.321(a).

is being bullied.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, under Section 504, as part of a school's appropriate response to bullying on *any* basis, the school should convene the IEP team or the Section 504 team<sup>23</sup> to determine whether, as a result of the effects of the bullying, the student's needs have changed such that the student is no longer receiving FAPE. The effects of bullying could include, for example, adverse changes in the student's academic performance or behavior. If the school suspects the student's needs have changed, the IEP team or the Section 504 team must determine the extent to which additional or different services are needed,<sup>24</sup> ensure that any needed changes are made promptly, and safeguard against putting the onus on the student with the disability to avoid or handle the bullying.<sup>25</sup> In addition, when considering a change of placement, schools must continue to ensure that Section 504 FAPE services are provided in an educational setting with persons who do not have disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the student with a disability.

Although there are no hard and fast rules regarding how much of a change in academic performance or behavior is necessary to trigger the school's obligation to convene the IEP team or Section 504 team, a sudden decline in grades, the onset of emotional outbursts, an increase in the frequency or intensity of behavioral interruptions, or a rise in missed classes or sessions of Section 504 services would generally be sufficient.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, one low grade for an otherwise straight-A student who shows no other changes in academic progress or behavior will generally not, standing alone, trigger the school's obligation to determine whether the student's needs are still being met. Nonetheless, in addition to addressing the bullying under the school's anti-bullying policies, schools should promptly convene the IEP team or Section 504 team to determine whether FAPE is being provided

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<sup>22</sup> At the elementary and secondary educational level, a "qualified student with a disability" is a student with a disability who is: of an age at which students without disabilities are provided elementary and secondary educational services; of an age at which it is mandatory under State law to provide elementary and secondary educational services to students with disabilities; or a student to whom a State is required to provide FAPE under IDEA. 34 C.F.R. § 104.3(l). In addition to the provision of regular or special education and related aids and services pursuant to 34 C.F.R. § 104.33, FAPE protections extend to educational setting, evaluation and placement, and procedural safeguards. 34 C.F.R. §§ 104.34-.36.

<sup>23</sup> The Section 504 team is the group of knowledgeable persons that determines the appropriate Section 504 FAPE services for a qualified student with a disability under Section 504.

<sup>24</sup> A reevaluation would not be needed unless there is a reason to believe the student's underlying disability or disabilities have changed or the student has an additional disability.

<sup>25</sup> OCR would expect that schools address bullying behavior to ensure that the burden does not fall on the student with a disability. Along these lines, and consistent with the OSERS 2013 Dear Colleague Letter, schools should exercise caution when considering a change in placement, or the location of services (including classroom) provided to the student with a disability who is the target of bullying and should keep the student in the original placement unless the student can no longer receive Section 504 FAPE in that placement. OCR also urges schools to allow for parental participation when considering any change in placement or location of services (including classroom). *See* 34 C.F.R. pt. 104, app. A (discussion of Subpart D).

<sup>26</sup> In light of schools' ongoing obligation to ensure that students with disabilities are receiving FAPE, adverse changes in the academic performance or behavior of a student receiving FAPE services could trigger the school's obligation to convene the IEP team or Section 504 team regardless of the school's knowledge of the bullying conduct. *See, e.g.*, Section V, Hypothetical Example B, below. As a best practice, schools should train all staff to report bullying to an administrator or school official who can promptly convene a meeting of knowledgeable people (e.g., the student's Section 504 team or IEP team) to ensure that the student is receiving FAPE and, as necessary, address whether the student's FAPE needs have changed.

to a student with a disability who has been bullied and who is experiencing any adverse changes in academic performance or behavior.

When bullying results in a disability-based harassment violation, it will not always result in a denial of FAPE. Although all students with disabilities are protected from disability-based harassment, the requirement to provide FAPE applies only to those students with disabilities who need or may need FAPE services because of their disability.<sup>27</sup> This means that if a student is the target of bullying resulting in a disability-based harassment violation, but that student is not eligible to receive IDEA or Section 504 FAPE services, there could be no FAPE violation.

When a student who receives IDEA FAPE services or Section 504 FAPE services has experienced bullying resulting in a disability-based harassment violation, however, there is a strong likelihood that the student was denied FAPE. This is because when bullying is sufficiently serious to create a hostile environment and the school fails to respond appropriately, there is a strong likelihood both that the effects of the bullying included an impact on the student's receipt of FAPE and that the school's failure to remedy the effects of the bullying included its failure to address these FAPE-related concerns.

Ultimately, unless it is clear from the school's investigation into the bullying conduct that there was no effect on the student with a disability's receipt of FAPE, the school should, as a best practice, promptly convene the IEP team or the Section 504 team to determine whether, and to what extent: (1) the student's educational needs have changed; (2) the bullying impacted the student's receipt of IDEA FAPE services or Section 504 FAPE services; and (3) additional or different services, if any, are needed, and to ensure any needed changes are made promptly. By doing so, the school will be in the best position to ensure the student's ongoing receipt of FAPE.

#### **IV. How OCR Analyzes Complaints Involving Bullying of Students with Disabilities**

When OCR evaluates complaints involving bullying and students with disabilities, OCR may open an investigation to determine whether there has been a disability-based harassment violation, a FAPE violation, both, or neither, depending on the facts and circumstances of a given complaint.

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<sup>27</sup> The FAPE requirement to evaluate applies to all students who are known or believed to need special education or related services, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability. 34 C.F.R. §§ 104.33, -.35. For a student who is suspected of having a disability but who is not yet receiving IDEA or Section 504 services, OCR may consider whether the school met its obligation to evaluate the student. 34 C.F.R. § 104.35. For example, if a student suspected of having a disability was missing school to avoid bullying, OCR may consider whether the student's evaluation was unduly delayed (e.g., if the school knew or should have known of the bullying and failed to act) in determining whether there was a denial of FAPE under the circumstances.

**When investigating disability-based harassment, OCR considers several factors, including, but not limited to:**

- Was a student with a disability bullied by one or more students based on the student's disability?
- Was the bullying conduct sufficiently serious to create a hostile environment?
- Did the school know or should it have known of the conduct?
- Did the school fail to take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the conduct, eliminate the hostile environment, prevent it from recurring, and, as appropriate, remedy its effects?

*If the answer to each of these questions is "yes," then OCR would find a disability-based harassment violation under Section 504 and, if the student was receiving IDEA FAPE or Section 504 FAPE services, OCR would have a basis for investigating whether there was also a denial of FAPE under Section 504.*

*Even if the answers to one or more of these questions is "no," for a student who was receiving IDEA FAPE or Section 504 FAPE services, OCR may still consider whether the bullying resulted in a denial of FAPE under Section 504 that must be remedied.*

**When investigating whether a student receiving IDEA FAPE or Section 504 FAPE services who was bullied was denied FAPE under Section 504, OCR considers several factors, including, but not limited to:**

- Did the school know or should it have known that the effects of the bullying may have affected the student's receipt of IDEA FAPE services or Section 504 FAPE services? For example, did the school know or should it have known about adverse changes in the student's academic performance or behavior indicating that the student may not be receiving FAPE?

*If the answer is "no," there would be no FAPE violation.<sup>28</sup> If the answer is "yes," OCR would then consider:*

- Did the school meet its ongoing obligation to ensure FAPE by promptly determining whether the student's educational needs were still being met, and if not, making changes, as necessary, to his or her IEP or Section 504 plan?

*If the answer is "no," and the student was not receiving FAPE, OCR would find that the school violated its obligation to provide FAPE.*

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<sup>28</sup> Where a student is suspected of having a disability but is not yet receiving IDEA FAPE services or Section 504 FAPE services, OCR could consider whether the student's evaluation was unduly delayed in determining whether there was a denial of FAPE under the circumstances. See fn. 27, above.



## V. Hypothetical Examples

The following hypothetical examples illustrate how OCR would analyze a complaint involving allegations of the bullying of a student with a disability who only receives Section 504 FAPE services.

### A. Disability-Based Harassment Violation and FAPE Violation

At the start of the school year, a ten-year-old student with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and a speech disability is fully participating in the classroom, interacting with his peers at lunch and recess, and regularly attending speech therapy twice a week. In addition to providing for speech services, the student's Section 504 plan also provides for behavior supports that call for all his teachers and other trained staff to supervise him during transition times, provide constructive feedback, and help him use preventative strategies to anticipate and address problems with peers.

Because of the student's disabilities, he makes impulsive remarks, speaks in a high-pitched voice, and has difficulty reading social cues. Three months into the school year, students in his P.E. class begin to repeatedly taunt him by speaking in an exaggerated, high-pitched tone, calling him names such as "weirdo" and "gay," and setting him up for social embarrassment by directing him to ask other students inappropriate personal questions. The P.E. teacher witnesses the taunting, but neither reports the conduct to the appropriate school official, nor applies the student's behavior supports specified in his 504 plan. Instead, she pulls the student aside and tells him that he needs to start focusing less on what kids have to say and more on getting his head in the game. As the taunting intensifies, the student begins to withdraw from interacting with other kids in P.E. and avoids other students at lunch and recess. As the student continues to withdraw over the course of a few weeks, he misses multiple sessions of speech therapy, but the speech therapist does not report his absences to the Section 504 team or another appropriate school official.

In this example, OCR would find a disability-based harassment violation. The student's peers were making fun of him because of behaviors related to his disability. For OCR's enforcement purposes, the taunting the student experienced, including other students impersonating him and calling him "weirdo" and "gay," was therefore based on his disability.<sup>29</sup> The school knew about the bullying because the P.E. teacher witnessed the conduct.<sup>30</sup> Yet upon witnessing the taunting, the P.E. teacher not only failed to provide the student behavior supports as required in the student's 504 plan, but also failed to report the conduct to an appropriate school official. Had she taken this step, the school could have conducted an investigation and found that the conduct created a hostile environment because it interfered with the student's ability to benefit from the speech therapy services that he

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<sup>29</sup> OCR would have also investigated whether a school's inappropriate response to the use of the word "gay" in this context constituted a gender-based harassment violation under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1681-1688; 34 C.F.R. pt. 106, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. For a discussion of gender-based harassment, see [OCR 2010 Dear Colleague Letter on Harassment and Bullying](#), at pages 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> The P.E. teacher in this example is a responsible employee. See fn. 17, above.

should have been receiving and negatively affected his ability to participate fully in P.E., lunch, and recess. The school's failure to appropriately respond to the bullying violated Section 504.

OCR would also find FAPE violations under Section 504. First, when the P.E. teacher failed to implement the behavior supports in the student's Section 504 plan, the school denied the student FAPE under Section 504. In addition, and independent of the failure to provide behavior supports, because the bullying impacted the student's receipt of Section 504 FAPE, the school should have addressed the student's changed needs; by failing to do so, the student was denied Section 504 FAPE. The school should have known about the missed Section 504 services and related changes in behavior. The P.E. teacher knew about the bullying but did nothing to report the student's behavioral changes (e.g., the student's increasing efforts to isolate himself from other students) to the Section 504 team members or other appropriate school official. Similarly, the speech therapist knew that the student was missing speech therapy but did not report this to the 504 team or to an appropriate school official. By failing to address the adverse effects of the bullying on FAPE, the school did not make necessary changes to ensure the student was provided FAPE under Section 504. If, upon concluding its investigation, OCR and the district were to enter into a resolution agreement, OCR could require, for example, that the district (1) ensure that FAPE is provided to the student by convening the Section 504 team to determine if the student needs different or additional services (including compensatory services) and, if so, providing them; (2) offer counseling to the student to remedy the harm that the school allowed to persist; (3) monitor whether bullying persists for the student and take corrective action to ensure the bullying ceases; (4) develop and implement a school-wide bullying prevention strategy based on positive behavior supports; (5) devise a voluntary school climate survey for students and parents to assess the presence and effect of bullying based on disability and to respond to issues that arise in the survey; (6) revise the district's anti-bullying policies to develop staff protocols in order to improve the district's response to bullying; (7) train staff and parent volunteers, such as those who monitor lunch and recess or chaperone field trips, on the district's anti-bullying policies, including how to recognize and report instances of bullying on any basis; and (8) provide continuing education to students on the district's anti-bullying policies, including where to get help if a student either witnesses or experiences bullying conduct of any kind.

### **B. FAPE Violation, No Disability-Based Harassment Violation**

A thirteen-year-old student with depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) who receives counseling as part of her Section 504 services is often mocked by her peers for being poor and living in a homeless shelter. Having maintained an A average for the first half of the academic year, she is now getting Bs and Cs, neglecting to turn in her assignments, and regularly missing counseling sessions. When asked by her counselor why she is no longer attending scheduled sessions, she says that she feels that nothing is helping and that no one cares about her. The student tells the counselor that she no longer wants to attend counseling services and misses her next two scheduled sessions. The counselor informs the principal that the student has missed several counseling sessions and that the student feels the sessions are not helping. Around the same time, the student's teachers inform the principal that she has begun to struggle academically. The

principal asks the teachers and counselor to keep her apprised if the student's academic performance worsens, but does not schedule a Section 504 meeting.

In this example, whether or not the school knew or should have known about the bullying, OCR would not find a disability-based harassment violation under Section 504 because the bullying incidents were based on the student's socio-economic status, not her disability.

Independent of the basis for the bullying and regardless of whether school officials knew or should have known about the bullying, the school district still had an ongoing obligation under Section 504 to ensure that this student with a disability was receiving an education appropriate to her needs. Here, the student's sudden decline in grades, coupled with changes in her behavior (missing counseling sessions), should have indicated to the school that her needs were not being met. In this example, OCR would find that these adverse changes were sufficient to put the school on notice of its obligation to promptly convene the Section 504 team to determine the extent of the FAPE-related problems and to make any necessary changes to her services, or, if necessary, reevaluate her, in order to ensure that she continues to receive FAPE. By failing to do more than keep track of the student's academic performance, the school failed to meet this obligation, which violated Section 504.<sup>31</sup>

### **C. No Disability-Based Harassment Violation, No FAPE Violation**

A seven-year-old student with a food allergy to peanuts has a Section 504 plan that provides for meal accommodations, the administration of epinephrine if the student is exposed to peanuts, access to a peanut-free table in the cafeteria, and the prohibition of peanut products in the student's classroom. In advance of the upcoming Halloween party, the teacher reminds the class that candy with peanuts is prohibited in the classroom at all times, including Halloween. That afternoon, while on the bus, a classmate grabs the student's water bottle out of the student's backpack, drinks from it, and says, "I had a peanut butter sandwich for lunch today, and I just finished it." The following day, while having lunch at the peanut-free table in the lunchroom with some friends, a classmate who had been sitting at another table sneaks up behind her and waves an open candy bar with peanuts in front of her face, yelling, "Time to eat peanuts!" Though the candy bar does not touch her, a few other classmates nearby begin chanting, "Time to eat peanuts," and the student leaves the lunchroom crying. When the student goes back to her classroom and tells her teacher what happened at lunch and on the bus, the teacher asks her whether she came into contact with the candy bar and what happened to the water bottle. The student confirms that the candy bar did not touch her and that she never got the water bottle back from the classmate who took it, but says that she is scared to go back into the lunchroom and to ride the bus. The teacher promptly informs the principal of the incidents, and the peers who taunted the student on the bus and in the lunchroom are removed from the lunchroom, interviewed by the assistant principal, and required to meet with the counselor during

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<sup>31</sup> If OCR and the district were to enter into a resolution agreement in this case, such an agreement could include, for example, any of the provisions specified in Hypothetical Example A, above.

recess to discuss the seriousness of their conduct. That same week, the school holds a Section 504 meeting to address whether any changes were needed to the student's services in light of the bullying. The principal also meets with the school counselor, and they decide that a segment on the bullying of students with disabilities, including students with food allergies, would be added to the counselor's presentation to students on the school's anti-bullying policy scheduled in the next two weeks. Furthermore, in light of the young age of the students, the counselor offers to incorporate a puppet show into the segment to help illustrate principles that might otherwise be too abstract for such a young audience. In the weeks that follow, the student shows no adverse changes in academic performance or behavior, and when asked by her teacher and the school counselor about how she is doing, she indicates that the bullying has stopped.

In this example, based on the school's appropriate response to the incidents of bullying, OCR would not find a disability-based harassment violation under Section 504. The bullying of the student on account of her food allergy to peanuts was based on the student's disability. Moreover, the physically threatening and humiliating conduct directed at her was sufficiently serious to create a hostile environment by limiting her ability to participate in and benefit from the school's education program when she was near the classmates who bullied her in the lunchroom and on the bus. School personnel, however, did not tolerate the conduct and acted quickly to investigate the incidents, address the behavior of the classmates involved in the conduct, ensure that there were no residual effects on the student, and coordinate to promote greater awareness among students about the school's anti-bullying policy. By taking prompt and reasonable steps to address the hostile environment, eliminate its effects, and prevent it from recurring, the school met its obligations under Section 504.

OCR also would not find a FAPE violation under Section 504 on these facts. Once the school became aware that the student feared attending lunch and riding the bus as a result of the bullying she was experiencing, the school was on notice that the effects of the bullying may have affected her receipt of FAPE. This was sufficient to trigger the school's additional obligation to determine whether, and to what extent, the bullying affected the student's access to FAPE and take any actions, including addressing the bullying and providing new or different services, required to ensure the student continued receiving FAPE. By promptly holding a Section 504 meeting to assess whether the school should consider any changes to the student's services in light of the bullying, the school met its independent legal obligation to provide FAPE under Section 504.

## **VI. Conclusion**

OCR is committed to working with schools, students, families, community and advocacy organizations, and others to ensure that schools understand and meet their legal obligations under Section 504 and Title II to appropriately address disability-based harassment and to ensure that students with disabilities who are bullied continue to receive FAPE.

OCR also encourages States and school districts to reevaluate their policies and practices in light of this letter, as well as OCR's and OSERS's prior guidance. If you would like to request technical assistance or file a complaint alleging discrimination, please contact the OCR enforcement office that serves your area. Contact information is posted on OCR's website at:

<http://www.ed.gov/ocr/complaintintro.html> or please contact OCR's customer service team at 1-800-421-3481 (TDD 1-800-877-8339).

I look forward to continuing our work together to address and reduce incidents of bullying in our schools so that no student is limited in his or her ability to participate in and benefit from all that our educational programs have to offer.

Sincerely,

/s/

Catherine E. Lhamon  
Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights