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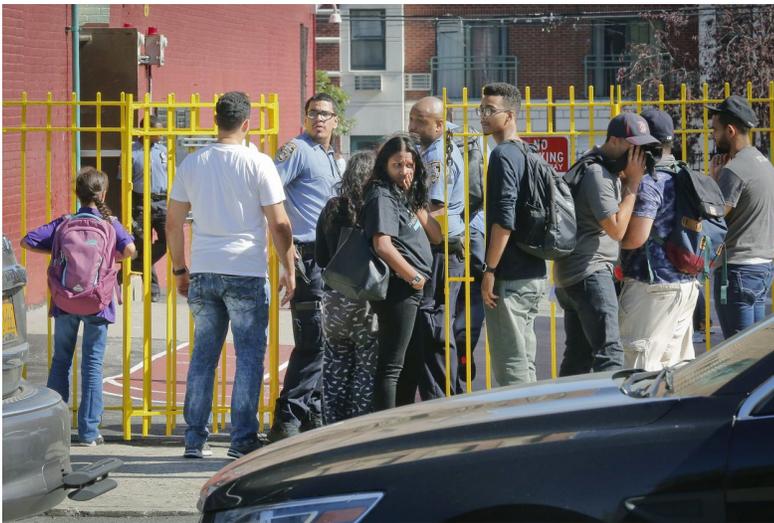
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## New York City Struggles to End Bullying in Schools

Some families and advocates say more should be done to keep students protected



Parents and guardians waited outside a Bronx high school where a stabbing left one student dead, in September 2017. PHOTO: BEBETO MATTHEWS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

*By Leslie Brody and Ben Chapman*

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A fatal stabbing in a Bronx classroom two years ago left one teenager dead and another charged with manslaughter. The tragedy sparked a citywide conversation about the potential for bullying to spin out of control.

Since then city Department of Education officials say they have confronted bullying aggressively, with more training and efforts to tend to the emotional needs of students, in hopes of preventing cruelty from the start. But some families and advocates say more should be done to keep children safe.

The prevalence of bullying varies widely among city schools of all levels, state data showed. They reported 6,437 verified incidents to the state in the 2017-2018 year, up

from 4,105 the year before. There also were more than 1,000 cyberbullying episodes in each year.

But the problems run deeper, according to a citywide audit released in March by the state comptroller's office, which found evidence of significant underreporting. School staffers described minimizing incidents to preserve the good records of college-bound students, for example, and said they didn't bother to report some offenses because recording all of them was too onerous.

"The city's Department of Education can and should do more to protect students," Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli said in a statement on the audit, which scrutinized two years ended in June 2017. Department officials disputed some of his findings, and say the city is investing \$8 million in antibullying initiatives.



Alexander Rodriguez, a Brooklyn 16-year-old, said he was teased a lot in school. He didn't tell teachers because he didn't want to be a "snitch." PHOTO: DULCE MARQUEZ

Bullying was at the heart of the conflict that erupted at the Urban Assembly School for Wildlife Conservation in September 2017, according to a lawyer for Abel Cedeno, who was 18 years old when he was charged with manslaughter. He pleaded not guilty in a trial that began Friday in a criminal court in the Bronx. His lawyer has said Mr. Cedeno suffered years of bullying at school and he used a knife in self-defense.

"There was no justification for the actions of Abel Cedeno," Nancy Borko, a prosecutor in the Bronx District Attorney's office, said in court Friday.

The Department of Education shut that school. Agency officials say they are committed to addressing all bullying allegations, which must be investigated by the school within five school days. They expect bullying reports will rise because the number of

infractions that trigger investigations will jump to 56 in the fall, up from 18 in the past school year.

Some students endure pain without telling adults. Alexander Rodriguez, a Brooklyn 16-year-old, said he was teased a lot in elementary school, when he was chunky and had a high voice. He didn't tell teachers because he didn't want to be a "snitch."

Alexander said some teachers were too lax with students who made fun of others. What helped him was becoming a peer mediator, which taught him more about what motivates bullies. Joining a debate team also showed him the power of his own voice.

"I know I am not defined by the terms of my peers," Alexander said. "I feel bad for people who feel they need to make pejorative comments."

Like counterparts nationwide, the department has tried to combat bullying in a host of ways, from launching online complaint forms to antibias programs. It also requires every school to appoint a "Respect for All" liaison so students know where to go for help.

Even so, 38% of the city's public high-school students said peers harass, bully or intimidate students at their school some or most of the time, according to a department survey in the 2017-18 academic year. In middle school, 50% of students said so. Despite such misbehavior, 84% of students said they feel safe on campus.

Gregory Floyd, president of Teamsters Local 237, the union for school safety agents, is among those saying the city's approach to bullying is insufficient. "Children are left to fend for themselves," he said. "The strong ones pick on the weak ones, and the weak ones suffer in silence."

Mayor Bill de Blasio has emphasized tending to students' inner lives. In June he announced he will add 85 social workers to help address student crises before they escalate, and expand social-emotional learning in elementary grades.

"We're making record investments in teaching students how to recognize their emotions and solve the root causes of conflict, which will help prevent bullying and strengthen relationships in schools," spokeswoman Miranda Barbot said.

The mayor has also called for reducing suspensions, which are disproportionately imposed on black and Hispanic students, in favor of conflict resolution techniques. Some principals have complained, however, that pressure to cut suspensions has made some classrooms more disorderly, because troublemakers assume there will be few

consequences for acting up.

Some families say schools still don't respond to bullying complaints. Attorney Jim Walden said that in the past year, more than six families told him their schools ignored transgressions. "The fact there are still serious cases that are not being investigated is concerning," he said. After he alerted the department, he said, staff took action.

Mr. Walden represented 23 families who sued the department in 2016 for better protections. In settling the suit last year, the department agreed to set up an electronic portal this fall so families can track a school's bullying investigation and see any steps taken to remedy the problems.

"I'm not confident it will work," Mr. Walden said. "But I'm confident if it doesn't work, we'll have adequate tools to enforce the settlement agreement."

—*Alexis Gravely contributed to this article.*

**Write to** Leslie Brody at [leslie.brody@wsj.com](mailto:leslie.brody@wsj.com) and Ben Chapman at [Ben.Chapman@wsj.com](mailto:Ben.Chapman@wsj.com)

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