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Concerns resurface over behavioral problems in Deer Isle-Stonington schools

November 13, 2025



Deer Isle-Stonington Elementary School. (File photo)

THE ISLAND—On a night when the Deer Isle-Stonington CSD 13 School Board began a procedural review of its bullying policies, both a parent and an educational tech raised new concerns over the impact of behavioral problems at the elementary and high schools.

At its monthly meeting at The Reach on November 10, the board held first readings for seven policies, including two that address bullying and hazing. A "first reading" represents the initial introduction of a proposed new or updated policy for informational purposes. No public comment is taken, co-chair Genevieve McDonald explained, and no vote is taken. In this case, the policies to be considered for adoption or amendment are referred to the board's policy committee prior to a second reading and possible vote.

But their presence on the agenda coincided with comments delivered by Russell Brown, a parent and coach at the schools, and educational tech Samantha Parker, raising concerns about detrimental behavioral issues.

"Two weeks ago I had a discussion with a parent and community member about their kids leaving the schools here," Brown said, citing what they felt was an unsafe atmosphere. "I am concerned that any of our parents would take kids out of this school, move them to another school and even pay for that out of their own pocket."

Brown said that when his older children went to Island schools, student behavioral issues and safety concerns never arose. Now, he said, he frequently hears anecdotes about problems at the school.

"In this case, they had trouble even getting their kid to go to school. They'd get up everyday, hating to go to school," he said. "And now that they switched schools, that's all gone away. So what's going on?"

McDonald thanked Brown for bringing his concerns forward and assured him the board shared them, but pointed out that the

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comment period was not for questions and answers. She said that citizens' comments involved upcoming agenda items, policy revisions and decisions, but that board members as a rule would not engage in a back and forth, especially on general topics.

Board member Darien Gove suggested that Brown bring his concerns directly to the school principal. If they weren't resolved, he could then bring them to Superintendent Tara McKechnie.

After Brown spoke, Parker was recognized. Reading from a prepared statement, she told the board that while she loved the job she's held for three years and loved working with the Island's children, "the atmosphere in school is scary."

Parker said she's placed more calls to "safety care" personnel since the start of the school year than in her entire tenure. "We are seeing these behaviors spread like wildfire," she said, noting that students seem unclear about acceptable boundaries and behaviors. In part, she said the district's approach to restorative justice, which replaces more traditional methods of student discipline, was incomplete because as implemented it lacked consistency and accountability.

"If that does not concern you, then that concerns me," she said.

Although school board members hesitated to address Brown and Parker directly, co-chair Chelsea Torrey assured both that the issue was on the board's radar.

"This is a thing that we are aware of," she said. "It is a concern. We will have a lot of conversations on this topic."

"We say we want people to come back and live on the Island and raise their families here," Brown said. "But are they going to come if this is the situation in the schools?"

New elementary school principal Caitlin Snyder, who is just starting her second week on the job, said that school atmosphere and sense of safety are among her top priorities. She said any parent with concerns is welcome to meet with her.

And an 11th grade transfer student who was in attendance said her experience so far was vastly different than the ones Parker and Brown described.

"This school is a welcoming community," she said, explaining that she had transferred from George Stevens Academy at the start of the year. "I haven't had a single bad interaction since I arrived."

Policy to be reviewed

Meanwhile, the board is reviewing its current anti-bullying and anti-hazing policies. Last revised six years ago, the seven-page "Bullying and Cyberbullying Prevention in Schools" document defines bullying as behavior that results in physical harm to a student, places a student in fear of such harm, creates an intimidating or hostile learning environment, or interferes with "the student's academic performance or ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities or privileges provided by a school."

It also includes all forms of discrimination and cyberbullying as well.

The policy lists several examples of such prohibited behavior, including:

Repeated or pervasive taunting, name-calling, belittling, mocking, put-downs, or demeaning humor;

Behavior that is likely to harm someone by damaging or manipulating his or her relationships with others, including but not limited to gossip, spreading rumors, and social exclusion;

Non-verbal threats and/or intimidations such as use of aggressive, menacing, or disrespectful gestures;

Threats of harm to a student, to his/her possessions, or to other individuals, whether transmitted verbally or in writing;

Blackmail, extortion, demands for protection money, or involuntary loans or donations;

Blocking access to school property or facilities;

Stealing or hiding books, backpacks, or other possessions;

Stalking; Physical contact or injury to another person or his/her property.

The current policy lays out a process in which bullying should be reported to school administrators either by the alleged victim or parents. School personnel such as staff, coaches and club advisors are required to report any bullying incidents that they are aware of. The policy then identifies a process of response, communication and remediation—the range of actions which the school will take to address a confirmed case of bullying.

The policy also requires administrators to report instances of bullying to the Maine Department of Education annually. According to the database, CSD 13 reported 21 instances of bullying in 2017, the first year data was collected. Since then, there have been 12 reported incidents over eight years, averaging 1.5 incidents a year. In 2025, two incidents have been reported to date.

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