

## Parliament Bullying in Singapore schools has been 'stable and managed'

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Schools have strengthened peer support by equipping students with skills such as befriending and listening. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

SINGAPORE - About one in five of 15-year-old students here reported experiencing some form of verbal bullying, while one in 10 has encountered social bullying.

Physical bullying was less prevalent at about 5 per cent, according to a student perception survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2015.

Minister for Education (Schools) Ng Chee Meng cited these figures - which he said is quite similar to findings by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and other local studies - in Parliament on Tuesday (Oct 3).

"On the whole, bullying... has been stable and managed," he told Non-Constituency MP Daniel Goh, who asked how prevalent bullying is in schools and what steps were being taken to detect it.

Mr Ng said schools will discipline and educate students when they misbehave or make mistakes, so they learn and do not repeat the wrong behaviour.

"School staff will also counsel students who are involved in bullying as well as those affected by it," he added.

Schools have also strengthened peer support by equipping students with skills such as befriending and listening. These students will alert teachers when they observe situations that affect their classmates' safety, said Mr Ng.

Dr Goh also asked how the MOE is responding to the growing instance of people posting video recordings of bullying online.

Last month, a video of a fight that broke out between three boys in a classroom at St Hilda's Secondary School went viral online. An adult intern "with an external agency" was present, but did not stop the fight. The school later said he did not have the "training or authority to manage the situation".

Video posting and filming using handphones is actually prohibited in classrooms, said Mr Ng, reiterating that "proactive measures" like teaching students to cope with bullying are more important.

Responding to other MPs, he noted that cyber bullying - hostile or aggressive messages that are conveyed through electronic or digital media - is a growing area of concern.

To address this, schools have in place measures such as providing accessible channels for students to safely report bullying cases, and investigating and following up promptly on reported cases.

In severe cases, Mr Ng said that parents would be called in by schools for follow-up action such as counselling.

Non-Constituency MP Leon Perera asked if there is a hotline for students who have reservations about approaching teachers or friends.

Mr Ng said the best way to deal with bullying incidents is through the "peer network" or "teacher network", but acknowledged that a national hotline for bullied children would be a "useful medium".