

SOCIETY

School Bullying in Singapore Spurs Outrage

Furor reaches all the way to new prime minister

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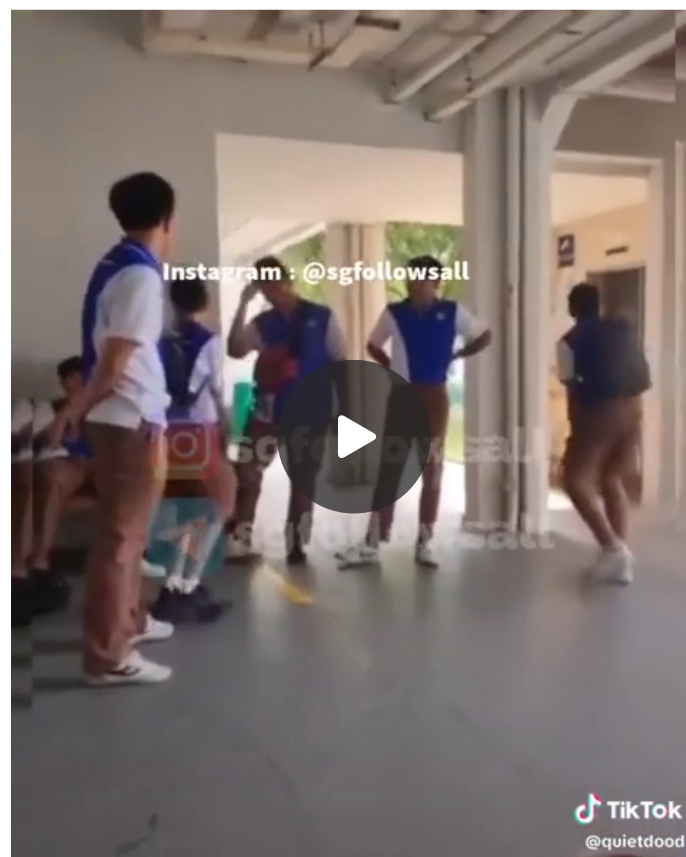


The recent uploading of a video onto social media documenting the physical bullying of a teenage student by his peers in Singapore has kicked up unprecedented outrage among parents with kids of school age, with emails calling for state intervention sent not just to the Minister of Education Chan Chun Sing but as far up the chain to Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and President Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

The incident, at Bukit View Secondary School in Singapore's western region, is far from an isolated one in the pre-tertiary state education system, parents say, with the groundswell of outrage illustrative of the extent to which childhood bullying experiences

are entrenched within the lives of successive generations of Singaporeans. It is also having an impact on the ruling People's Action Party, with its concerns over retaining the vote of lower to middle-class parents with children in school because of their wish to raise the country's birth rate. Talk of not voting for the PAP in the coming election is appearing on local online forums because of the way this affair is being handled.

According to [state media reports](#), on September 15 an anonymous user posted a short, brutal video clip described as dating from October 2023 onto social media, calling for it to go viral. In the video, five teenage students of various ages wearing the uniform of Bukit View Secondary School were shown at the void deck of a public housing tower block surrounding another younger schoolmate when suddenly one of them sent a flying kick into the spine of the victim. The video ended with the cries of the victim who was now laid out on the floor after first hitting his head against a nearby wall, with mocking laughter from the onlooking students.





This is not the only incident of physical bullying that caught national headlines in Singapore this year. This August, Singapore police arrested several teenagers from a state-run technical college who were also [filmed on video as they slapped, punched, and kicked a victim in a stairwell](#). Statements by the school's senior management and the police afterwards decried the bullying, saying disciplinary action up to criminal charges for rioting, unlawful assembly and voluntarily causing hurt would be levied against the perpetrators.

Bullying, many parents say, exists on a large scale at least partly because people are taught to keep quiet about it, to be stalwart in the face of adversity as part of the Singaporean ethos. A [2022 study by the Singapore Children's Society](#) found that as many as one in four secondary school students surveyed was a victim of bullying, at least twice a month over a span of one school year, and that males and females were just as likely to be bullied. More Malays were victims compared to the other major ethnic groups. Bullies and their victims tended to be of the same gender, the same ethnic group, and in the same class at school.

The original Tiktok video of the Bukit View Secondary School bullying affair went viral on September 16 with more than 600,000 views and 4,000 comments before being mysteriously deleted a day later. Subsequent reposts on other social media sites such as Facebook or Reddit were also taken down around the same time amid speculation on whether the videos had been subjected to either significant reports submitted by individuals with vested interests or government intervention. However, the takedowns came too late to limit the spread within society. Multiple police reports were filed not just by the victim's parents but angry public members who were themselves parents, with emails calling for state intervention sent not just to the Minister of Education Chan Chun Sing but up the chain to Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and President Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

A major accelerant in igniting this rare level of public outrage regarding childhood bullying in school has been what is perceived to be efforts at censorship and lack of accountability from the school's senior management as well as the wider educational authority. The first reaction by the school on Sunday night was to go into siege mode. Critical comments were deleted from the school's [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) pages. One-star reviews left on the school's Google Maps profile criticizing the bullying scandal and subsequent comment censorship efforts were also removed.

A subsequent statement released by its principal Jaswant Singh the next day did little to quell public anger. On Monday, Singh said the incident hadn't been previously notified to him or his teachers as it occurred outside school premises a year ago. "Following the circulation of the video, the school immediately checked in on the well-being of the student, who did not report any injuries at that time. The school takes a serious view of such misbehavior and will counsel the students involved as well as mete out disciplinary actions where appropriate."

[Online screenshots](#) were also posted by various individuals who had emailed Education Minister Chan showing the terse two-line reply to their petitions for higher-level intervention: "Thank you for your email to Minister Chan. We note your concern and have conveyed it to the relevant department. Regards, MOE Feedback Team."

The revelation that the victim told neither the school nor his parents of the assault, given the potential for serious injury, for almost a year strongly indicates he must have

felt unsafe in reporting the abuse he suffered, considered by critics to be an indictment of the toxic mental health environment in which many children grow and study in. In 2022 Singapore reported that one-third of youths aged 10 to 29 who died between 2018 and 2022 [did so from suicide](#). Studies in 2008 and 2010 released by the Singapore Children's Society documented the phenomenon of school bullying in the country, with [one in four secondary school students](#) experiencing bullying and only a [third of the bullied respondents subsequently seeking help](#).

A Singaporean parent choosing to remain anonymous told Asia Sentinel that, "It's disappointing to see students bullied and no actions taken without parents' intervention. If this is going to be a parent's constant responsibility to initiate any actions in bullying cases, schools have to step up to ensure safety as part of an educational environment. No parent will choose to escalate to higher authorities if the school can contain or address the situation fast enough."

Various online accounts have expressed similar sentiments, with some parents claiming that they were heavily leaned on by school principals to retract or not make police reports and petitions for ministry-level state interventions when they were frustrated with the lack of accountability, justice, or protection for their children who were bullied in school. Some parents have been driven to take vigilante action to protect their children as a result.

This is demonstrated in April 2019 when a 44-year-old father was [jailed for seven weeks](#) after fracturing the rib of a 10-year-old boy who bullied his son in school. In his defense statement, the father revealed that he had previously reported the bullying to a teacher several times only to be so frustrated by the lack of action that he considered switching schools for his son before deciding to take action himself.

The inability of the childhood education system to deal with bullying is demonstrated by the father's claim that his son's bully went around after being assaulted telling others in school that "playing with (the boy) will cause them to be fractured by (his) dad." The judge and prosecutor said they couldn't set a precedent for outraged parents "taking justice into their own hands" for their children no matter how let down they felt by schoolteachers or senior management.

This admonition to “trust the system framework” in reporting bullying incidents to adult authorities ignores the pervasive public narrative exemplified by the latest Bukit View Secondary bullying scandal of systemic reputational damage limitation by school senior leaders in Singapore via public information suppression and evasive, woolly crisis communication that offer no accountability and little hope for justice to the victims.

It also ignores how some adults in positions of authority in schools and daycare centers can themselves be bullies. In May 2024 a woman working at a childcare center was charged with [stabbing a six-year-old boy in the head multiple times with a pen](#), and in August 2023 pre-school teachers working at two different Kinderland centers were arrested for hitting children under their care. In a rare case of [accountability under public pressure and scrutiny](#), the government charged both teachers for child abuse, removed and banned the preschool principal involved from working with children, and restricted the licensing of the two involved to six-month renewal limits on top of a S\$10,000 (US\$7,716) fine for the preschool company.

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