In the wake of several student suicides due to bullying in Massachusetts and across the country, school administrators and concerned parents are examining the role of communications technology, such as text messaging and social networking sites, in harassment among youths. The Cyber-Bullying Bill seeks to require schools to create programs to educate staff, students, and families about this new form of bullying, which can take place both in and outside of the school.

The Cyber-Bullying Bill

Daniela Montoya-Fontalvo ’11
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The Bill

Final Draft S2404: “An Act relative to bullying in schools”

Elevator Speech

A safe school environment for children is essential. Right now students are in a crisis because of cyber-bullying. Over the last couple of years, the rate of cyber-bullying has increased a tremendous amount due to a rise in student access to technological devices.

Were you aware of the fact that an astounding number of young people, 1 in 3 teenagers and 1 of 6 pre-teenagers have been victims of cyber bullying? So many stories of the horrors of cyber-bullying and its rising prevalence have reached the media and this is why we are advocating on behalf of this bill. The problem that was once bullying in schools now follows children home with them to their computers and on their cell phones.

The story of Phoebe Prince, the 15-year-old in South Hadley who killed herself after being continuously taunted on-line, is just one that has left parents, students, and teachers wondering how to prevent this from happening again.

With the use of cell phones, social networking sites, and other technology on the rise, it is so important that each school have a way of educating students on appropriate conduct. It is similarly crucial that parents understand these technologies as well as how to monitor their children’s use of them.

Additionally, each school must have in place methods of reporting, regulating, and punishment in order to stop cyber-bullying from becoming more dangerous and more pervasive.
You can help by supporting legislation in order to get S2313/H483 unanimously passed so that our children will not have to fear constant harassment and intentional harm over the Internet and other technological devices.

Op-Ed Piece

Parents: Watch Your Children's Backs!

Much of the noise surrounding 15-year-old Phoebe Prince’s death comes as a result of confusion about how a degree of tormenting that lead to suicide could have gone unnoticed and was not prevented by her teachers and school administrators. After all, such relentless persecution could not have happened anywhere else but in school, right? A child is protected at home, so it must have been the blindness of schools that led to Prince’s death.

News of Phoebe Prince—an Immigrant in South Hadley, MA—who committed suicide early this year, has spread around the world. Her suicide has set in motion incredible action including a unanimous bill passed in the Massachusetts State House. The bill aims to prevent the pain Prince endured, namely from cyber-bullying. Awareness of the incident and of the immense problems surrounding Prince’s suicide have been internationally broadcasted. Now, a court case is being held to charge the nine students responsible for actions that resulted in Prince’s death with criminal harassment and civil rights violations.

Unfortunately, the boundaries of bullying have been vastly expanded in recent years with the increase in use of social networking sites, computers, cellular phones, and many other electronic devices. A CTIA and Harris Interactive study shows that four out of five teens carry a cell phone, and there are 17 millions carriers of mobile devices. This marks a 40% increase in use since 2004. The result of this increase is that students are becoming more accessible to bullies since it is now possible to reach a victim wherever they go. Harassment now takes place over social networking sites such as facebook, from cell phone texting, and through online forums. This persecution is more anonymous and fast spreading than ever before. And it is so much more dangerous.

The recent bill passed unanimously by the Massachusetts Legislature requires all schools, both public and private, to establish education programs that will teach students, teachers, and parents about the dangers of cyber-bullying and how to prevent it. The bill requires that all schools have in place disciplinary procedures and reporting processes so that students are conscious of how to communicate problems to administrators and are aware of consequences. The bill requires that school officials—from bus drivers and cafeteria workers to teachers—report bullying to a school’s principal.

In an effort to put parents, students, and teachers on notice that no type of bullying will be tolerated in schools, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will be responsible for supporting education and awareness programs throughout the state. However, the budget will be small. Additionally, legislators who created the bill have been extremely wary of over-stepping First Amendment rights of free speech in attempting to monitor bullying that happens on personal electronic devices or from home. The bill has been called toothless because of its reluctance to take definitive disciplinary action on those students who torment others through cyber-bullying. There are steps that must be taken outside of the bill's provisions to support it and ensure its effectiveness.

The goal is to prevent physical and emotional harm from taking place both in school and at home. And therefore it is up to parents to be extremely aware and vigilant once children leave school grounds. A watchful parent must not shy away from the sometimes-confusing technology that their teenager is using. Rather parents must educate themselves so that there is an understanding of their child's use of technology. Children take their cues from the adults in their lives and so it is essential that parents demonstrate the type of respectful relationships that children must learn.

Parents, in cooperation with teachers and school administrators, are responsible for educating children in the technicalities of reporting bullying and consequences for slander. The Bullies now have a more permanent, hurtful, and vastly more public way of expressing their cruelty. The expectation must be very clear: cruelty will not be tolerated. Parents must actively create an environment of respectfulness and inclusiveness that will be instituted in the community and at school. Peer pressure from students must be on the side of being nice to each other so that children will intervene if they see bad behavior. Furthermore, the school must foster an environment where children should also feel compelled to speak to teachers and school administrators when they are bullied or see bullying without being afraid of being labeled as a snitch. These ideals of respectfulness must be learned at home and parents must lead the total climate change that must be established.

With children so often being more technologically savvy than their parents, it is essential that parents learn the basics of social networking sites and text messaging. It is further crucial for parents to monitor closely their children's usage of these technologies in order to take an active step toward ensuring that the internet is not abused.

Parents need to look at this issue as a mental health epidemic- our society has become such that parents hide
their head in the sand when it comes to the technology their children use and children have not learned to speak up for their friends who are being bullied. Parents must take a more active role. The State cannot mandate that the school go about controlling the flow of information at home so parents must not give their children free reign and should supervise their children’s actions.

**Excerpts from Campaign Journals**

**Daniela**
*From a meeting with school parents:*

“Before attending this event, I didn’t know what to expect. The issue of cyber bullying is a new topic that has quickly gained recognition. As more students are becoming victims to cyber bullying, schools are realizing that their job is not only to teach students the basics of education, but to also treat them how to be good citizens and to act in a moral way. Teachers, guidance counselors and parents attended this event. I feel that the purpose of the meeting, besides being educational, was also done in a sense of urgency.”

*From a meeting with Waltham Mayor Jeannette A. McCarthy:*

“I was very lucky to have the opportunity to meet with Mayor McCarthy of Waltham to discuss the issue of cyber bullying. Through my research over the last couple of weeks, I have noticed that she has had opinions regarding this issue. Her office was easily accessible and she was very approachable, open to any question that I had regarding cyber bullying and delving into stories from her own experiences as the Mayor of Waltham. She is a very interesting person that has much to say about issues like cyber bullying.”

“In today's world, a person can do whatever he or she wants with pure anonymity. Mayor McCarthy sees the ability to post anything on the internet while being anonymous as the true prince of darkness. A person can do anything and have no responsibility. These days, children are more technologically savvy than parents and because of this, parents often to not know how to deal with it unless they are equally savvy. Because of this, Mayor McCarthy believed that the issue of cyber bullying must be one that is dealt with at home and at school.”

**Rebecca**
*From a meeting with school parents:*

“Many parents were worried that they couldn’t control what happened in schools, where their children spent most of their days. Even if everyone was educated and aware, would there be an official plan of action to put in place the ideas that Alice spoke about? Here, Alice asked for the parents’ ideas regarding what schools should do. This seemed to worry parents even more. What might have been more effective would be a discussion about the cyber-bullying bill. If parents were made aware of the bill, their fears might be assuaged by the knowledge that the State was taking action to protect their children. Many parents I spoke to did not know much about the bill and were skeptical of what the government could do for them. Perhaps the sponsors of the meeting should have included a discussion of the bill in their presentation.”

*From a conversation with Superintendent Tony Pierantozzi:*

“In a later conversation, I asked him about the cyber-bullying bill and Mr. Pierantozzi expressed some worries about its implementation. He believed that the law would not actually solve anything unless the State Supreme Court took action. He found the language to be an infringement on first amendment rights. Mr. Pierantozzi felt that kids pick up their behavior from parents and a law would not change that. He saw the bill as too “huge and broadly worded, time-consuming, and full of negative language”. He was more in favor of programs that his schools already had in place that encouraged children to build healthy relationships with each other and to confide in a caring adult if they had troubles. “You cannot legislate decency, it needs to be taught day-to-day,” he said.”

**Update (September 2010)**

The bill was signed by Governor Patrick on May 3, 2010. It is now Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2010.

**For more information**

**Cyber-Bullying**

- Cyberbullying.us: [http://www.cyberbullying.us/resources.php#handouts](http://www.cyberbullying.us/resources.php#handouts)