

Let's take bullying offline: Legislation would make it a crime to send message causing fear

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Fairbanks Daily News-Miner editorial

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calls it an "emerging public health problem" facing young people. There's no vaccination available to prevent it. Nor is there a pill to cure someone who falls victim to it.

It's called "electronic aggression." Some simply call it "cyberbullying."

The CDC says a rising number of young people are harmed by it: "Youth can use electronic media to embarrass, harass or threaten their peers. Increasing numbers of teens and pre-teens are becoming victims of this new form of violence."

Electronic aggression, the CDC said, causes emotional distress and problems at school. It said young people who are victimized electronically are "very likely to also be victimized off-line" by being sexually harassed, suffering psychological or emotional abuse by a caregiver or being raped.

It seems young people are always online these days. And it's often without proper adult supervision, and that's when potentially devastating problems can occur.

The Alaska Legislature in 2011 passed a bill making it a crime to send someone an explicit photo of a person younger than 16. That new law differs from existing child pornography law because it covers a wider range of image categories.

Now a bill is up for a hearing to further clamp down on how electronic devices are used as a means of bullying someone. This one, Senate Bill 128 by Sen. Kevin Meyer, R-Anchorage, would make it a crime to send "an electronic communication that insults, taunts, challenges or intimidates a person under 18 years of age in a manner that subjects the person to the fear of physical injury, severe mental or emotional injury, or damage to the person's property."

The crime would be a class B misdemeanor, punishable by up to 90 days in jail.

Sen. Meyer, in his sponsor statement about the bill, notes that existing state law allows school districts to deal with some types of bullying. But he points out that bullying also occurs outside of school. "In some extreme cases," he writes, "cyberbullying has led to suicide."

It's long been known that adults prey on children through electronic means. The fact that children are attacking each other through electronic devices is what has most recently caught the attention of medical experts, educators, legislators and law enforcement authorities around the nation.

One challenge, should SB 128 become law, would be determining what constitutes electronic language that can cause a minor to fear injury. Kids often use foul language; that's not new. They use it among friends, so this isn't just about the actual words used. The intent of the person sending the communication would be the key part of any prosecution. SB 128 has hearings scheduled for Monday and Wednesday in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Kids have enough to worry about these days. Bullying exists at school and probably always will to some degree. Nevertheless, laws aimed at reducing the harm that can come via electronic communications should be pursued to at least reduce the number of ways through which bullying can occur.

Rebecca's Law Aims to Punish Bullying in Fla.

January 17, 2014



Rebecca Ann Sedwick

In honor of a 12-year-old girl who committed suicide after allegedly being bullied, two Florida politicians have introduced a bill that would make bullying a crime in the state.

"Rebecca's Law" is named for Rebecca Sedwick, who jumped to her death at an abandoned cement plant near her home in September 2013. The local sheriff accused a 12-year-old and a 14-year-old of harassing an intimidating Sedwick prior to her death, and charged both with felony aggravated stalking – the first time the statute had been used to combat bullying. The charges against the girls were later dropped.

If passed, "Rebecca's Law" would create a new category of criminal offense in the state: bullying, a misdemeanor; and aggravated bullying, a third-degree felony. Bullying is defined as "willfully, maliciously, and repeatedly" harassing another person. Someone guilty of aggravated bullying would have "willfully, maliciously, and repeatedly harasses or cyberbullies another person and makes a credible threat to that person."

Punishments for committing the offense of bullying would vary based on the degree, and could include a fine or jail time.

Fla. State Rep. Heather Fitzhagen, who sponsors the bill in the House of Representatives, told CBS News' Crimesider that she is not aware of other states that have codified anti-bullying statutes, but hopes that if the bill passes, the issue will "get traction across the nation."

Fitzhagen says that Sedwick's case hit particularly close to home for her because she has a 12-year-old daughter herself. She hopes the bill will spur discussion at schools, in families and among teens.

"I think this is going to raise awareness because now there is a consequence to this type of behavior," she says.

Fitzhagen says she has met with Sedwick's mother, Tricia Norman, who she calls "very brave."

Norman's attorney, Matt Morgan, has previously said that his client is considering lawsuits against the two girls who allegedly bullied her daughter, and the Polk County school district.

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Bossier City teen takes plea deal in cyberbullying suicide case

By KSLA Staff

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BOSSIER CITY, LA (KSLA) -

A Bossier City teen charged with felony criminal assistance to suicide in connection with the death of a bullied local teen has cut a deal with prosecutors and pleaded guilty to a lesser charge.

15-year-old Danielle Cox was a sophomore and Parkway High School in Bossier City. Her mother, Jessica Morton, says she had many hopes and dreams. She took her own life on May 24th, 2011. Her family says it was because of cyber-bullying.

Jason Thomas was 17 when he was first charged with cyberbullying following the death of 15-year-old fellow Parkway High School student Danielle Cox. He was accused of using a web site to "text bomb" Danielle, sending her more than 100 text messages in January 2011, encouraging her to kill herself. Hours later, she attempted to overdose on over-the-counter pain pills. She survived, was treated and returned to school, but her parents say she continued to struggle with the pain of the cyberbullying. She took her own life on May 24, 2011.

The cyberbullying charge was later upgraded to felony criminal assistance to suicide. Thomas was set to go to trial on that charge Monday. He would have faced up to 10 years in prison if convicted. Instead, he pleaded guilty to the original misdemeanor charge of cyberbullying in a deal that will keep him out of jail.

He was sentenced to 6 months, suspended, 1 year of probation and ordered to serve 24 hours of community service per month. Now 19, Thomas was also ordered to either stay in school full-time or have a full-time job and undergo monthly counseling sessions.

During sentencing Monday morning, Bossier district court judge Mike Nerren told Thomas that he could not order remorse or an apology, but he strongly recommended that he "take care of that as soon as possible." To that, Thomas replied that he was "prepared to do that now." Standing, Thomas took a deep breath and said, "I sincerely apologize for what I did,"

continuing on to say, "I was wrong on January 21, 2011. Nothing was right about it...I'm not proud of my actions. Thank you."

Thomas declined to comment following his sentencing Monday morning. The Cox family says they did not feel that Thomas' courtroom apology was sincere, but they say his sentencing is a step closer to closure.

Following their daughter's death, they created a Facebook group called Smiles for Danielle to raise awareness about what happened to her and to encourage a dialogue about cyber-bullying.

Hear more from the Cox family, and on the one major issue surrounding Thomas' conviction via plea that has yet to be resolved, tonight on KSLA News 12 at 5.

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Students Arrested for Cyber Bullying

Baton Rouge, LA - We all know about high school bullying but have you heard of cyber-bullying? It's real and three Loranger High School students have been arrested for it. As WAFB's Marie Centanni reports, student bullying may have gone too far.

Investigators with the Attorney General's High-Tech Crimes Unit say the situation started when a 15-year-old female student created a website called "Loranger's biggest queer.com." The website featured pictures of a 14-year-old male student. He responded with his own website, which investigators say included a list of students he called "The Preps," and poems so graphically violent, investigators say "they crossed the line."

Kris Wartelle with the Attorney General's Office said, "It sort of was like bullying on the Internet that got even worse, and we're lucky it didn't escalate to something even worse."

After seeing the boy's website, a concerned parent alerted the Tangipahoa Parish Sheriff's Office. The Attorney General's High Tech Crime Unit was contacted and began an immediate investigation. Authorities confiscated the student's computers.

Both students were arrested, as well as 18-year old Joseph Sanchez, who was charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Authorities say Sanchez helped the younger male set up and maintain his website. The pair called themselves the "8-Ballas," and targeted students they called "The Preps."

"When you have students making threats to other students or groups of students on the Internet, talking about killing someone or blowing up the school or shooting a certain group of people, when there's a feud like that and certain words are used," explains Wartelle, "That's when you worry about something escalating or becoming the next Columbine and these days you have to take threats seriously."

The school system is taking it seriously as well, and will decide Friday whether to expel the three students for the remainder of the school year. All of the students involved are honor students.

Cyber-stalking is a relative felony, which means a judge can decide if it is a misdemeanor or the more serious felony crime. It's punishable with a \$2,000 fine or one year imprisonment.

<http://www.wafb.com/story/2774728/students-arrested-for-cyber-bullying>

Officials: Suicidal Teen Was Cyber-bullied

Officials in Massachusetts believe there's been another deadly case of cyber-bullying in the apparent suicide of 15-year-old Phoebe Prince of South Hadley, Mass.

Prince moved last year to the area from Ireland. While making the transition to a new town and a new country, Prince, officials believe, became the target of intense cyber-bullying, which may have contributed to her apparent suicide.

CBS News correspondent **Whit Johnson** reports Prince seemed to be well-adjusted and happy, but underneath, friends say, the 15-year-old freshman was tormented -- a victim of cyber-bullying.

A friend who did not want to be identified told **CBS News**, "She was being bullied because she was pretty and people were just jealous."

Prince's classmate also said he was one of her closest friends, but she never revealed her pain.

Her friend said she was called an "Irish slut" and a whore.

According to a letter from Prince's high school principal, what began as "mean-spirited comments" at school soon found their way online, something experts say is far more dangerous.

Meline Kevorkian, the author of "101 Facts About Bullying" told **CBS News**, "Cyber-bullying can be so dangerous because it can lead to cyber-mobbing, which means kids can come together to attack another kid, 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

Prince was found dead in her South Hadley home on Jan. 14, just days before a big school dance.

The night after she died, fellow students held a candlelight vigil.

Prince's unidentified friend said, "It just makes me sad that it takes the life of a young teenager who had everything going for her to bring the community together to have them realize how bad bullying is."

This isn't the first time cyber-bullying has ended in death. In 2006, 13-year-old Megan Meier killed herself after being harassed on MySpace by a neighbor's mother, posing as a 16-year-old teenage boy.

The anonymity of the Internet, experts say, means parents should be even more vigilant.

Kevorkian said, "As a parent, the concern has to be that we're monitoring and we're really knowing what they're doing in the virtual world."

School officials say the incident is under investigation and some students have already been disciplined. Meanwhile, the family has flown Prince's body back to Ireland for burial.

Brittany Jordan, a 17-year-old cyber-bullying victim, appeared on "**The Early Show**." Tina Meier, the mother of Megan Meier, also appeared on the broadcast. Tina is the founder of the Megan Meier Foundation.

Jordan said Prince's story reminds her of how close she came to killing herself. Cyber-bullying, she

said, turned her into a "totally different person."

Jordan said she thought suicide was the only option because she'd been put down so much.

She said, "I thought that it was just the only thing I could do to get away from all of the hurt and pain."

Why didn't she ask for help?

Jordan said she didn't know what to do or say about the cyber-bullying attacks.

Tina, who has counseled Jordan, said her daughter was bullied in a different way than most cases. Megan, she said, was bullied over a two-hour period, while most cyber-bullying, she said, happens over a longer time. Tina said she was "very vigilant" with her daughter's online activities.

Tina said parents should have open communication with their kids and know what they're doing on the computer. She said it's important to know if your children have a Facebook and MySpace account, or both. She said parents should also know who their child's friends are online. Parents, she said, should also be on the lookout for any changes in their child's attitude.

She said trouble might be indicated if "they start having their grades drop and not wanting to go to school and not using their cell phone like they did before and not getting on the Internet like they did before and they're being isolated from their friends."

Tina said kids don't have to be depressed to get into a cyber-bullying situation.

She said, "These can be everyday kids who are going through their lives that can all of a sudden get in a situation that they are being cyber-bullied that can transform them into this situation, and it can be devastating for them."

Jordan said kids should "know that they are loved and that people care about them, and they can make it through this."

Tina added it's OK for kids to reach out to other people and talk about what they're going through.

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Compromise "cyberbullying" bill passes Legislature, goes to Gov. Jindal

By Ed Anderson, The Times-Picayune

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BATON ROUGE -- A compromise bill that creates the crime of "cyberbullying," or sending threatening or harassing messages by electronic means, to those under 17 cleared the Legislature today and now goes to Gov. Bobby Jindal for his approval or veto.

The House voted 89-0 today for House Bill 1259 by Rep. Roy Burrell, D-Shreveport; the Senate followed suit by a 36-0 vote.

Burrell's bill was rewritten in a six-member compromise committee after senators said the original version was too harsh and could land a teenager in jail for a prank or a "stupid mistake."

The new version of Burrell's bill says that if a youth under 17 receives a threatening or harassing message by cell phone, through an Internet chat room or other electronic means and the sender is over 17, the offender can face up to six months in jail, be fined up to \$500 or both.

If the offender and victim are both under 17, the sender can be ordered to undergo counseling with parents and teachers or others, Burrell said. If that doesn't do any good, the local district attorney can file criminal charges of "cyberbullying" and its misdemeanor penalties or the more serious charge of "cyberstalking," which can result in a felony conviction.

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