

TO PREVENT BULLYING—TAKE ACTION

Testimony in Support of Amending HB2578

by

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Talk is cheap!! Until school personnel are required to take action, no child who is being bullied is safe!

Since the Kansas Legislature passed 72-8256 into law in 2007 requiring school districts to have policies and plans to stop bullying in our schools, little has changed. Many schools are less safe. One-in-three teen deaths is the result of bullying and thousands of Kansas kids stay home from school each day out of fear.

So, at the December 2010 meeting of the State Board of Education, I moved to have prevention and disciplinary recommendations posted on the KSDE website to encourage school personnel to report and stop bullying plus hold them accountable, similar to our child abuse statute 38-2223. Instead, on February 8th, 2011 the Board only passed a Resolution to establish an Anti-Bullying Awareness Week. (See attached)

Then on September 23rd, 2011 a 14 year old girl named **Rhianna Morawitz hung herself by a belt in her bedroom closet after being repeatedly bullied at Northeast High School in Wichita. Her parents had tried for weeks before to get the school principal to stop other students from spiting in her hair, shoving her down the stairs and into lockers.** The cyberbullying from this small group of jealous girls was relentless. They even sent text messages taunting her to kill herself the day she committed suicide. Afterwards, the Principal denied knowing about the bullying. The girls who tormented and physically abused her were never disciplined or charged with any crime.

So, after meeting with Rhianna's parents and seeing the closet where she hung herself, I met with a group of parents and a Reviser to draft SB278. (See Attached) Just like laws which set minimum requirements for law enforcement and judges to follow, the New Sections in this 2012 bill can be used to amend HB2578 to include timelines for school personnel to report bullying and for the school principal to investigate after taking action to protect the child being bullied. Parents will be notified and the bullying behavior stopped.

FYI, Rhianna's parents posted an **online petition which over 7,000 other parents signed demanding that school bullying plan requirements be passed into Kansas law.** Just having a policy or a plan posted on a district's website does little to actually prevent or take action to stop bullying from tormenting any student.

But, even with thousands of parents demanding that their children be protected, a few school administrators claimed that they did not want to be held accountable. So, on February 15th, 2012, the Senate Education Committee voted to pass SB69 which requires school districts to just: (1) submit a copy of the district's plan to address bullying (currently required by state law) to the State Board of Education; (2) publish that plan on the district's website and distribute it annually to parents of children in the district; and (3) develop the plan through a process that includes representation of parents, school employees, school administrators and the community through the school site councils.

As drafted, HB2578 will not prevent bullying. Districts are already required to post their policy and plans on their websites. So, please amend HB2578 to include the minimum enforcement actions in SB278. Only then, will all Kansas students be protected from bullying and fewer students will commit suicide.

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Father of Wichita girl who committed suicide makes plea for anti-bullying bill

Associated Press -- By John Milburn – 1/31/2012



TOPEKA — The father of a Wichita girl who committed suicide after being repeatedly bullied urged Kansas senators on Tuesday to strengthen the state’s anti-bullying laws.

Rick Morawitz told the Senate Education Committee that a 2007 state law doesn’t go far enough to protect students who are victims of bullying.

His 14-year-old daughter, Rhianna, hanged herself in her bedroom in September after what her father said was sustained harassment at school and online.

“I didn’t expect what I found,” Morawitz said. He also said his daughter was bullied for at least four years, and it became worse when statements about her were posted on the Internet.

“Now if somebody wants to bully your child, it’s 24/7. It doesn’t stop,” said Morawitz, who added that he has gathered more than 7,000 signatures for a petition to support changing the law.

State law currently says each school district must have an anti-bullying policy, but it doesn’t set minimum requirements for what the policy must contain, other than it must call for training of staff and students.

The committee is considering legislation to require more reporting by school districts under a uniform anti-bullying policy and to shorten the timeline for investigations. It also requires districts to report incidents to the State Board of Education.

The new legislation would define bullying as physical contact, verbal and nonverbal expressions and uses of electronic communication devices to harass, intimidate or harm other students or school employees.

Walt Chappell, a Wichita member of the State Board of Education, said the proposal’s goal is to improve the law by requiring districts to do a better job of reporting the scope of bullying and take quick action. Chappell said, “As elected officials and educators, our first obligation to Kansas parents is to make sure their child is safe.”

He said the bill would protect students and teachers from being bullied by students. Districts would be encouraged to develop a discipline policy that would use expelling a student from school or a “zero-tolerance” stance as a last resort.