

Bee Column
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School Bullying Needs to Stop, New Law to Take Effect July 2012

We were all saddened to hear about the preventable death of Williamsville North High School freshman Jamey Rodemeyer. Jamey committed suicide nearly two weeks ago after years of being bullied by other students at school. Shortly after the media reported on his death discussions about bullying resurfaced, not only in the news, but also around the dinner table at home.

Unfortunately, over the years there has been an increase in the number of media headlines that tell of young people committing suicide. In January 2010, the tragic death of Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old teenager living in Massachusetts, made national news after she took her own life because she had been harassed by other students during school and then again at home by threatening messages left on her Facebook page and cell phone. It's unfortunate that social media and electronic devices are being used to bully children beyond the school walls where an administrator or teacher has the ability to put an end to the harassment. With the rapid growth of ever-evolving technology, young people can no longer escape the torment by going home at the end of the day. Cell phones and social networking sites enable the bullying to continue any time of the day via the home computer and electronic messaging devices. Astonishing statistics show that suicide is the third leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

There has been heightened awareness of the psychological effects bullying can have on impressionable youth, and statistics illustrate that bullying and depression often go hand-in-hand. However, more needs to be done to stop the teasing, harassment and physical altercations that can be associated with the acts of bullying in schools, on the bus or playground, and even at home. Parents, teachers and other role models need to be aware of the warning signs, which can include unexplained cuts, bruises and scratches; torn or damaged articles of clothing or books; a child who suddenly becomes afraid of going to school; has lost an interest in school work or has a sudden drop in grades; appears sad or depressed; complains of frequent headaches or other ailments; has trouble sleeping; or has a loss of appetite.

We in the New York State Legislature enacted the Dignity for All Students Act last year, which will take effect on July 1, 2012. The new law will require school districts to create policies and guidelines that include requirements intended to create a school environment that is free from discrimination and harassment. School districts will also be tasked with creating school training programs to discourage students from discriminating against and harassing other young scholars. Also, at least one staff member at each school will be required to attend an intensive training program. This person will become the school's designated contact for handling bullying. He or she will be trained to recognize

and respond effectively to harassment and bullying, and implement strategies to prevent it. A statewide task force has been working on guidelines and model programs for schools to emulate and adapt to their students and staff members come July 1, 2012.

In the meantime, I encourage parents to monitor your child's activities on the computer and cell phone. Talk to your child daily, ask questions, and if you suspect your child is being bullied, contact the school and set up an appointment with a guidance counselor, teacher or principal.

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