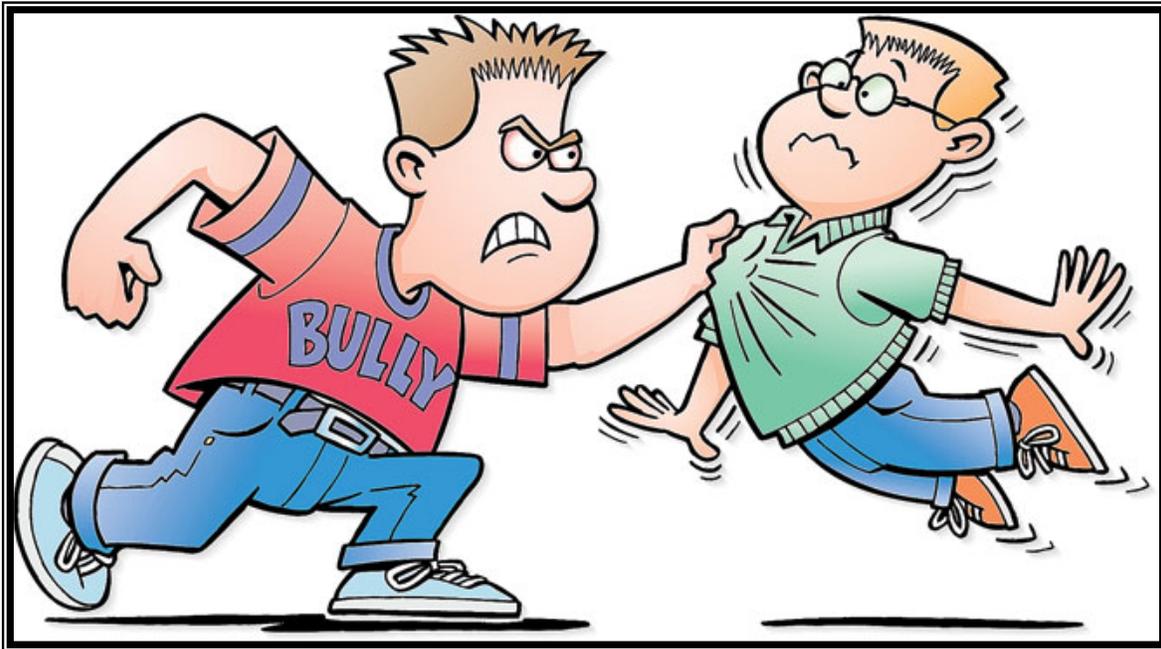


THE PROBLEM OF BULLYING

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Policies in place locally to deal with conflicts in schools

The death of Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old who committed suicide after repeated bullying by classmates in South Hadley, Mass., has sent ripples throughout the nation's school systems.

The types of bullying that are seen throughout the country can have one of three effects. The first can result in suicide, as in the most recent case. The second can turn into what has been experienced in Columbine High School in Colorado where bullied students turned guns on classmates and teachers. That was also seen closer to home at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro.

The third is what many school systems try to enact: a policy that is used where teachers and administrators can identify any bullying and put a stop to it before tragedy happens.

Each school in Saline County has a strict policy on bullying, but it is putting it into practice that is important, according to Dan Jordan, director of personnel and student services.

"We are very cognizant to stay on top of anything we see going on," Jordan said. "We look at our policy every year and make amendments when we need to, but we are very confident in the policy that we have and in the staff and students we have to carry it out."

In the most recent case in Massachusetts, the administration has come under fire for not doing enough to stop Prince's harassment.

According to court documents filed in connection with charges against six South Hadley High School students, new questions were raised about how much school officials knew about the bullying. They also provide a glimpse into the

final, tortured hours of Prince's life shortly before the 15-year-old hanged herself at home Jan. 14.

On Jan. 7, according to the documents, Prince went to a school administrator after learning that one of the defendants, Flannery Mullins, had told fellow students that she was going to "beat Phoebe up" and that she "needed to watch out at break after second block."

The documents do not reveal the official to whom Prince spoke or provide details of the conversation.

A witness who was interviewed by investigators said Prince had gone to administrators because she was "scared and wanted to go home." After the meeting, the witness said Prince returned to class, and said that no action was going to be taken and that "she was still going to get beat up."

In a recent interview, Superintendent Gus Sayer said school administrators were not aware of the bullying until Jan. 7, a week before Prince committed suicide. On that day, two teachers reported separate bullying incidents to the principal, Sayer said.

In one incident, a student walked into Prince's classroom and yelled at her. In the other, a teacher overheard several students in the cafeteria making remarks about Prince "that appeared to be threatening."

"Even though they weren't made to her directly, he reported that to the principal," Sayer said. The principal "took immediately disciplinary action against both students," Sayer said. He would not say what kind of action was taken, citing school privacy rules. District Attorney Elizabeth Scheibel has said the inaction of school officials was troublesome but not criminal.

Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick said that "adults did not seem to have acted like adults" in the case. He did not distinguish between school administrators and the parents of the teens charged.

Prosecutors said Prince, an Irish immigrant, endured months of verbal assaults and threats after she briefly dated a popular boy. She was harassed mostly in school, but also on Facebook and through other electronic forms.

The insults included being called an "Irish slut," the papers say. The documents detail in length the final 24 hours of the girl's life. On Jan. 13, Prince told a confidant that school "has been close to intolerable lately."

On the day of her death, according to the documents, Prince was in the school library at the same time as three of the charged teens — Sean Mulveyhill, Kayla Narey and Ashley Longe. Witnesses told investigators that Prince was subjected to crude sexual taunts from Longe, including, that day, "Irish whore."

At the end of the school day Jan. 14, witnesses said Prince was again subjected to verbal abuse as she walked out of the building. After Prince had left school grounds, a witness said Longe, as she rode by in a friend's car, threw an empty beverage can at Prince and started laughing.

According to the documents, Prince was crying as she walked home. Investigators said she exchanged several text messages with a friend about two hours before her death, in which she discussed the verbal abuse she had received that day and the ongoing taunts.

Later in the day, Prince's body was found hanging in a rear stairwell of her family's

apartment. Although the result of cases like Prince's are rare, the problem with bullying is one every school district must face. In Benton's policy, bullying is defined as physical harm to a student, school employee or damage to school property, substantial interference with a student's education or with an employee's role in education, a hostile educational environment or a substantial disruption of the operation of the school.

Benton also has categories of bullying, which also include electronic acts as well as verbal and physical taunts. For those teachers who must identify and deal with bullying, examples such as sarcasm, pointed questions, mocking, demeaning humor blackmail, deliberate physical contact and non-verbal intimidation are pointed out in the policy.

More than 40 states have anti-bullying laws that generally require schools to adopt a set of preventive policies. But Marlene Snyder of Clemson University's Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life said laws and policies don't necessarily help if schools don't follow through with intensive training for teachers and staff. "In defense of teachers, very few of them have ever had training on bullying prevention, much less how to intervene without making the situation worse," she said. "Some people don't understand

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the dramatic and devastating effect that this kind of treatment can have on a child."

Massachusetts is one of only seven states without a specific law targeting school bullying, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. The Legislature cited Phoebe's death and the apparent suicide of 11-year-old Carl Walker-Hoover of Springfield last year in passing anti-bullying legislation earlier this month. The Legislature still needs to approve a final version before sending it to the governor. Many parents complain that the laws aren't enforced consistently and that school officials don't do enough to remove bullies from schools. Ted Mathews, a South Hadley parent who said his 13-year-old son was harassed in school several years ago, said he doesn't understand why school administrators did not intervene. "Bottom line is, they could have done something, but they didn't," Mathews said. "My personal belief is if you're going to hold these kids accountable, then you've got to hold these adults accountable, too. Everybody's got an excuse, but it doesn't bring her back."

In Saline County, bullying may still be a problem, but officials believe that it is one that is dealt with at the highest priority so that needless tragedies do not occur. "We discuss bullying every year," Jordan said. "We make sure everyone knows what to do and how to deal with it."