

Anti-bully bill won't fully protect students, MPP says

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A proposed new law forcing teachers to report bullying incidents doesn't go far enough – nor is it happening quickly enough, says Newmarket-Aurora Progressive Conservative MPP Frank Klees.

"It's very disappointing the way this has been tabled," Mr. Klees said after the bill was introduced to the legislature Thursday. "This is a serious issue that has been dragging on for a number of years ... and for some inexplicable reason, this amendment now won't take effect for yet another year. I'm sure parents across the province will be equally disappointed."

The bill, which amends the Education Act, would require teachers to report serious student incidents like bullying to the principal. It would also require principals to contact the victim's parents. If school staff fail to report it, they could be subject to school board discipline.

The Ontario government introduced the legislation to try to address what it calls a "reporting gap" between principals, teachers and parents when student violence occurs.

Stu Auty, member of the Safe Schools Action Team and president of the Canadian Safe School Network, calls it "another step in the right direction to improve school safety. Parents and principals need to know what is happening in our schools so appropriate action can be taken."

But Mr. Klees said the proposed law falls short of what is required to address the problem.

"It's unconscionable that by the time this gets implemented another year will have passed and they've given us no logical explanation why."

According to Liz Sandals, chair of the Safe Schools Action Team and Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education, the implementation date of Feb. 1, 2010 was set to coincide with the start of the second school semester.

"I know it sounds like a long time, but it's actually very standard," she said. "We obviously have no control over how quickly this bill will pass."

Mr. Klees, who took an interest in the bullying issue after an incident at

a Newmarket Catholic school involving two older students assaulting a younger student with a belt, also criticized the proposed legislation for leaving too much discretion up to the principals.

In the Newmarket incident, parents of the six-year-old had not been told their son was assaulted with a belt by two 13-year-old males in a school washroom. The parents learned of the assault from the boy's sister; the principal told them she would not be reporting the incident to police, Mr. Klees said.

The offenders were later charged in connection with the assault and not allowed to return to the school. The Catholic board admitted to a breach of protocol and promised to use the incident to re-enforce protocols with all principals.

Since learning of that incident, Mr. Klees has been urging the province to force schools to report student-on-student violence. Conservative MPPs Joyce Savoline (Burlington) and Christine Elliott (Whitby-Oshawa) have also raised the issue of mandatory reporting.

"After the nightmare my son and our entire family have lived through, we believe this legislation is a good step, but only half a step."

"This can no longer be kept like a dirty little secret in our schools," Ms Savoline said in a heated exchange with Education Minister Kathleen Wynne Tuesday.

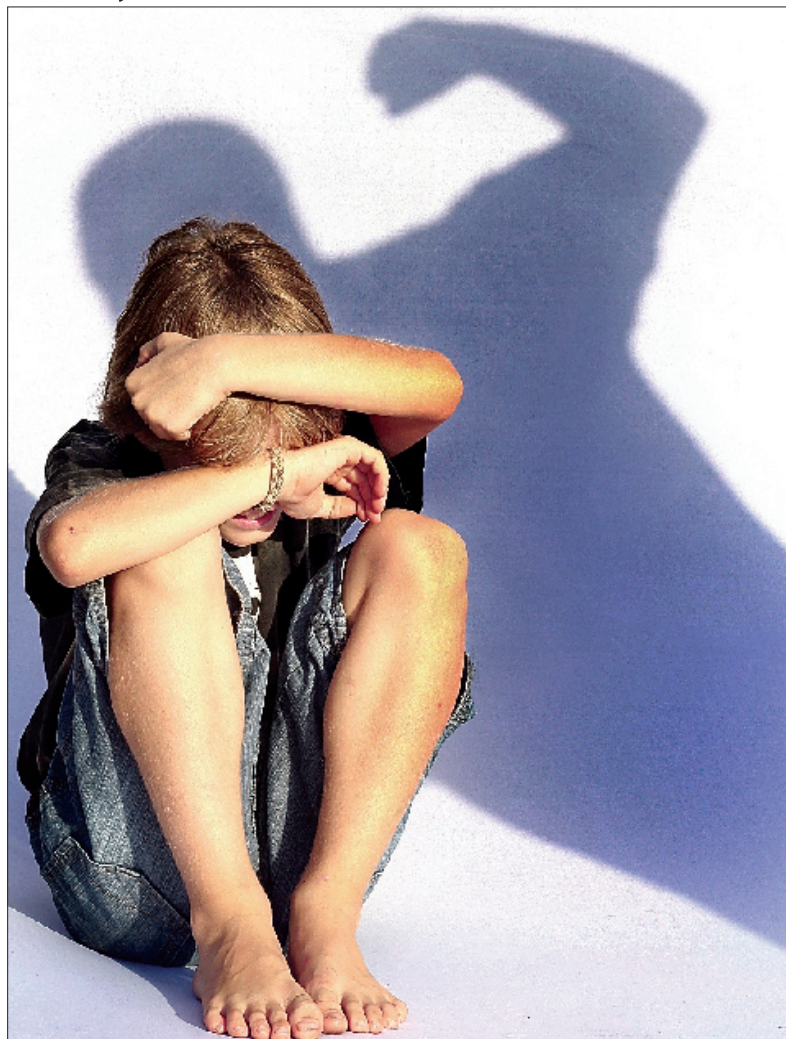
Klees said he was disappointed the new amendment tabled Mar. 12 only requires reporting to principals – it does not include mandatory reporting to police.

But Ms Sandals said it is not necessary. "The rules around police reporting are already quite clear," Ms Sandals said. "All boards have police protocols that comply with provincial guidelines."

She admits there are some instances where those guidelines are not being followed and in those cases "an awareness raising needs to happen."

In York Region public schools, "incidents are already being reported," said board spokesperson Lucia Cascioli. "We have policies and procedures in place and they're being dealt with appropriately."

Catholic school board spokesperson Joann MacDonald said her board is reviewing the new bill and is "pleased to take any steps to enhance school safety." She noted her board



Despite Safe Schools policies in all York Region schools, heartbreaking incidents of physical violence, verbal and online intimidation and bullying of all kinds is still happening at every grade level. Queen's Park is implementing a new bullying reporting law next year, but some say that's not enough.

also already has many strategies in place.

But Mr. Klees said more is needed. Leaving mandatory police reporting out of the law is "a huge mistake", he said, and he accused the Minister of giving in to the Ontario Principals' Council. The council has said that "criminalizing students for their involvement in minor altercations" is an over-reaction.

The bill tabled this week also gives principals the ability to decide not to notify parents if the principal thinks it will put

the pupil at risk of harm from his parent of guardian.

Ms. Sandals said this is in response to concerns from victims of homophobic bullying who worried that if their parents found out they were gay, they'd be kicked out of the house. "We need to have some discretion so that we're not making a bad situation worse."

"Right now the ultimate decision [to report to police] is usually with the principal. And they make mistakes; no one's perfect. If it were mandatory, we wouldn't have to worry if the principal makes the wrong choice."

"I'm sure most parents in this province would say they don't want to give any principal any reason not to report violence," said Mr. Klees. "It's an escape being

given to the principal to allow him not to report it. All he has to do is say he thought the child would be at risk."

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Karen Sebben, whose son Daniel suffered years of bullying at his Newmarket high school, said it's time to remove the decision-making powers from principals' hands – for their own protection.

"Right now the ultimate decision [to report to police] is usually with the principal," she said. "And they make mistakes; no one's perfect. If it were mandatory, we wouldn't have to worry if the principal makes the wrong choice. We should take the decision right out of their hands."

"After the nightmare my son and our entire family have lived through, we believe this legislation is a good step, but only half a step."

Also included in the proposed amendment are provisions requiring school staff to intervene in "inappropriate, disrespectful behaviour among students."

"If a teacher walking down the halls passes a gang of kids, for example, and overhears them making racist or homophobic or sexist slurs, the teacher would be required to intervene," Sandals explained.

When asked how this would be enforced, Ms Sandals said "it's not a matter of enforcement; it's making expectations clear."

BULLYING IN OUR SCHOOLS:

Watch for a series of investigative stories on bullying in our schools starting next week.

They are heartwrenching, frustrating stories about a Grade 1 boy terrorizing, bullying and stomping on a Richmond Hill classmate for small, imagined transgressions such as wearing the "wrong" T-shirts. His mother fought with school administrators to protect her child, but in the end transferred him to another public school.

Another Richmond Hill mother started a Facebook group to deal with bullying after her daughter was tormented for years - physically and through the internet - in her Catholic elementary school.

Yet another Newmarket student bullied in high school turned to drugs and even attempted suicide.

These students and their families want stronger policies and laws to stop bullying in all schools.