



Legislation won't stop bullying

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By Peter Jon Mitchell, guest columnist

Ontario's government has announced it will bar any school, separate or public, from vetoing the name Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) for school-based anti-bullying clubs.

While nearly everyone believes more should be done to stop bullying, this action shows even consensus issues can be mangled in the political sphere.

The GSA issue is important because it has larger implications for Catholic and religious education.

But the debate has simplified a complex bill down to a single issue, obscuring the reality legislating against bullying may not stop bullies.

The real question is whether laws against bullying are effective public policy? Do anti-bullying bills stop children from bullying?

Over 100 pieces of anti-bullying legislation have been passed in the U.S. over the last decade, yet there is little evidence this has altered student behaviour.

A 2009 Associated Press review of anti-bullying laws found they were failing to address repeated bullying.

AP also found many jurisdictions which legislated the enforcement of school board policies were unable to ensure they were being followed.

In Canada, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia have introduced anti-bullying laws, with other provinces and territories promising to explore the idea.

But anti-bullying legislation is only one step in a long line of provincial initiatives. There has been significant funding dedicated to the issue with insufficient monitoring of results.

For example, Ontario introduced a bullying prevention plan in 2005 that included \$8 million for anti-bullying materials and \$1 million for a partnership with Kids Help Phone.

In addition, between 2007 and 2010, the province spent \$150 million on safe school programs.

Yet a 2010 report by the auditor general noted the government dispersed funds inefficiently and did not sufficiently track the impact of the spending.

A similar situation exists in Quebec, where legislators announced a three-year, \$16.8-million anti-violence plan that included anti-bullying initiatives in 2008. The government simultaneously promised to produce a portrait of violence in Quebec schools that has yet to be completed.

Every province has some measures to address bullying, yet the issue remains a serious one, despite years of funding provincial initiatives.

The bigger problem is that bullying is a complex issue requiring the engagement of parents, extended family, students and educators.

Laws may provide clear definitions of bullying, mandate the need for policies, assign responsibility and empower educators with disciplinary tools, but it is community-level involvement that will best stop bullying.

What should governments do?

The provinces have a history of mandating and funding anti-bully initiatives without any robust evaluation of them.

Before rushing to legislate, governments should begin by reviewing existing policies and funding commitments. Legislating existing policies or building upon previous policies without evaluation is not prudent.

If provinces are committed to legislating on bullying, they must ensure school communities have the autonomy to customize community-specific programs. The best ideas are likely to come from those closest to the problem.

Finally, policymakers must communicate clear, pragmatic expectations of the legislation.

The law has a limited role in addressing bullying and legislation alone will not end bullying in schools.

Bullying requires action, but rushing to legislate schoolyard relationships is unproven territory that can amount to little more than political posturing.

The social health of a school community will not be determined by government, but by parents, students and educators who are already invested in their local school.

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