

NATIONAL POST

Bullying kids into being whistleblowers: Report calls Alberta's new law 'wrongheaded'

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It's being called the toughest anti-bullying legislation in the country, but Alberta's new Education Act – which many predict will set the tone for the rest of Canada – is being blasted by a family research group.

In a report that was to be released Monday, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada pans the very thing many observers have praised: giving schools the authority to suspend complacent bystanders to bullying. A senior researcher calls the approach "wrongheaded," arguing that it paints a picture of absentee parents who have no part or power in the solution.

"It's essentially saying that as adults, we've left the playground, and that it's up to kids to police bullies on behalf of the school and parents," says Peter Jon Mitchell, the report's author. "Certainly there might be room for bystanders' (involvement), but I hope we're not passing the buck to kids and saying, 'Solve your own problems.'"

Alberta's newly adopted legislation, which some say could set the standard for other provinces, requires that students "refrain from, report and not tolerate bullying or bullying behaviour directed toward others in the school, whether or not it occurs within the school building, during the school day or by electronic means."

The revised code of conduct has been praised by education insiders for its stiff stance, with accountability measures in place for schools and students alike. The IMFC, however, contends that placing an enforcement onus on kids may actually increase their vulnerability to harm.

Senior researcher Mitchell says the bottom line is that "government makes a lousy parent," and calls for less emphasis on refereeing and more emphasis on positive relationships between kids and adults.

"Bullying is a relational issue requiring a relational response," he says. "It's not that (law-makers) shouldn't be involved; it's that involvement should be limited, with policies that empower parents instead of having the opposite effect."

Notably, one of the most vocal Canadian opponents of passive-bystander culture shares a similar opinion.

Brenda Morrison, associate professor of criminology at Simon Fraser University, says the misstep with the new legislation is that it threatens students into reporting bullying rather than empowering them to do so – a strategy she believes exacerbates the problem.

"These heavy sanctions actually create more of a culture of fear in schools," says Morrison, a bullying expert. "We want kids to voluntarily step up for all the right reasons, because they're good citizens."

Morrison says the last thing Canada needs "is another big stick." She believes a key challenge will be finding ways of engaging people on the issue at all levels – students, teachers, parents and organizations – to create "communities of care" that instil a sense of belonging in classrooms.

To do that, however, the IMFC reports that the widening generation gap is in critical need of closing.

"Youth have their own culture where adults, for the most part, aren't present," says report author Mitchell. "(As such), many of our approaches to bullying are akin to refereeing a soccer match from outside the stadium."