

Anti-bullying legislation step in right direction, advocates say

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New anti-bullying legislation coming to Ontario schools in September is a step in the right direction, but hopes that it will eliminate bullying completely are unrealistic, say education advocates.

"I'm not really sure you can eradicate it," admits Annie Kidder, executive director of the Toronto-based group People for Education.

Nonetheless, she says, the Accepting Schools Act, which [passed last month in the Ontario legislature](#), gives school administrators and teachers an opportunity to address not only victims of bullying, but the bullies themselves.

Kidder says this distinction shows that lawmakers get the big picture — that bullying is a complex problem that doesn't just go away by punishing the perpetrators.

'Maybe I was a pain in your ass to call every day but this is my daughter. I don't want her to hurt herself because of this.'

—Kathy Lindsay

"What we really need to be working on in our schools is kids' mental and social

health, because bullying is really a relationship in a way," she says. "We have to deal with the bullied and the bullies."

According to Bullying Canada, one in 10 children has bullied others while as many as a quarter of all students in Grade 4 to Grade 6 have been bullied.

High profile cases in Ontario, Alberta, N.B., B.C.

This issue has been a hot topic lately following a number of recent high-profile cases.

Earlier this year, [a 13-year-old boy was acquitted](#) of robbing and assaulting 11-year-old Mitchell Wilson in a high-profile bullying case that garnered widespread attention. Wilson, who suffered from muscular dystrophy, killed himself last September.

In April, a school board in New Brunswick assigned [a full-time teacher's aide to escort a Grade 7 boy](#) who claimed he was being teased for being flamboyant and overweight. Critics called the practice too extreme.

Then this past June, police in Fort McMurray, Alta., reported that a 14-year-old boy was barely responsive and had his jaw bone shattered following [a fight involving up to 60 high school students](#).

The altercation was believed to have started with bullying. In response, provinces like Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and British Columbia have recently reviewed how they tackle this issue.

Some of the new policies included establishing a yearly anti-bullying awareness week, hiring special co-ordinators and ensuring that school principals report all incidents to board superintendents.

[British Columbia's recent \\$2-million strategy](#) also involved a smartphone application that allows students to report incidents anonymously and give teachers one professional development day a year to address anti-bullying strategies.

Ontario's Bill 13 encompassed many of these aspects, including a policy that ensures parents of bullies and victims are notified right away.

Controversial with Catholic groups

Yet since its inception, the bill has met with controversy.

A number of outspoken Catholic groups [have criticized it](#) as legislation designed to force schools to adopt Gay Straight Alliance clubs to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students.

The act does include such a policy, but more importantly, says Kidder, it outlines the need for schools to define and establish their own anti-bullying strategies and to treat each incident on a case-by-case basis.

Kathy Lindsay says she remains pessimistic about the new act and its potential to protect her 13-year-old daughter.

"We have all these kids out there who aren't being protected, and maybe they (the schools) just don't know how to deal with it," says Lindsay, who lives in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.

The mother of two pulled her daughter and 11-year-old son from their public school a few weeks before classes ended last month due to bullying concerns.

Lindsay says her daughter was coming home crying because a group of girls taunting and excluding her. She notified the school and even escorted her daughter to class one day.

Lindsay claims she received no response, so she hired a lawyer to ask the school to address her daughter's bullying.

School board responds with lawyer

The school board responded with a letter from its own lawyer. Lindsay says the letter stated that the matter had been taken care of and that she was banned from entering her daughter's school again without prior consent.

She says the letter made her feel like the one being bullied.

"I want to see them (the schools) protect kids and listen to kids," she says, her voice wavering. "Maybe I was a pain in your ass to call every day but this is my daughter. I don't want her to hurt herself because of this," she says.

A spokeswoman for Algoma District School Board declined to comment.

Rob Frenette, co-founder of Bullying Canada, says education and creating an environment where children and parents can speak out is key.

Bullying takes on many forms nowadays and doesn't necessarily refer to physical violence or open taunting, he says.

"Text messaging classmates about other classmates and making fun of them...is something that happens more and more without being detected," Frenette says in an email. "Another example is using social media to bully a classmate."

The Toronto District School Board, the largest in Canada, says it will spend the summer developing board-wide guidelines in time for the act's implementation in the fall. But it says that it will be up to its nearly 600 schools to decide how they specifically adopt and address these strategies.