

TO STOP BULLYING—TAKE ACTION

Testimony in Support of HB2143

by

Dr. Walt Chappell, President of Educational Management Consultants LLC

District-wide policies are ineffective!! Until the Legislature requires that action is taken at the building level to stop bullying, no student or school employee is safe!

K.S.A. 72-8256 became law in 2007. It requires school districts to have policies and plans to stop bullying in our schools, but little has changed. Most schools are now less safe. One-in-three teen suicides is the result of bullying and thousands of Kansas kids stay home from school each day out of fear.

At the December 2010 meeting of the State Board of Education, I moved to have prevention and disciplinary recommendations posted on the KSDE website to encourage school personnel to report and stop bullying plus hold them accountable, similar to our child abuse statute KSA 38-2223. Instead, on February 8th, 2011 the Board only passed a Resolution to establish an Anti-Bullying Awareness Week in October.

Then on September 23rd, 2011 a 14 year old girl named **Rhianna Morawitz hung herself by a belt in her bedroom closet after being repeatedly bullied at Northeast High School in Wichita. Her parents had tried for weeks before to get the school principal to stop other students from spiting in her hair, shoving her down the stairs and into lockers.** The cyberbullying from this small group of jealous girls was relentless. They even sent text messages taunting her to kill herself the day she committed suicide. Afterwards, the Principal denied knowing about the bullying. The girls who tormented and abused her were never disciplined or charged with any crime. But, the Principal is now a Wichita Asst. Superintendent.

HB2143 is modeled after laws already enacted in other states. Just like the child abuse statutes KSA 38-2223, it requires school personnel to report bullying and for the school principal to then investigate after first protecting the child from further abuse. Parents will be notified and the bullying behavior stopped.

FYI, Rhianna's parents posted an **online petition which over 7,000 other parents signed demanding that student safety requirements be passed into Kansas law.** Just having a policy posted on a district's website has done little to actually prevent or stop bullies from tormenting other students or school employees.

Twelve years later, even with thousands of parents demanding that their children are protected, a few school administrators still claim that they should not be held accountable. They want to be left alone to develop policies which they seldom follow. Meanwhile, teen suicides and school shootings are up as are classroom disruptions. Consequently, districts are spending millions to keep bullied students with guns from getting into schools to kill their tormentors instead of protecting them from further abuse in the first place.

Passing HB2143 will be a major step forward to prevent bullying and improve student achievement. Teachers can't teach and students can't learn in chaos and fear. Since 2007, school districts have already been required to develop and post their bullying prevention policies and plans on their websites. **HB2143 will finally require that specific actions are taken in each Kansas school to keep all students, teachers, administrators and non-instructional staff safe.** Only then, will our fellow Kansans be protected from bullying and fewer teens will commit suicide or come back to kill people in their school.

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Father of Wichita girl who committed suicide makes plea for anti-bullying bill

Associated Press -- By John Milburn – 1/31/2012



TOPEKA — The father of a Wichita girl who committed suicide after being repeatedly bullied urged Kansas senators on Tuesday to strengthen the state’s anti-bullying laws.

Rick Morawitz told the Senate Education Committee that a 2007 state law doesn’t go far enough to protect students who are victims of bullying.

His 14-year-old daughter, Rhianna, hanged herself in her bedroom in September after what her father said was sustained harassment at school and online.

“I didn’t expect what I found,” Morawitz said. He also said his daughter was bullied for at least four years, and it became worse when statements about her were posted on the Internet.

“Now if somebody wants to bully your child, it’s 24/7. It doesn’t stop,” said Morawitz, who added that he has gathered more than 7,000 signatures for a petition to support changing the law.

State law currently says each school district must have an anti-bullying policy, but it doesn’t set minimum requirements for what the policy must contain, other than it must call for training of staff and students.

The committee is considering legislation to require more reporting by school districts under a uniform anti-bullying policy and to shorten the timeline for investigations. It also requires districts to report incidents to the State Board of Education.

The new legislation would define bullying as physical contact, verbal and nonverbal expressions and uses of electronic communication devices to harass, intimidate or harm other students or school employees.

Walt Chappell, a Wichita member of the State Board of Education, said the proposal’s goal is to improve the law by requiring districts to do a better job of reporting the scope of bullying and take quick action. Chappell said, “As elected officials and educators, our first obligation to Kansas parents is to make sure their child is safe.”

He said the bill would protect students and teachers from being bullied by students. Districts would be encouraged to develop a discipline policy that would use expelling a student from school or a “zero-tolerance” stance as a last resort.