

## A MINUTE WITH™...

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**anti-bullying expert Dorothy Espelage**

New anti-bullying legislation signed by Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn outlaws harassment in schools based on sexual orientation; it also expands the legal scope of bullying to include harassment by e-mail, text messaging and social networking websites outside of schools. Dorothy Espelage, a renowned expert on bullying and aggression, shared her views on the new legislation in an interview with [News Bureau education editor Phil Ciciora](#).

**How big of a step forward is this legislation in preventing bullying?**

This is a huge step forward. Previous legislation only required schools to have a bully-intervention policy in place. The focus on the role of bullying and sexual orientation is outstanding. We know that upward of 50 percent of bullying perpetration includes homophobic epithets, and that this type of harassment is tremendously damaging to teens, as adolescence is a time of self-discovery.

**Does the new law go far enough, or is there still room for improvement? For example, would this legislation have prevented the type of bullying that made national headlines in Massachusetts a few months ago?**

Well, it is a step forward in that it gets the issue of bullying back in the news and that it affirms that there's a public commitment in Illinois to preventing bullying. However, there has to be funding to back this up. Schools already are struggling financially in our state. So to have these unfunded mandates written into the bill prevents the legislation from having a true impact.

**Cyber-bullying often occurs out of school and on weekends. Does this new bill place too many burdens on schools to punish behavior that happens out of school?**

I think it's correct to assume that the schools can't handle all of the cyber-bullying that is happening outside of school. The limits of what schools can control only extends until the final bell at the end of the day, and schools don't want to seem like they're snooping on their student's private lives outside of the classroom, which also brings up issues of limiting students' constitutionally protected free speech and intrusion into their private lives.

So parents shouldn't assume that school administrators can automatically correct an undesirable situation. Administrators are busy enough tending to in-school bullying; I doubt that they can also manage what's happening outside of school hours.

But all concerned parties – parents, teachers and administrators – need to talk with their kids about the responsible and respectable use of technology. Parents should not purchase cell phones for their children until they understand the consequences of engaging in online aggression.

Also, parents need to educate themselves about what's happening online. I recommend that they spend time learning about the websites their children are visiting. Parents should "friend" their children in their online social networks, as well as have access to their e-mail accounts. Home computers should be located outside of the child's bedroom.

At the classroom level, teachers can also do a tremendous amount to curb bullying, but they need to recognize that bullying happens in most American schools and classrooms. Teachers also need to realize that they are typically not good at determining who is involved in the bullying dynamic. Sometimes, it's so subtle that they might not always see it. Research has found that teachers do a poor job of accurately identifying victims, and they often misidentify bully-victims.

**What should parents do if their child is the victim of a bully?**

Parents should recognize that there are serious short- and long-term consequences of being bullied. They should talk to their children openly about bullying and communicate with school officials about what their child is experiencing. If they notice drastic changes in a child's mood or activity level, then they need to get them help as soon as possible.

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