

Bullies could face expulsion in new act

By CP

TORONTO -- Students who engage in physical or online bullying could be suspended or expelled under changes to Ontario's Safe Schools Act that unanimously passed third and final reading yesterday in the provincial legislature.

The bill marks the first time either type of bullying has been formally prohibited in Ontario schools, although the definition of bullying under the act has yet to be worked out.

Education Minister Kathleen Wynne said the changes will also lead to a more consistent application of discipline in schools across Ontario, and give students who are kicked out for behavioural problems a chance to get back into class so they can eventually graduate.

"The legislation will more effectively combine discipline and opportunity for students to continue their education," Wynne told the legislature during third reading debate.

Bullying, especially the online variety, has captured headlines across the country as students face discipline over postings made on popular websites such as YouTube and Facebook. In February, 19 Toronto-area students who blamed their principal for school policies on cellphone use, and took their gripe online, were suspended.

"These amendments would ensure there are strong consequences for inappropriate behaviour," said Wynne, who stressed the changes will ensure there are programs at all Ontario school boards for students who are kicked out.

Conservative Leader John Tory said that was crucial.

"I think we have to find ways to take people who are repeat offenders and make sure what we don't do is put them out on the street and have them out of the school system," Tory said.

"Then they're almost guaranteed to have a life that is going to go the wrong way, and I think we've seen what the consequences of that can be."

The New Democrats warned changes to the Safe Schools Act would not solve the serious discipline problems in some Ontario schools.

NDP Leader Howard Hampton said the recent fatal shooting of a 15-year-old Toronto student shows schools are in desperate need of increased funding to deal with security, safety and other problems.