



Anti-bullying bill is overdue but blessed

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When a student commits suicide because of bullying, the bully committed a crime. He or she likely won't be charged. But an innocent was slaughtered, even if the weapon was merely words slicing at the delicate human heart.

The victim calls out from beyond for justice. I have the feeling that young Jamie Hubley, the kind, funny Ottawa boy who killed himself in October, would ask only for some kind of retroactive kindness. The families need to know that their child's cries for help were finally listened to, even if too late. The bully has to face what he or she did.

But most importantly, the swarms of bullies currently in Ontario schools have to learn that bullying is sickening and contemptible, that it can scar the victim's soul and plant the seeds of lifelong depression. Bullies have to be told to stop; in fact, never to start.

Now finally, the Ontario government's planned anti-bullying legislation, the Accepting Schools Act, will mandate consequences — beyond mere suspension — for bullying. The Conservatives want rules for reporting and investigating, plus remedial treatment for bullies, not just a pointless suspension. In some cases, the bully will have to be expelled just to keep victims safe.

If only the Ontario College of Teachers were able to expel predatory teachers openly and fairly. If only we were able to persuade struggling students not to drop out of high school and permanently blight their lives.

Education is a constant stream of "if onlys," of great hopes and terrible regrets. If only Jamie were alive today, or 11-year-old Mitchell Wilson of Pickering, a boy with muscular dystrophy who killed himself after being mugged and tormented.

So we look to the future. Just as we know there is no point jailing people for years without rehabilitation efforts — they only come out more damaged — we know that bullies still need an education. They also need to be taught another way to behave, and only specially trained teachers can do this.

Bullies are rarely junior psychopaths. They're kids without a sense of self, perhaps with a frantic frightening home empty of love. They build themselves up by destroying spindly, fragile or unusual kids. Or, let's not fool ourselves, any unfortunate child who comes to hand.

Gay rights are still in their infancy. We could help their progress by mandating education about sexuality and promoting gay-straight alliances in schools. As the *Star* has reported, this year the Dufferin Peel Catholic school board refused to let a gay support group call itself a "gay-straight alliance." To Nancy Kirby, head of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association, "the word 'gay-straight alliance' has become controversial."

In this day and age, her words are primitive. If even the school board bullies gay students, bullies get the message that gays are fair game.

No wonder Premier Dalton McGuinty wants support for the bill from Liberals, the NDP and Conservatives. The message has to go out to recalcitrant school boards that bullies won't be tolerated. In a sex-heavy era when sexuality emerges early and is expressed openly, gay students should be able to come out of the closet as soon as they understand their own natures.

Straight students should be their brothers and sisters, their good friends, especially when gay teens are being openly mocked on Facebook and Twitter. Social media can be a side door for misery. You can't shove a kid into a locker anymore but you can call him a "fag" or her a "lezzy" on a website.

The bill has to take cyber-bullying into account. Marjorie Raymond, a 15-year-old Quebec schoolgirl, killed herself last week, having told her mother, "I can't take it any more." "School authorities didn't take the problem seriously enough," Marjorie's mother said. "They didn't listen. . . They trivialized it, like it was a little teenage quarrel between girls. But it had become more than that."

Her alleged bully had been suspended for tormenting Marjorie. What did the bully write on Facebook on Nov. 1, just weeks before her victim died?

"Suspended 5 days! Ahahaha! Not bad."