

School Bully Bill Needs More Teeth, Group Says

By JOSH POLTILOVE The Tampa Tribune

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TALLAHASSEE - A proposal designed to prevent bullying in Florida's schools is too vague to protect all students because it doesn't specifically address sexual orientation, physical appearance or gender expression, a gay rights group argued Monday.

Members of nonprofit statewide gay rights group Equality Florida, state Rep. Scott Randolph, D-Orlando, and a Miami educator spoke Monday of the need to add those forms of bullying to the bill.

Sexual, religious and racial harassment are listed as examples of bullying. But the bill needs more examples of harassment and prohibited behavior, because leaving their interpretation to school administrators, counselors or teachers will allow bullying to continue, Miami high school guidance counselor Lisa La Monica said.

Michael Freinkle, who said he faced bullying because of his sexual orientation and religion while a Brandon High student, said lawmakers need to try harder to protect everyone in the bill.

"We can't shy away from the biggest problems," he said after Monday's news conference. "If that means waiting one more year for the legislators to wisen up, then it means one more year."

A 2005 Harris Interactive survey showed physical appearance, sexual orientation and gender expression are the three most frequent forms of bullying in schools.

Randolph said it will take political courage to include sexual orientation in the bill but that it's the right thing to do.

"Too often we put a Band-Aid on a problem and it's forgotten about," he said. "But you're still bleeding one way or the other."

Rep. Nick Thompson, R-Fort Myers, said his bill is "all-inclusive," trying to prevent all forms of bullying, even if it doesn't specifically list each one. He doesn't plan to amend it.

The bill requires Florida's school boards to create their own policies to prevent bullying. Bullying is defined in the bill as chronically inflicting physical or psychological damage. School districts would have to develop a procedure to refer victims and bullies for counseling.

Hillsborough and Pasco counties already have antibullying policies.

Hillsborough's student handbook says gender and cross-gender sexual harassment can

qualify as bullying. It also directly addresses sexual harassment.

"While more cases of males harassing females have been reported thus far in the United States than any other type," it says, "it is quite possible for males to harass other males or for females to harass other females."

Last year a similar antibullying proposal passed through the state House but wasn't considered on the floor of the Senate. Thompson said it would have passed but it ran out of time. That bill originally didn't break down any categories, such as physical appearance, that constitute bullying.

This year's House version of the bill heads to an education committee today for a vote.

WHAT'S NEXT

House Bill 575 goes to the K-12 committee today. It has two other committee stops. Senate Bill 114 has been approved by two committees and has one committee stop left. A time has not been scheduled for that debate.

Sponsors

HB 575: Rep. Nick Thompson, R-Fort Myers, nick.thompson@myfloridahouse.gov, (850) 488-1541

SB 114: Sen. Carey Baker, R-Eustis, baker.carey

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