

Get anti-bullying bill right

The passage of anti-bullying legislation by both the Massachusetts House and Senate does not mean advocates for the law can rest easy.

Attempts to get an anti-bullying law have failed in the past. Now, supporters of the bill must stay vigilant as a joint committee meets behind closed doors to reconcile different versions of the bill.

The original House and Senate versions were all talk and no real action. They took a stand against bullying, but offered few tools to victims, family or local law enforcement officials. It made scant demands of school authorities.

When the final votes were taken, both the House and Senate versions were much stronger. But there are still special interests that may fight provisions of the bill. Legislators should not be bullied into weakening a law aimed at preventing tragedy.

The legislation was spurred by the deaths of two young people — Phoebe Prince, the 15-year-old South Hadley High School student and Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, 11, of Springfield. Both committed suicide after they were harassed and bullied by classmates.

Key to the legislation passed by the House at the end of last week is the requirement that teachers, school administrators and staff be required under law to report bullying to a school principal.

A principal who determines an incident is bullying, as defined by the law, is then required to notify the police. Criminal charges are possible under the law.

The mandated reporting was absent from the first version of the bill and is critical to getting school authorities to act. Some schools already have anti-bullying policies and, in some cases, use curriculum materials that seek to counter such behaviors. Others need to be pushed along. Rep. John W. Scibak of South Hadley, who has championed the tougher bill from the start, agrees that the mandated reporting of bullying incidents "is the guts of this bill."

The House bill requires all school districts and private schools to develop a bullying prevention and intervention plan. The bill also targets cyberbullying by prohibiting the use of emails,



State Rep. John Scibak of South Hadley has championed a tough anti-bullying bill from the start. A legislative conference committee must not allow special interests to weaken the final measure.

text messages, Internet posts and other electronic means to create a hostile school environment.

The language of the House bill defines bullying as "the repeated use by a perpetrator of a written, verbal, or electronic expression, or physical act or gesture ... directed at a victim that causes physical or emotional harm or damage to the victim's property; places the victim in reasonable fear or harm to himself or of damage to his property; (or) creates a hostile environment at school."

The legislation would also require school officials to inform parents of their anti-bullying curriculum and alert

both the parents of bullies and the parents of victims after a reported bullying incident.

The House bill also calls for training school officials. It is important in the final bill that this include all staff — including bus drivers, maintenance staff and cafeteria workers. The training is key. School employees need to understand what constitutes bullying and grasp what steps they can and must take. If nothing else, good training will prevent a lot of false reports.

Neither version of the bill calls for fines for failure to report bullying, as some proponents have sought. Raising awareness, training and providing a clear path for reporting and getting law enforcement involved are what's important.

Of course, the most important tools to combat bullying are informed and active parents.

After the January tragedy in South Hadley, the town formed an anti-bullying task force. Those who care about bullying are working together to find solutions and raise awareness. Parents need to be listening to their kids, monitoring their Facebook pages and starting early to teach understanding, self-respect and respect for others.

The proposed anti-bullying law will require schools to develop a program. If the right bill comes out of the conference committee, it should make a difference. Effective parenting, of course, is still the best way to nurture young people who recoil from the idea of treating others badly.