

Lt. Gov. Denn & Attorney General Biden Announce Improved Anti-Bullying Legislation

Rep. Schooley, Sens. Henry and Sokola sponsoring measure to increase reporting of bullying, promote Attorney General's bullying hotline

Wilmington – Noting that one out of every three middle and high school students report being bullied but many other incidents go unreported, Lt. Gov. Matt Denn, Attorney General Beau Biden and legislative leaders unveiled legislation on Friday that would protect students against bullying and add consistency in how such incidents are reported.

Nationally, 8.2 million students are bullied each year and 1 million are cyber-bullied. About 160,000 students stay home from school on any given day because they're afraid of being bullied. In Delaware, nearly 20 percent of students surveyed last year reported that another student issued a verbal threat against them, while 30 percent reported that they said something to another student to hurt them.

Lt. Gov. Denn said the proposal contains an important provision requiring the Department of Education to annually audit schools to ensure that they are properly investigating and reporting bullying allegations.

"It's not just having the numbers, though those are important. Letting parents of kids who were bullied know about it is obvious," Lt. Gov. Denn said. "Less obvious, but just as important, is letting the parents of kids who are doing the bullying know what is going on. Many of these kids, perhaps most, come from families with interested and active parents,

who want their kids to do the right thing in school. If those parents know that their kids are engaged in bullying, they will start taking some strong steps at home to deal with the problem.”

The legislation was developed from multiple community forums Attorney General Biden has held talking to students and parents about bullying, and from conversations he and Lt. Gov. Denn have had with district superintendents.

“Kids deserve to be safe at school, but we need to fully understand the challenges we face in order to hold bullies accountable, prevent future incidents, and help students – both bullies and victims – stay on the right path,” Attorney General Biden said. “This legislation addresses the gaps in Delaware’s law that have led to uneven and inaccurate reporting.”

The legislation, which will be filed next week, would address a lack of consistency in how bullying incidents are reported by school districts. For example, Laurel Middle School, which has a four-star commendable rating, had the highest number of incidents (38 in a 344-student school) during the 2010-11 school year, but William Penn High with 1,981 students had zero reported incidents. And only one incident was reported in the entire Smyrna School District.

Under the bill, school districts would be required to report unsubstantiated claims of bullying to the state Department of Education, in addition to the current requirement for reporting substantiated claims. The current law says substantiated claims must be reported within five business days. Often it takes longer than that for a school administrator to verify a student’s claim, so the incident never gets reported.

Additionally, DOE must audit the districts’ reports of bullying statistics annually. Lastly, the Attorney General’s

Office's bullying hotline (1-800-220-5414) must be posted on each school district's website and in a conspicuous place in each school.

Rep. Terry Schooley, who is the lead House sponsor of the legislation, said that reducing the instance of bullying starts with everyone treating all instances of reported bullying seriously and not tolerating any form of bullying.

"We're not talking about the old-fashioned 'kids will be kids' instances, these are serious situations that are putting kids at risk. Bullying creates fear and intimidation in our schools, and it leads to students performing poorly in school, not going to school for fear of being bullied or in some cases, committing suicide," said Rep. Schooley, D-Newark. "There is a reluctance to report bullying, but we need everyone – parents, teachers, administrators and students – to say that they will not tolerate bullying and to report all instances, so we can better address this problem."

Senate Majority Whip Sen. Margaret Rose Henry, one of the prime sponsors of the legislation, said that protecting children from bullying is paramount.

"There's no magic fix for bullying, much as all of us wish there were one," said Sen. Henry, D-Wilmington East, a longtime champion of anti-bullying measures. "But these changes will increase accountability on the part of our schools and conspicuous posting of the bullying hotline number, I think, will give parents another tool to address this problem."

"Schools need to be a place where students feel safe, and all adults and students need to be willing to respond to any physical, verbal and cyber threats," said Sen. David Sokola, D-Newark, chairman of the Senate Education Committee and a strong backer of anti-bullying measures.