



Submission to the Standing Committee on Social Policy for Bill 14, Anti-Bullying Act, 2012

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on Bill 14, Anti-Bullying Act, 2012.

OSSTF/FEESO is a diverse union representing 60,000 educational workers from across the province of Ontario. OSSTF/FEESO's 140 bargaining units represent both English and French members in elementary and secondary school workplaces, private schools, consortia offering support services to school boards and universities.

OSSTF/FEESO welcomes the intent of the legislation in Bill 14, Anti-Bullying Act, 2012. Bullying can be pervasive to the point at which it dramatically impacts the emotional well-being, social and academic success of the students we serve daily.

We agree with the statement in the bill's preamble that, "The negative cost of bullying to society at large is therefore considerable." Numerous studies have indicated that when a student learns in a safe and welcoming environment, success will follow.

We are pleased to see that cyber-bullying is included in the legislation, given the reality that students depend on electronic devices for the majority of their social communication and use them consistently throughout the day, including at school. In addition, OSSTF/FEESO welcomes the language used to define bullying. In dealing with bullying, it is essential that language and intent be clearly defined in order to ensure that the reporting of incidents will produce meaningful and appropriate resolution to any verified incident of bullying.

OSSTF/FEESO shares the belief outlined in the proposed legislation that effective professional development for educators, as well as a strong curriculum, is a critical part of a successful implementation program for this legislation and will assist in the remediation references in the act. As stated in our commentary on Bill 13, every education worker must be provided with comprehensive professional development that outlines their roles in reporting as well as discussions surrounding the issues facing students. In the past, specifically with the implementation of Bill 157, Education Amendment Act (Keeping our Kids Safe at School) 2009, inadequate professional development led to gaps in the full implementation and the effectiveness of the act.

As each employee in the school system plays a vital role directly or indirectly in the education of our students, there needs to be a shared responsibility for all staff to effectively address bullying. Student safety and well-being are increased when students are able to access the encouragement and assistance of well-trained and knowledgeable staff at school. In particular, our support staff members play critical roles in their interactions with individual students and in their supervision of them in various capacities. Bill 157 clearly outlines varied degrees of responsibility for reporting and responding to incidents. The reluctance of some administrators to provide reporting forms for all staff to complete when witnessing an incident remains a concern as does the failure of some administrators to respond to completed reports.

It is important that if passed, the legislation include requirements that school and board administration will take appropriate action, as clearly defined and outlined in the legislation, when incidents of bullying are reported. Bill 14 is an opportunity to address and resolve these concerns.

OSSTF/FEESO and other education stakeholders should have a role in the development of policy surrounding the legislation. Along with many of these organizations, OSSTF/FEESO has created materials that could be of great benefit in the development of provincial policies as well as local school board policies. Working together and sharing collective knowledge and resources will result in policies that are relevant and practical.

Many of the points made in this submission are echoed in the one OSSTF/FEESO made regarding Bill 13, the Accepting Schools Act, 2012. Both bills will potentially have an important impact on our schools and on our students. Combining these bills would bring together the best ideas, making the intent of each of them stronger and resulting in better advocacy and protection for all students.

In conclusion, if negative, harmful behaviours such as bullying continue to go unaddressed, students will continue to feel undervalued by their education system. The Safe Schools Action Team Report confirmed that students need to know the adults in their educational lives will address bullying and harassment in all its variant forms. Without meaningful intervention, we will see marginalized students withdraw from both the academic environment and the social environment of the school community. This legislation will be especially critical to those victims of the most serious bullying behaviour that unfortunately, can result in self-harm or suicide. It is vital that this legislation be enacted.

May 22, 2012

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