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## Bullying law a work in progress

By Margery Eagan | Thursday, February 10, 2011 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Columnists

We know this much: 15-year-old Phoebe Prince's suicide spurred statewide soul searching and pushed a recalcitrant Legislature to enact a new anti-bullying law this spring.

But after more than three hours of Beacon Hill hearings yesterday on possible revisions to that law, it was clear that many doubt the law will work and that others question if we even know what does work.

One academic even questioned the expertise of the supposed bullying expert Barbara Coloroso, who advised South Hadley before and after Prince's death there a year ago January.

But the prosecutor who investigated Prince's death argued unequivocally that the law must be toughened. Former Northeastern District attorney Elizabeth Scheibel, now retired, also said there must be legal sanctions for school officials who fail to report bullying.

Addressing the commission headed by Attorney General Martha Coakley, Scheibel said schools must report all cases of substantiated bullying to local district attorneys just as they now must report suspected child abuse. As the law is written, a school administrator, not a prosecutor, decides if a bullying case rises to the criminal level.

"Trained people who can identify crime (should) look into it," not school officials, Scheibel said after her testimony. The idea is not to drag young bullies into the criminal system but to intervene early.

After Scheibel, however, there were as many opinions from speakers. Elizabeth Englander of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center said holding parents of bullies legally libel could prevent such parents from admitting their child's problem, thus prolonging any attacks.

Nan Stein, a Wellesley College researcher and bullying authority, said schools too often latch onto supposed experts like Coloroso, who "has been anointed as a worldwide expert" without, according to Stein, showing that her methods work.

Dan Lebowitz of Northeastern's Center for Sports in Society claimed a 25-year history there of battling bullying and harassment. Yet when he spoke movingly of being bullied himself — he wore leg braces as a young boy — he attributed his turnaround not to a program but to sports, particularly power lifting.

Scheibel said Phoebe Prince's family has taken comfort in the focus on bullying that followed her death.

But when asked whether the climate has improved in South Hadley, where school officials were lambasted for ignoring Prince's plight, the former DA just smiled, then replied, diplomatically, about continuing "to work with South Hadley and other schools."

Bottom line: There's much figuring out to be done before Coakley's commission makes its recommendations in June.

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