
Prince proposal spurs criminal record concerns

By David Abel

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A proposed settlement that would weaken potential penalties against most of those charged with bullying Phoebe Prince has sparked new concern among antibullying specialists about whether tainting the defendants with a criminal record is appropriate.

"You don't want a fist of vengeance that so many people were calling for; but you don't want just to dismiss their actions," said Barbara Coloroso, a Colorado-based author of a number of books about bullying. "The Prince family should have some sense of justice."

The settlement, which has yet to be approved by a judge, would allow five of the six defendants charged in the bullying last year of the 15-year-old South Hadley girl to admit to criminal harassment, a misdemeanor.

In exchange, prosecutors would drop more serious charges against them, a person familiar with the proposed agreement said this week. Prosecutors say the harsh treatment led Prince to commit suicide.

"When you're dealing with kids, it's probably always better to try to turn them into productive citizens, rather than locking them up and throwing away the key," said Elizabeth Englander, professor of psychology at Bridgewater State University and director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center.

She said she would wait for more details about the proposed agreement before judging its fairness.

"I think a lot of how we will judge this is on what the kids will actually have to do," she said. "But requiring them to plead guilty to criminal harassment does send a message to people how seriously the Commonwealth takes bullying. It would be very different if they didn't have to plead guilty to anything."

Coloroso, whose books include "The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander," said she would like to see the alleged perpetrators required to publicly acknowledge what they did, explain the consequences of bullying and how to stop it, and to make private amends to Prince's family.

"Community service and a fine are not enough," she said. "They don't give justice to the family of the target of the bullying, and they don't give those who were charged the opportunity to heal from this by being held accountable. What I always hope for with juveniles is that there's some restorative justice."

She suggested that the youths be required to own up to their behavior by "saying what they did to her." She said they should also be required to scrub anything negative they may have written about her online.

Coloroso said the judge should order them to apologize individually to Prince's family. "Then, they can truly get on with their own lives," she said.

Prince's relatives could not be reached yesterday.

Prince, a freshman who immigrated from Ireland, hanged herself in her family's home in January 2010 after what Elizabeth Scheibel, then the Northwestern district attorney, described as the "culmination of a nearly three-month campaign of verbally assaultive behavior and threats of physical harm."

Kayla Narey, Sharon Chanon Velázquez, Ashley Longe, Sean Mulveyhill, and Flannery Mullins, all of South

Hadley, have faced felony and misdemeanor charges, including civil rights violations causing bodily injury, criminal harassment, and disruption of a school assembly.

Flannery and Velázquez also face charges of stalking Prince. Mulveyhill was charged with statutory rape, a charge that will be dropped under the agreement, the source said.

Prosecutors say Velázquez, Mullins, and Longe were angry with Prince because of her relationship with Springfield teenager Austin Renaud and relentlessly taunted her in person and on Facebook.

The proposed agreement relates to the bullying charges that prosecutors say resulted in Prince's death, but other charges may remain. Longe is also charged with assaulting Prince by throwing an aluminum can at her. Renaud faces statutory rape charges in allegedly having sexual contact with the underage Prince.

Scheibel did not return calls for comment, and a spokeswoman for David E. Sullivan, now the Northwestern district attorney, declined to comment.

Prince's death helped prod state lawmakers last year to pass a new antibullying law that requires teachers to report bullying to administrators, who must investigate.

Schools must also notify police if they think criminal charges are warranted.

State Representative Martha M. Walz, a Back Bay Democrat who authored the antibullying law, said that from what she knows of the proposed settlement, it does not undermine the legislation.

"I can't see any student taking this as a slap on the wrist," she said. "They will have a criminal record that will be with them for the rest of their lives."

Pat Gardner — director of the Center for Teacher Education and Research at Westfield State University, which has trained thousands of students and teachers in how to prevent bullying — said that no matter how the case is settled, it remains a tragedy for everyone involved.

She said she wants to see the students punished. "But I'm not sure the answer is scarring them for the rest of their lives," she said. "These kids made horrible mistakes. But when a child kills herself, I'm not sure what you do."

Derrek Shulman — regional director of the Anti-Defamation League New England, which lobbied for the new law — called the Prince tragedy a watershed for state officials coming to terms with the dangers of bullying.

"The case shows the destructive impact of bullying must be recognized and responded to before it spirals out of control," he said.

Sirdeaner Walker, whose 11-year-old son Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover committed suicide after being bullied in 2009, said that, at the least, the students who allegedly bullied Prince should be required to do community service, in which they are sent to schools to discuss their experience.

"The bottom line is that whatever happens, Phoebe Prince's life has ended tragically, and the other students' lives have been changed forever," she said.

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