



## **Testimony of Dr. Elizabeth Englander, to The Commission to Review Statutes Relative to Implementation of the School Bullying Law:**

My name is Dr. Elizabeth Englander, and I am a professor of psychology at Bridgewater State University and the founder and director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center. MARC is a center that delivers research and resources for the Commonwealth, as well as providing free and comprehensive in-school prevention programs. This year, MARC has provided services to almost 200 schools in the state. My perspective on these issues is both as a researcher and as a fieldworker.

This year, a mother I'll call *Mary* wrote to me – parents write to me all the time. She wrote about her “13-year-old stepson: charming, smart, funny, energetic, and apparently a bully.... He's had a complicated life...We need help to figure out how to deal with this, and so does he.”

This Committee is convened to do an important job, and it's reasonable to say that parents who willfully neglect to correct a bullying child should be liable. But in my experience, most parents of bullies are like *Mary*: they want to do the right thing; they are very afraid of what their child might do to others; and they know they need help.

So how can we support all the parents who want to do the right thing, while also bringing into the fold the few parents who deny their child's abusiveness?

One option is punishment. Punishing parents of bullies may motivate a few neglecters; but if admitting your child is a bully means you may be liable, then you can bet that many parents will never admit that their child is a bully. We may actually lose parents who otherwise would have taken responsibility.

But there are other options. In the world of bullying legislation, Massachusetts has become a national model by pairing educational requirements with consequences. In our collective efforts to fit parents into the larger picture, maybe we should follow the example of the State Legislature in this matter.

So what educational efforts do we need to make?

First, parents, communities, and schools must send a consistent message to the children that we are all raising together. This means that we need to work as partners, and to come to some kind of consensus about what the rules and expectations are for our children.

Second, it's through parents that children gain access to the technology that our research suggests is the primary means for bullying today. Now, we give kids access to many things that they could potentially misuse, but if parents are aware and educated about possible dangers, they usually law down the law.

In my experience, parents here in Massachusetts aren't indifferent to the misuse of technology. In fact, my reading is that parents are somewhat DESPERATE to know more about these issues. They live busy lives and are generally doing their best to raise their children in a complex world. MARC is constantly fielding requests for parent and community education.

So perhaps while we're looking at ways to make parents accountable, we should also be examining how to *help* them be accountable – how to give them the support, resources, education, and partnership they need in order to be firm and effective parents.

Finally, I think that from a practical standpoint, enforcing parental liability for their child's bullying behaviors may be quite difficult. Who gets to decide that this parent is really trying, but this one isn't?

On the other hand, promoting and supporting methods for parental education and responsibility would be welcome and supported by one and all. Partnering with parents and educators, and helping them do the best they can, is how we at MARC see our job. No one can really solve these problems alone. For that reason, I would encourage all of us to consider that approach.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify today on this important topic. Don't hesitate if MARC or I can be of assistance.

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