

**MASSACHUSETTS COMMISSION TO REVIEW STATUTES RELATIVE  
TO IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SCHOOL BULLYING LAW**

**Testimony of Katherine M. Moss, Ph.D., Behavioral Health Network**

Western New England College, School of Law, Springfield, MA  
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Good afternoon Attorney General Coakley and members of the Commission. My name is Katherine Moss. The perspective I bring to this discussion is that of a licensed clinical psychologist and the Director of school-based programs for the Behavioral Health Network. BHN is a large community mental health and substance abuse agency serving communities throughout Hampden and Hampshire counties. Among many other programs and services, we provide consultation to school staff and direct services to students and families on a wide range of topics related to social/ emotional/ behavioral development. In this capacity, we have been directly involved in the development and implementation of district planning and staff training on initiatives related to creating safe and supportive learning environments and positive school climates. We have also provided individual and group skill building and counseling support to students and families impacted by aggression in schools, as targets or aggressors. At the most extreme, we were called in to support students and staff in both of the region's school communities that experienced tragedy relative to bullying in the past few years.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

First, I want to thank the Legislature, the Commission, DESE, and the many other parties involved, for their careful attention and swift action on the important issue of bullying and cyberbullying. It is a great step forward for the climate of our Commonwealth to have articulated so clearly at the state level a consistent set of expectations (and consequences) for how our children and youth can expect to treat and be treated by one another inside and outside the educational setting.

The framework provided by the legislation and DESE's model Plan puts structure and state-wide consistency to efforts that were developing inconsistently across the Commonwealth.

I offer three reflections relative to this effort going forward, with a single underlying theme: this undertaking will not be successful if approached as a simple or quick effort. To achieve the stated goal of truly reducing bullying incidents in schools will require a shift in overt behavior, as well as attitudes and beliefs, on the part of students as well as on the part of school staff and parents. It will require full and long-term commitment on the part of all involved to make this happen. With that in mind, I offer these thoughts:

1. The comprehensive and extensive directives to schools must be accompanied by long-term 'supportive monitoring' as well as clear consequences for districts and staff that are not making adequate progress towards implementation.

Previous testimony to this commission has discussed district accountability and suggested the need for districts to report to DESE their progress. I agree, but would favor a reporting/ accountability system based on a coaching model. In this system, schools and districts would regularly assess the status of each component of their Plan implementation and receive support and guidance from DESE or other entity on ways to progress to the next level. Those schools or staff not making necessary change in behavior will receive support and ultimately consequences.

School administrators, teachers and support staff are juggling MANY competing priorities for their instructional time and resources and their own emotional energy. Adding more mandates to their load without long-term support and guidance would be counterproductive.

2. Relatedly, implementing the Model Plan with integrity and thoughtfulness will require substantial financial and personnel resources on the part of school districts and their community. I urge the Legislature to consider the difficulty schools will have in doing justice to the implementation of the legal mandate without sufficient financial resources.
3. True bully prevention must also go beyond the walls of the K-12 institutions to address even earlier conditions which foster bully behavior. Based on relevant research, I suggest that two additional arenas be addressed:
  - a. Early education and care programs are responsible for thousands of our Commonwealth's children prior to entering Kindergarten. The skills and programs outlined in the Model Plan can and should be taught in the community preschool classrooms of our children at ages 3 and 4 as well as K-12. The earlier our children learn about respecting differences; and about the consequences of their words and behavior, the better! If not already happening, I suggest that the Department of Early Education and Care be included in these discussion.
  - b. Research suggests that children who bully are often less likely to be in supportive relationships with their parents and more likely to have experienced inconsistent parenting and discipline. Again, looking way back in prevention... If we focus some of our energy and resources on parent education and support, we will hopefully reduce the number of potential bullies who enter our schools.

Finally, the Commission requested specific input on the issue of parental accountability. I have often heard said that "the parents who need the most support are the ones least likely to participate voluntarily in services." Perhaps we might consider a mandatory course for parents of students (or for parents and their students together, as developmentally appropriate) whom schools have determined have engaged in bullying. Similar to safe driver education programs for individuals convicted of drunk driving, parents would be legally required to participate in a course that serves as a visible consequence but also an opportunity for parents to learn skills they need but may not otherwise have or be open to receiving.