

Bill Number: H.B. No. 1000

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An Act to Minimize the Detrimental Impact of Cyberbullying By Ensuring that School Administration and Staff Have the Tools and Training Necessary to Deal with Cases of Online Harassment.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF FLORIDA:

Section 1:

This Act may be cited as the “The Rebecca Sedwick and Mckenna Brown Cyberbullying Prevention Act”.

Section 2:

Whereas, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System Data Summary & Trends Report published by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention showed that 16% of high school students reported being electronically bullied in the 12 months prior to the survey, an indication that cyberbullying is a shared experience by the youth and adolescence of today.

Whereas, Florida’s statutory framework attempts to negate the harms of cyberbullying through the Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up for All Students Act, which requires general anti-bullying policies on the district-level and requires training and prevention programs.

Whereas, the law's broad language and lack of specificity creates holes in implementation for cyberbullying prevention.

Whereas, the Florida cases of Rebecca Sedwick and Mckenna Brown demonstrate the profound dangers of cyberbullying and expose gaps in school responses to online harassment.

Whereas, Rebecca Sedwick, a 12-year-old girl from Polk County, died by suicide after enduring more than a year of escalating cyberbullying from classmates.

Whereas, Rebecca Sedwick’s mother alerted the school and was told that Rebecca would receive additional safety measures that never happened which raised questions about whether the school fulfilled its responsibility to protect her.

Whereas, the 2022 suicide of 16-year-old Mckenna Brown in Pinellas County revealed similar failures in

the education system.

Whereas, Mckenna was targeted through a coordinated wave of online harassment across text messages and multiple social media platforms, including the sharing of deeply personal and traumatic information.

Whereas, Mckenna's mother reported that although school officials were aware of the critical situation, they never took action to help Mckenna.

Whereas, in both cases, parents felt the schools failed to protect their daughters as the cyberbullying intensified.

Whereas, these cases demonstrate that while Florida has an existing policy structure, it does not ensure effective responses when dealing with cases of cyberbullying.

Whereas, the National Institute of Justice's findings affirm that general anti-bullying programs cannot sufficiently prevent online harassment; only cyberbullying-specific prevention programming can effectively minimize online harassment.

Section 3:

The definition in s. 1006.147 (3) (b) relating to cyberbullying is applicable to this section.

Definitions in s. 1006.147 (3) (f) relating to bullying and harassment are applicable to this section.

Section 4:

Florida Statutes s. 1006.147 (4) is amended to add paragraph (o) and paragraph (p), to read:

(4) Each school district shall adopt and review at least every 3 years a policy prohibiting bullying and harassment of a student or employee of a public K-12 educational institution. Each school district's policy shall be in substantial conformity with the Department of Education's model policy. The school district bullying and harassment policy shall afford all students the same protection regardless of their status under the law. The school district may establish separate discrimination policies that include categories of students. The school district shall involve students, parents, teachers, administrators, school staff, school volunteers, community representatives, and local law enforcement agencies in the process of adopting and reviewing the policy. The school district policy must be implemented by each school principal in a manner that is ongoing throughout the school year and integrated with the school's curriculum, bullying prevention and intervention program, discipline policies, and other violence prevention efforts. The school district policy must contain, at a minimum, the following components:

[existing paragraphs retained]

(o) A procedure for providing cyberbullying-specific prevention curriculum that instructs students on recognizing, avoiding, and reporting online harassment, digital aggression, and harmful online behavior.

(p) A procedure for providing annual training for all school employees on recognizing cyberbullying and online harassment, understanding the functions and risks of social media platforms and digital communication tools commonly used by students, and implementing strategies to support students and parents of students who are victims of cyberbullying or online harassment.

Section 5:

The Department of Education shall ensure compliance with the requirements of this act.

The Department shall verify that each school district has implemented the mandated policy including a cyberbullying-specific prevention and annual staff training as required under s. 1006.147(4).

Compliance monitoring shall be incorporated into the Department's existing reporting procedures under s. 1006.146.

5. Analysis of Your Research

This research makes it evident that cyberbullying presents a uniquely damaging form of harassment because of its persistence, permanency, and public visibility. When harmful content and hurtful messaging is accessible at all hours of the day and permanently available on the internet, the psychological toll it has on children becomes increasingly detrimental, and the risk of suicide and self-harm consequently rises. While Florida's current statute outlines general anti-bullying mechanisms, it does not require evidence-based prevention programming or minimum training standards regarding cyberbullying. The general and broad terminology in the statute means that schools do not need to implement cyberbullying-specific curriculum which is the most effective when trying to minimize online harassment.

The suicides of 12-year-old Rebecca Sedwick and 16-year-old Mckenna Brown in Florida highlight the real-world consequences of cyberbullying and the gaps in Florida's existing legal framework. In both cases, parents informed the schools but school administration failed to intervene meaningfully and protect students that were suffering. The data, suicide-risk research, analysis of current Florida statutes, and real-world cases make it clear that cyberbullying threatens child safety and schools need to be held accountable and equipped with the proper tools to safeguard children to prevent the tragic loss of life.

To create a policy that mandates cyberbullying-specific prevention programming in public schools is an action that is feasible in a political, economic, and administrative sense. Generally, bills that safeguard children especially with regards to the realm of technology and social media pass through the legislature with bipartisan support, making it a politically feasible solution. When considering cost implications, policy that mandates specific programming is feasible since similar legislation has been passed and implemented without imposing a financial burden on school districts. Additionally, policies with the intention of protecting the lives of children tend to garner financial and funding support which

makes it economically feasible. Administration would be able to accomplish policy that sets guidelines for cyberbullying-specific prevention programming for students and faculty is feasible considering schools are already meant to be fulfilling similar responsibilities for bullying and harassment in general, with cyberbullying-specific programming built off existing frameworks.

Legislative intervention is the most effective solution in preventing cyberbullying and online harassment as it can set standards and guidelines for schools to build a foundation of understanding and support in schools which are best positioned to have an impact on children's lives.

1. A description of its bipartisan appeal

With consideration to party support, Democrats and Republicans in Florida have had a strong history of bipartisan unity on bills protecting and safeguarding children by equipping schools with the tools to better serve students. Bills like the Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up for All Students Act which have set the existing statute and similar guidelines for anti-bullying mechanisms and have passed through the legislature with bipartisan support. A bill that outlines methods for preventing cyberbullying through setting standards for school administration and staff builds upon the existing legislation and holds the same bipartisan appeal. Furthermore, this bill has the potential to appeal to both Democrat and Republican voters in the FL-13 district as it aims to solve an issue that directly affected Pinellas County after the high-profile failure of school mechanisms in preventing the tragic loss of Mckenna Brown. Ensuring that children are protected and preventing youth suicide are issues that are important on a national scale which is why this legislation should have mass appeal.

2. Procedural/Administrative Provisions

Severability Clause: Any section of this act that is held invalid or unconstitutional, does not affect the validity or legitimacy of the remaining provisions of this act, which shall continue to be implemented in full force and effect to the fullest extent of the law.

Effective Date: This Act shall take effect July 1, 2026.

Repealer Clause: All laws or parts of laws in conflict with this Act are hereby declared null and void.

3. Summary/Digest:

Cyberbullying is a current and critical issue that threatens child safety and presents a unique challenge due to the persistence, permanence, and public visibility of online harassment. While Florida has an existing policy that sets guidelines for general anti-bullying programs and staff training, the current statute's broad language does not set standards that meaningfully prevent cyberbullying. The failure of the current system in schools is evident with the high-profile cases of Rebecca Sedwick and Mckenna Brown. In both cases, the student endured cyberbullying and online harassment before committing suicide. The parents of both girls notified schools of what the girls were going through but reported that school administration did not effectively intervene and failed to protect the student. No family should have to endure that type of loss which is why the Rebecca Sedwick and Mckenna Brown Cyberbullying Prevention Act aims to amend the existing framework to ensure schools have the tools and information necessary to safeguard children in such cases. To ensure that what happened to Rebecca Sedwick and Mckenna Brown never happens again, the Rebecca Sedwick and Mckenna Brown Cyberbullying

Prevention Act amends the existing statute to require districts to include cyberbullying-specific prevention programming including a curriculum and staff training to instruct school employees on the best way to support students in cyberbullying cases. The anticipated outcome is to build a foundation of understanding so in the short-term it prevents cyberbullying and in the long-term staff will have the ability to meaningfully intervene in cases of cyberbullying.

This bill represents the best solution because it builds off existing legislation, effectively modernizing it to address the realities of the internet and social media. Constituents would benefit because the Rebecca Sedwick and Mckenna Brown Cyberbullying Prevention Act solves the well-documented failures encountered in the school system when dealing with incidents of cyberbullying. Considering John Fay's campaign for Congress is a bid for the FL-13 seat, the Rebecca Sedwick and Mckenna Brown Cyberbullying Prevention Act could be of value. Because the case of Mckenna Brown was a high-profile incident of cyberbullying and tragic loss felt by a Pinellas County family, it may be beneficial to introduce a policy that is personal and directly affected the community in the FL-13 district. The Rebecca Sedwick and Mckenna Brown Cyberbullying Prevention Act could be used by campaign messaging to demonstrate an awareness of issues faced by the community and show a conceivable effort to safeguard children and prevent the loss of life which appeals to voters.

4. Sources

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