



# CAPITOL WEEKLY

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## Battling the bullies: Dealing with a problem that causes deep suffering among victims

By **Bonnie Lowenthal** | 11/10/11 12:00 AM PST

By affixing his name to a small package of education bills last month, Gov. Jerry Brown sent a signal to parents and teachers alike that bullying – in the school yard or on the Internet – is unacceptable, and the grownups are going to do something about it.

Bullied kids are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression. They often develop behavior problems and underperform in school. Sometimes, they give up and drop out of school altogether. Way too many of them are bullied mentally, verbally and physically almost on a daily basis.

In short, bullying is toxic. So we need to get bullying out of our schools in the same way we had to get lead out of our paint. We simply cannot allow something so poisonous near our children.

Even if you have little sympathy for bullying's young victims, it's obvious to everyone that an atmosphere of threat and intimidation can undermine all of our best efforts, and can make it harder for us to prepare the next generation to compete in the world marketplace.

It's a national issue, and it's about time. Bullies are no longer confined to the school yard or the street corner. They now have at their command all the tools of social media and the digital age. School kids can be stalked online and terrorized in their own homes any time of the day or night.

These predators have new tools to harass and hurt. So school districts need new tools to deal with the problem.

One new law that will take effect on New Year's Day is AB 746, which extended the definition of an "electronic act" to include posts on a social network site. This should be a valuable new tool for the prevention of bullying, and brings the law up-to-date with the realities of our children's lives.

Other laws seek to foster a peaceful, positive learning environment on campus. AB 1156 will expand the definition of bullying, linking it to academic performance as well as requiring school personnel to take bullying prevention trainings. AB 9 will put school safety first by creating strong and clear anti-harassment policies and programs that currently either don't exist in most schools or do not specifically include the issue of bullying.

The governor's actions are supported by a program that's focused on the solution to the problem of bullying. **PeaceBuilders** is a science-based, research-validated program which decreases aggressive and violent behavior and reduces suspensions, referrals and disciplinary action. In 600 sites throughout California, **PeaceBuilders** increases school attendance and improves tests scores and academic achievement by creating a welcome and safe environment where children can focus on learning and teachers spend less time disciplining their students and can focus on teaching them.

A recent Harris Interactive survey showed that both parents and children worry more about the dangers of bullies than illegal drug use and believe there should be more resources available to students who experience bullying in schools. Programs that focus on how to prevent bullying before it starts are the key to decreased aggressive and violent behavior, reduced suspensions, and reduced referrals and disciplinary action.

I am a strong advocate for a child's right to a safe, high-quality education. I've been extremely impressed with the strides made by schools that have implemented anti-bullying programs and embraced a philosophy of turning school into a safe, peaceful and productive place to be. It is just these kinds of healthy environments – shored up by making AB 1156 and AB 9 law – where we can foster our children's well-being and education, and where bullies have no power. The governor should be commended for signing these bills, and for demonstrating his continued support for a positive learning environment for all students.

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