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LOCAL

ADL lauds anti-bullying bill passed by Florida Legislature

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Millions of television viewers watched in shock as a group of teenage girls pummeled a classmate in a student-made video that recently aired on national news shows.

The alarming incident, coupled with another clip, showing a child being beaten on a school bus, in addition to a series of school shootings, illustrates the disturbing dilemma of bullying and violence in the nation's schools.

"It's becoming an epidemic in our schools," David L. Barkey, southern area counsel for the Anti-Defamation League, said. "There's definitely a link between bullying and

criminal activity. We believe it's very important for schools to implement programs and policies to prevent and respond to bullying."

As a longtime advocate of anti-harassment programs, the ADL lauded the Florida Senate's unanimous passage last week of the Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up for All Students Act. The bill, which had passed earlier in the Florida House of Representatives, requires all Florida public schools to adopt policies that prohibit bullying or harassment of any student or employee.

In addition to covering verbal and physical bullying, the bill prohibits cyber-bullying, a growing problem that affects al-



Close to 40 educators from the American Heritage School in Delray Beach participated in the Florida launch event of ADL's new cyber-bullying program, "Trickery, Trolling and Threats: Understanding & Addressing Cyber-bullying." Submitted photo

most half of U.S. teens. The bill also provides examples of bullying, including racial, religious or sexual harassment. The bill will move to Gov. Charlie Crist to be signed into law.

"This bill has been a longtime in coming and, overall, we are pleased with it," Andrew Rosenkranz, ADL Florida regional director, said. "An anti-bullying law

would be a big step forward in stopping the bullying epidemic within our schools, and we urge the governor to sign the Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up for

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All Students Act."

The ADL is a principal member of the Florida Safe Schools Coalition, which, for seven years, has sought a comprehensive anti-bullying bill that will protect all students, including those kids who are bullied or harassed because of their actual or perceived personal characteristics, such as disability, gender identity, national origin, physical appearance, race, religion, sex or sexual orientation.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics survey, students who were bullied were more likely to report they had carried a weapon to school for protection; bullied students were more likely to report being involved in a physical fight; and the National Education Association re-

ports that 160,000 victims of bullying miss one or more school days each month because they are too afraid to go to school.

Bullying does not stop unless schools consistently use proven prevention strategies that can be woven into the fabric of the school day and sustained over time, said Kim Mazauskas, bullying prevention/intervention coordinator of the School District of Palm Beach County.

"Schools are not successful when they provide inappropriate or inconsistent responses, or when efforts are not fully supported by school staff and parents," she added.

One of the Department of Safe Schools' projects to combat bullying in schools is its partnership with ADL to bring programming to middle schools and high schools

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upon request. The ADL programs include "Becoming an Ally," "Names Can Hurt Assembly" and "Hate Comes Home."

"The ADL has wonderful programs," Mazauskas said. "It gets to the underlying issues that cause bullying."

Among the various causes of bullying are "some people have a strong need to dominate or they get satisfaction from harming people," Mazauskas said. "Another reason — [bullies] are rewarded in some way by peer esteem. As long as power is glorified, it's going to be difficult [to eradicate bullying]. But if we can promote awareness, we can prevent it by speaking out."

ADL's A World of Difference Institute, which "provides hands-on training to

help children and adults challenge prejudice and discrimination and learn to live and work successfully and civilly in an increasingly diverse world," is promoting awareness. Last year, it introduced a free curriculum, "Cyber-bullying: Understanding and Addressing Online Cruelty," to help students and teachers recognize and confront cyber-bullying.

"Parents now are more aware of the issues and are taking a stronger stand on what their kids are doing on the Internet," Marcie Shaughnessy, ADL's Florida regional education director, said.

"Bullying continues to be on the rise — and sadly is going beyond that and turning to violence," she added. "ADL is taking the steps to make people aware of the results of bullying."

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