by {ga=ahumm}
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Nobody likes a schoolyard bully, but nobody tried to pass a law against them, until now. There are such bills being considered by both the New York City Council and the New York State Legislature.

Last month, the New York State Assembly voted 144 to 2 to pass the Dignity for All Students Act, an anti-bullying bill that would require schools to take systemic action to address bias-related harassment of students on the basis of "actual or perceived race, color, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practice, disability, sexual orientation, gender (including gender identity and expression), or sex." It also would require training of staff on how to deal with these issues and mandates documentation of and data collection on incidents of harassment. There is a Dignity for All Students Coalition of more than 100 groups statewide supporting it, including religious, civil rights, gay/lesbian, and education organizations.

As usual, the members of the Republican-dominated New York State Senate do not see the issue in the same way as the Democratic-led New York State Assembly. The senate has its own bill, the Schools as Safe Harbors Act, which also addresses bias harassment, though not as comprehensively. "The good news is that the Senate and Assembly are actively discussing a compromise measure," said Ross Levi, legislative counsel for the Empire State Pride Agenda , a gay and lesbian lobby group. "That's very encouraging. The timeline is quicker than I would have guessed when the session started."

In the city, an anti-bullying bill will soon be introduced into the City Council with a similar name, the Dignity in All Schools Act, which would prohibit harassment for any reason in public and private (but not parochial) schools, mandate that the chancellor create guidelines for enforcement, require training for employees and students on how to discourage harassment, require that the schools develop a method of reporting bullying cases.

The bill already has 37 co-sponsors. Since only 34 votes are needed for a veto-proof majority, chief sponsor Alan Gerson, who represents Lower Manhattan in the council, expects the bill to be enacted before the start of the new school year in September.

Gerson said the city anti-bullying act is designed to "call attention to an endemic problem and get something done about an awful part of youth subculture. For too many kids, the lessons learned are not about math and science, but how to endure taunts and harassment." He said that one of out society's "dirty secrets" is that "nothing seriously has been done about this. There is so much good and wonderful about youth. They're fresh, open, vibrant, and open-minded. But there is this subculture that affects too many of our young people -- the pecking order. Too many kids feel that there needs to be someone to pick on. Both the pickers and those picked on are victims. I want to give the school the tools and resources to deal with the problem effectively.

"I'm not naĂŻve," Gerson said. "This is not a panacea, but it could be a step in helping it to go away."

Posting The Human Rights Law

Intro 353 would require that the city's human rights law be posted in all places of employment and public accommodation.

Tom Smith, president of the Stonewall Democratic Club , developed the bill with former Council Member Kathryn Freed, and now sees real hope for passage. "The original human rights law didn't contain an education section," he said. "It is just as important for people to be able to understand and access the law as it is having the law in the first place."

The recently revitalized City Commission on Human Rights has been engaged in more education and outreach under Commissioner Patricia Gatling . Last month they launched a campaign to educate the public about the meaning of the latest addition to the human rights law, the category of "gender identity and _expression" protecting people of transgender experience. And on April 25, the commission and the New York Immigration Coalition offered a program on Immigrant Employment Rights , part of a new effort to educate immigrants on the "federal and city protections afforded under the Immigration and Reform Control Act of 1986 and the New York City Human Rights Law."

Same-Sex Partner in Civil Union Recognized as Spouse by New York Judge

Nassau County Supreme Court Judge John P. Dunne granted John Langan, a gay man who had obtained a civil union with his male partner Conrad Spicehandler in Vermont, the right to sue St. Vincent's Hospital in Manhattan for the wrongful death of his partner. This is the first time anywhere in the country that a jurisdiction outside Vermont has recognized a person in a civil union as a "spouse" under the law. Professor Arthur Leonard of New York Law School covered the legal issues for the Gay City News and I interviewed advocates for same-sex marriage about the impact of this decision on their movement.

Andy Humm is a former member of the City Commission on Human Rights. He is co-host of the weekly "Gay USA" on Manhattan Neighborhood Network (57 on Time-Warner; 109 on RCN) on Thursdays at 11 PM.