

Joint Statement on the Megan Meier's Cyberbullying Prevention Act, HR 6123

Submitted to:

The Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security

Committee on The Judiciary

House of Representatives

September 30, 2009

The undersigned represent the leading nationally recognized researchers and authorities on the issue of cyberbullying. Collectively, our purpose in releasing this statement is to express our professional opinion that Megan Meier's Cyberbullying Prevention Act is a well-meant, but faulty, vehicle for addressing this serious social problem.

In no way is our objection founded upon a belief that cyberbullying is not significant enough to warrant action. Clearly, cyberbullying causes serious emotional and academic damage to victims. It is our concern for the children involved in these behaviors that prompts our objection to the proposed legislation. Although the proposed legislation has raised free speech concerns, our statement will not address those concerns. Our disagreement is grounded in our comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of electronic aggression and our belief that this legislation will be ineffective in addressing the fundamental causes and correlates of the problem, and further, may in fact provide a distraction from the need for better, more effective prevention and intervention efforts.

Cyberbullying is a complex issue that involves education, emotional development, and social relationships. Although cyberbullying may appear to be as simple as cruel electronic messages, in fact research has clearly shown it to frequently be part of a pattern of offline and online harassment. The complexity of these behaviors cannot, unfortunately, be addressed by simply declaring them illegal. While such legislation is often defended as merely a beginning in addressing complex behaviors, it may in fact serve to distract stakeholders from investing in the comprehensive, ongoing, in-depth prevention and intervention efforts that are needed to truly prevent such trauma.

When it comes to children victimizing other children, the research has consistently demonstrated that both aggressors and targets in electronic aggression situations have significant psychosocial concerns. Further, a child who is victimized repeatedly and cruelly in school may, out of depression and despair, retaliate with cyberbullying and under this legislation would be branded a criminal, not a victim. As professionals, we see such behavior as more appropriately addressed through comprehensive efforts to establish school communities where every student feels supported, and where bullying and aggression of any kind is not allowed. These are issues that must be addressed locally in schools and with children's caregivers, rather than by the federal government.

Our objection to this legislation should not be misconstrued as dismissive of the importance of the need to proactively address the concerns of cyberbullying. To effectively address these concerns will require comprehensive funding of the safe schools and communities programs in states, districts, and local communities, with a specific directive that schools and communities must mobilize to address the new risks to young people presented by new technologies.

Submitted by:

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