

# Long Island Residents Urge Anti-Bullying Reforms

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Long Islanders are fighting to stop bullying in their local areas. (Rick Uldricks)

LONG ISLAND, NY — When 15-year-old Devin Moore started eighth grade at St. Mary School in East Islip, he never thought he would be viciously bullied. In 2018, he said three students cyberbullied him by sending him images of his face photoshopped on a gorilla suit. Moore is black.

Moore said he went to Principal Biagio Arpino and teachers, showing them the pictures, thinking his bullies would be punished accordingly. What transpired was not what he expected.

The students continued to attend the same school and classes as Moore, who spent the rest of the school year surrounded by the three students until he transferred to Long Island

Lutheran Middle/High School in Brookville, he said.

"It's not right that I had to go back to class and be punished for their actions," Moore told Patch. "It's not right that I had to go back every day and think they were going to hurt me."

After the bullying, Moore filed a federal lawsuit against the school, Arpino and the students. In this lawsuit, Moore's lawyer claimed the students used the app Discord, which provides free voice and text chat for gamers, to bully Moore using avatars and fake names. Through the app, Moore received racist images including one that stated that "Black People Are Not Functioning Members of Society," the lawsuit claims.

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Moore also said he received a photo of a rope with the caption "Man Dies After Killing Himself" underneath and a picture of a KKK member. In another photo, Moore said his face was also photoshopped into images portraying him with a gun to his head and one as a Nazi soldier. The lawsuit claims that the school refused to address the issue in order to protect its reputation as an institution that follows Christian values.

As of January, the lawsuit is still moving forward, according to Moore. He said the case is in the discovery phase and the next court date is set for February.

Moore's story is not an unusual one for many American students. Traditional bullying, defined as aggravated harassment where someone is made to feel like less than a person on more than one occasion, has been a problem for many years now. According to a 2017 report by the National Center for Education, 20 percent of middle and high school students ages 12 to 18 reported being bullied at school during the year. In addition, 41 percent of the students who reported being bullied said they thought it would happen again.

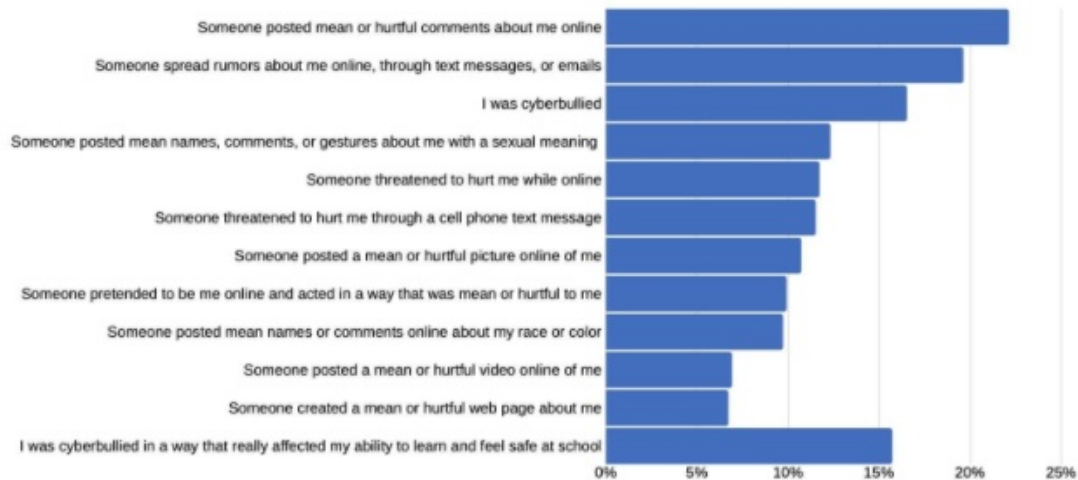
The age of social media, which has led to a new form of bullying, cyberbullying, which is exactly what Moore experienced. According to the book, "International Perspectives on Cyberbullying: Prevalence, Risk Factors and Interventions" published in 2018 by Palgrave Macmillan, cyberbullying is defined as a critical public health concern. The research cited an online survey among 1,501 regular internet users between 10 and 17 years old which found that 19 percent of teens were involved in online aggression in the past year with 12 percent reported being perpetrators; four percent were victims or targets; and three percent were both perpetrator and targets.

In 2013, the New York State Education Department put into effect the Dignity for All Students Act, which put the responsibility on the schools to report incidents of bullying to the state. In addition, under the law all students are given the right to have a safe and supportive environment not just on school grounds, but on the school bus and at school functions as well.

Joe Salamone, founder of a local nonprofit the Long Island Coalition Against Bullying, said in

his experience, about 90 percent of the people who called the group since it began in 2013 reported bullying on social media.

### Reports of cyberbullying



Source: Sameer Hinduja & Justin W. Patchin (2018): Connecting Adolescent Suicide to the Severity of Bullying and Cyberbullying, Journal of School Violence, DOI

For Moore, he had to endure the cyberbullying for the whole school year, until he switched to schools in the 9th grade in September 2018. So far, he has not experienced the same issues of bullying in his new school. However, since then Moore has been working to help turn his past experience into something positive. He started an anti-bullying organization, #Racetospeakup, helped to start an anti-bullying task force and has been working with officials to pass a state law that would hold New York schools accountable for bullying experiences.

Moore's proposed legislation would require schools to hold mandatory anti-bullying courses for both the teachers and the students. Moore feels passionate about the law because he feels it could have helped him in his situation. Suffolk County Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory made anti-bullying part of his platform after hearing Moore's story. The two worked together to create the anti-bullying task force, which is the only one in Suffolk County to be comprised of only teenagers. He is also supporting Moore with his law proposed earlier this year. Moore, who has received over 1,300 signatures out of 1,500 needed on his petition to get the law passed, has been meeting with other assembly members and senators who recommended he go to Albany to speak to the senate. It is still unknown when his law will be passed.

"It will take time but it's possible," he said. "I want to get this law passed to help as many kids as I can."

Moore isn't the only Long Islander trying to fight this bullying issue.

Salamone was bullied nearly all of his time at Robert Frost Middle School in Deer Park and all through his time at Deer Park High School. It got to a point where he tried to commit suicide in the 9th grade until he met a teacher, Kristen Wallace, who unknowingly thwarted his plan.

"In my personal experience when I was going through the height of it, I never really wanted to go out, I became very angry and moody there were definitely changes in my personality," he said.

But it wasn't just his own bullying experience that sparked his interest in wanting to help others. He was inspired to find a way to help other bullying victims after witnessing a special needs person being openly mocked and harassed by a group of kids in the waiting room of Good Samaritan Medical Hospital in West Islip in April 2013.

"I sat there and I thought 'if this type of thing can happen with an audience of people watching, then that means that something needs to be done,'" he said.

This led to him starting his non-profit, the Long Island Coalition Against Bullying, just five months later. His organization works to create bully-free communities on Long Island through education, increased awareness and therapy. Salamone's team of 20 staff members, made up of volunteer pediatric residents of Cohen Children's Medical Center, work to provide several different resources.

People can either call the group or report incidents of bullying directly through their website to receive a response from a member, who is trained in emotional connection and empathetic listening. In addition, through the group residents can request a "smile package" to send to a bullying victim which can be customized with their favorite things. The group also refers and, in some cases, even pays for kids and families to seek private counseling for up to five sessions close to home, no matter what insurance they have.

"When you are working directly with families like that, you are listening to what the particular struggle is," Salamone said. "In some cases, there is a real bullying incident and in other cases sometimes it's a lack of education about what bullying is and what it is not."

But what can be done when these resources don't work?

Neal Goldstein, an attorney at Goldstein and Bashnera said he's worked on more than a dozen cases. He receives about 25 calls a month from Long Island parents reporting bullying.

The biggest case Goldstein took on dates back to 2017. Goldstein represented then 16-year-old Austin Schneiderman, who filed a lawsuit against the Farmingdale School District after attempting to commit suicide after enduring bullying for three years while attending Welden Howitt Middle School.

"I found this young man incredibly articulate and genuine about what had occurred to him. His parents were also extremely credible and quite detailed about all the efforts they made to get the school to do something to stop the abuse Austin was going through," Goldstein said. "For me it was one of those moments when regardless of the ultimate settlement action had to be taken to help this family gain control over this situation."

Despite the fact that Schneiderman was being verbally and physically attacked on the school bus daily, once even describing his bullying in a journal entry assignment for class, school officials did nothing.

"We all understand that schools can't guarantee 100 percent safety, 100 percent of the time," Goldstein said. "But schools are supposed to be safe. When a bullying incident occurs it's incumbent upon school officials to have an open line of communication without. That seems to be an area where schools will often fail."

When her daughter was being bullied, Deer Park resident Catherine Corella said a "red flag" she noticed was when her daughter didn't want to ride the bus. The best advice Corella shares with parents who have a child going through bullying is she suggests all parents be extremely involved with their kid's schools.

She also said to check your children's phones. She regularly goes through her 13-year-old daughter's phone and social media accounts.

"All these kids under 18, unless they are buying their own phones, they don't need privacy," she said.



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