

Jay Howell & Associates

A PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

Attorneys at Law

644 Cesery Boulevard, Suite 300

Jacksonville, Florida 32211

(904) 680-1234 • Fax (904) 680-1238

www.jayhowell.com

HARASSMENT AT SCHOOL- PART I

by Jay C. Howell

Local newspaper accounts have recently featured several reported cases of children who are being harassed at school. These cases seem to follow familiar patterns. In one scenario, a female student is contacted, repeatedly approached, followed, and telephoned at her home by a male student who tells her that he wants to initiate, develop, or continue a personal relationship with her. Though the victim clearly states that she does not wish to establish such a relationship, the pattern of harassment continues.

In another typical situation, a student is targeted by another for harassment and intimidation through the use of websites, chatrooms, and other internet sources of information. The website may contain words and phrases of intimidation, actual threats, or even a listing of names of several students who the site suggests should be targeted.

Another example involves a pattern of physical conduct wherein the perpetrator student physically touches or fondles a member of the opposite sex or, in the traditional case of "bullying," a student is a regular victim of physical assaults and intimidation at the hands of another student.

Tragically, these cases are becoming more familiar. When parents turn to the obvious resources for assistance and protection, they are surprised to learn that the response of the individual school and school system is confused, weak, and unfocused. The school tells the family that any behavior which takes place on a website or outside of the school setting is beyond their control. Minimal disciplinary action such as three day suspensions are not forceful enough to end the long-term pattern of harassment.

Similarly, the parents are surprised to learn that the criminal justice and law enforcement may not have an immediate remedy to protect the child. If the pattern of harassment does not involve actual

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threats, stalking, or physical contact, then the behavior in question may not run afoul of our criminal statutes.

What can the parents do?

Can our individual schools, our school systems, our investigators, and law enforcement officials do a better job at protecting students from these disturbing examples of threatening behavior?

The obvious answer is yes, and in this and other articles to follow we will examine some of the steps which can be taken by parents and students to ensure that mandatory school attendance does not mean that the child must also suffer fear, intimidation, or worse.

It is important that we set the stage of recommendations to follow with some of the fundamental policies and procedures that must be considered in addressing any case of harassment, threats, or stalking in the school setting. The first is the School Board's Code of Student Conduct. Each school system has such a code and it is readily available to any parent. In typical student conduct codes, such as the one in place in Duval County, the code contains general information about the role of the school, the parents, and the students themselves, in addressing student safety. Basic policies regarding formal disciplinary action, suspension, and the procedures that accompany these actions is also included. The code is very specific and will often reveal exactly what happens is a particular rule is broken. Many of the school conduct codes are broken down into classes or general categories of misbehavior. The most minor classification includes such conduct as bothering other students, demonstrating inappropriate affection to other children, and being on time. The most serious infractions involve bringing a gun or other weapon to school, hurting someone on purpose, or setting a fire. Touching someone when he or she doesn't want

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to be touched, threatening other students to get them to do something, stealing, and fighting are often classified in the middle category of offenses.

Every parent should have a copy of the School Board Code of Student Conduct and information about what will happen if the code is violated. In our next article we will consider the practical meaning of the Florida stalking statute and some specific recommendations in any situation where a child has been harassed at school.