

[suntimes](#)

[Under new state law, online threats can mean school expulsion](#)

BY KIM JANSSEN

Staff Reporter

Last Modified: Jan 1, 2012 11:17PM

Whether they use Facebook, Twitter or a blog to do it, students who make online threats against other students or school staff face suspension or expulsion under a new Illinois law that took effect Sunday.

House Bill 3281, which passed in August, is the latest attempt to tackle the growing problem of online bullying, according to its supporters.

While examples of abusive behavior by students have multiplied across the nation and studies suggest half of all teens have been victimized by cyber-bullies, the law's impetus came from an incident at Oswego High School six years ago, Illinois House minority leader Tom Cross said.

When an Oswego student posted an online diatribe against his teachers in 2005, vowing "I'm so angry I could kill," leaders at School District 308 weren't sure what they could do, SD 308 spokeswoman Kristine Liptrot said.

Since the threat was made outside school hours, away from school grounds from a private computer, they were concerned about interfering with the boy's First Amendment rights and felt unable to suspend or expel the boy, who refused to take down the message until his parents intervened, Liptrot said, describing the experience as "upsetting and frightening" for the staff members and their families.

Cross said he'd tried repeatedly to change the law to strengthen school administrators' hands in similar situations, but added that it's taken a while for legislators to come to grips with Internet issues. "I don't think kids are getting any meaner," he said, "30 years ago, a bully might have said something in class — now they'll say it on the Internet."

The law allows administrators to discipline students who make any online threat that "could be reasonably interpreted as threatening to the safety and security" of

another student or staff member.

It was needed because existing laws “weren’t specific enough,” bill sponsor state Rep. Sidney Matthias said. “We’re making it clear to students that this is unacceptable behavior,” he added.

Copyright © 2012 — Sun-Times Media, LLC
