

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Criminal Justice

BILL: SB 548

INTRODUCER: Senator Simmons

SUBJECT: Bullying

DATE: February 4, 2014

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Dugger	Cannon	CJ	Pre-meeting
2.			ACJ	
3.			AP	

I. Summary:

SB 548 creates a criminal statute penalizing bullying and aggravated bullying. The newly created statute provides a first degree misdemeanor penalty¹ for bullying and a third degree felony penalty² for aggravated bullying. Cyberbullying is included in each new crime. The elements of these two new offenses and the definitions provided in the bill are the same as the elements and definitions in the stalking statute (found to be constitutional by the Florida Supreme Court in 1995).

II. Present Situation:

Bullying Statute

Florida law requires each district school board to adopt a policy prohibiting bullying and harassment in district schools.³ Violation of these policies can result in school disciplinary actions being taken. Among other things, the law prohibits the bullying or harassment of any public K-12 student or employee during a public K-12 education program or activity; during a school-related or school-sponsored program or activity; on a public K-12 school bus; through a computer, computer system, or computer network that is within the scope of a public K-12 educational institution; or through the use of data or computer software accessed at a nonschool-related location or through the use of electronic device technology or electronic devices not owned, leased, or used by a public school or school district if it substantially interferes with or limits the victim's ability to participate or benefit from the services, activities, or opportunities offered by a school or substantially disrupts the education process or orderly operation of a school.⁴

¹ Punishable by up to one year in jail and a potential fine up to \$1,000. Sections 775.082 and 775.083, F.S.

² Punishable by up to five years in prison and a potential fine up to \$5,000. Sections 775.082 and 775.083, F.S.

³ Section 1006.147, F.S.

⁴ Section 1006.147(2), F.S.

The law defines “bullying” as systematically and chronically inflicting physical hurt or psychological distress on one or more students, which may involve teasing; social exclusion; threat; intimidation; stalking; physical violence; theft; sexual, religious, or racial harassment; public humiliation; or destruction of property. It includes “cyberbullying” and defines it as bullying through the use of specified technology or electronic communications; the creation of a webpage or weblog in which the creator assumes the identity of another person or the knowing impersonation of another person as the author of posted content or messages; or the distribution by electronic means of a communication to more than one person or the posting of material on an electronic medium that is accessible to others.⁵

Law enforcement, among other entities, must be involved with the school district in the process of adopting the policies. The policies must include a process to investigate whether a reported act of bullying or harassment is within the scope of a district school system and if it is not, a process for referring such act to the appropriate jurisdiction must be identified. A procedure must also be included that provides immediate notification to parents and to criminal justice authorities so that actions rising to the level of criminal activity can be referred to the appropriate law enforcement entity for further investigation.⁶

Although Florida’s anti-bullying law does not provide criminal penalties for bullying per se, it does provide a process that allows bullying behavior to be investigated and prosecuted by criminal justice authorities and if warranted, pursued as other criminal offenses such as assault, aggravated assault, battery, aggravated battery, theft, stalking, or aggravated stalking.

Stalking Statute

Florida’s stalking law⁷ was upheld by the Florida Supreme Court as constitutional in 1995.⁸ It defines “harass,” “course of conduct,” “credible threat,” and “cyberstalk.”⁹ Basically, “harass” means a “course of conduct” (a pattern comprised of a series of acts over a time period, however short, showing a continuity of purpose), directed at a specific person causing substantial emotional distress to that person and serving no legitimate purpose. “Cyberstalk” means a course of conduct communicating or causing to be communicated, words or images by electronic mail or electronic communication, directed at a specific person, causing substantial emotional distress to that person and serving no legitimate purpose. Finally, “credible threat” is defined to mean a verbal or nonverbal threat placing a person in reasonable fear for his or his family’s safety, made with the apparent ability to carry it out.

The stalking statute provides a first degree misdemeanor penalty for stalking¹⁰ and third degree felony penalties for several aggravated stalking offenses.¹¹ The misdemeanor stalking offense

⁵ Section 1006.147(3), F.S.

⁶ Section 1006.147(4), F.S.

⁷ Section 784.048, F.S.

⁸ *Bouters v State*, 659 So.2d 235 (Fla 1995). The Court concluded that the stalking statute was not unconstitutionally overbroad or vague. *Bouters* at 238.

⁹ Section 784.048(1), F.S.

¹⁰ See Footnote 1.

¹¹ See Footnote 2.

occurs when a person willfully, maliciously, and repeatedly follows, harasses, or cyberstalks another person.¹²

One of the aggravated stalking offenses occurs when a person willfully, maliciously, and repeatedly follows, harasses, or cyberstalks another person and makes a credible threat to that person.¹³ The other three aggravated stalking offenses involve this same behavior without a threat being made and instead, the victim is either under 16 years; there is a protective injunction against a person for repeat violence, sexual violence, dating violence, or domestic violence; or there is a no contact (the victim) order against a person convicted of certain sexual offenses.¹⁴

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The bill creates a criminal statute penalizing bullying and aggravated bullying. The newly created statute provides a first degree misdemeanor penalty for bullying and a third degree felony penalty for aggravated bullying. Cyberbullying is included in each new crime. The misdemeanor bullying offense will occur when a person willfully, maliciously, and repeatedly harasses or cyberbullies another person. The felony aggravated bullying offense will occur when a person willfully, maliciously, and repeatedly harasses or cyberbullies another person and makes a credible threat to that person. The elements of these two new offenses and the definitions provided in the bill are the same as the elements and definitions in the stalking statute.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

Persons convicted of bullying and aggravated bullying under the bill will potentially be subject to a criminal fine of up to \$1,000 and \$5,000, respectively.

¹² Section 784.048(2), F.S.

¹³ Section 784.048(3), F.S.

¹⁴ Section 784.048(4), (5), and (7), F.S.

C. **Government Sector Impact:**

The Criminal Justice Impact Conference met on January 30, 2014 and determined that the prison bed impact from this bill is insignificant.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill creates section 784.049 of the Florida Statutes.

IX. Additional Information:

A. **Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:**

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. **Amendments:**

None.