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## Time to End the Bullying

JEFFERSON CITY — A tragic incident that happened a year ago in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Senatorial District has more recently come to the forefront of the news. A teenage girl, distraught by the words she sees on her computer screen from her online chat with whom she believes is another teenager, kills herself. It turns out that the police believe the “boy” in the chat was actually the parents of a friend with whom the suicidal girl had a falling out, seeking revenge for their scorned daughter. This tragedy has prompted the Dardenne Prairie Board of Aldermen to declare online harassment a misdemeanor, and I am looking at filing legislation this year to address the issue on a state level.

First of all, I’ve heard from lots of constituents asking why we don’t already have laws on the books to address bullying by way of e-mail, text messages, and online chat. The easy answer is because the new technology has advanced faster than what we could pass new laws to cover them. But the shocking events that led to the death of this teenager demand we move at the pace of the technology we seek to regulate.

I’ve started that movement by talking to prosecutors in this case to find out: 1) what exactly happened, 2) what would prosecutors need for a new case, and 3) how we prevent more incidents such as this one in the future. Information is preliminary at this point, and I hope as we move forward in this process that we’ll be able to fill in the gaps.

As I said, we’re early in the information-gathering stage of the process, so there are no particulars I’ve been able to identify just yet. Previous suggestions include those by the state Department of Mental Health that call for better counseling for those kids who feel they’re on the verge of despair and suicide is the only option. Talking it out instead of acting on those feelings is a good starting point. The move by the Dardenne Prairie Board of Aldermen to make this type of harassment a crime is another good start. As we continue through this process, though, we must be careful what language we put into any new law. While we have widespread support now, we have to come up with a plan that addresses the issue without alienating any of the people it is meant to serve.

Thirteen-year-old Megan Meier was a bright, beautiful young girl who had her whole life ahead of her. It is unbearable to think that an online chat would turn vicious, and most likely deadly, and contribute to end that young life. I believe my colleagues in the legislature will recognize the need to make a change in our harassment laws so another Megan Meier incident never has to happen.

If you have comments or questions about this week’s column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by phone at (866) 271-2844.