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Protest planned: Frustration cited over South Hadley school's handling of bullying issues

By CATHERINE BAUM
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SOUTH HADLEY - Parents and students who are unhappy with the way school officials have responded to the bullying case surrounding Phoebe Prince's death will voice their frustrations at South Hadley High School Tuesday night through protests and petitions.

Protesting is set to coincide with the anti-bullying task force's first meeting at 6:30 p.m. The task force is charged with developing constructive ways to address bullying, a problem Prince faced before she took her life Jan. 14. New to South Hadley, Prince was a 15-year-old freshman at the school.

Parents and students are using Facebook to spread the word about the protest, grieve Prince's death and share their concerns about bullying. Petitions supporting anti-bullying legislation and the resignations of Superintendent Gus Sayer and South Hadley High School Principal Daniel Smith are to be passed around and signed Tuesday night, according to the Facebook information about the event. The protest is to run from 6 to 10 p.m. at the Newton Street school.

"The folks that use Facebook, they're frustrated," said Luke Gelinas, whose son was friends with Prince. "They don't feel they have any other voice. They feel largely that their concerns have been unanswered, have been placated, and have been dismissed."

Meanwhile, task force attendees are to be separated into groups to develop ideas and plans to move forward, an approach some people believe won't work. "It's really poorly managed," said Darby O'Brien, a South Hadley High School parent. He noted he intends to sign a petition calling for Sayer and Smith's resignations.

"These guys don't know what to do and they're turning to us. Maybe we've got the wrong guys doing this job," he said.

Last month, some 300 people came out to discuss and listen to stories about bullying in South Hadley High School at a School Committee meeting. School officials asked the public not to mention Prince at the meeting, citing a request brought forward by her family.

A month later, parents report they are bothered by the lack of response from school officials.

"The longer it goes, the higher the frustration level," O'Brien said. "Parents have serious concerns. You've got those kids still walking the halls."

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