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Questions for School on Bullying and a Suicide

By ERIK ECKHOLM and KATIE ZEZIMA

Published: April 1, 2010

SOUTH HADLEY, Mass. — On one point, everyone here agrees: the high school students who taunted and threatened Phoebe Prince for three months, until she hanged herself, deserve to be punished.

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Christopher Capozziello for The New York Times

Bill Evans, the assistant principal of South Hadley High School, spoke with parents on Monday after nine students were indicted.

But acrimony over what school officials knew and how they dealt with the bullying of Ms. Prince, 15, has intensified since Monday, when the district attorney announced that six students who hounded her [would face criminal charges](#).

School leaders said the district attorney had gotten it wrong when she said that teachers and officials had long known about the hazing of Ms. Prince, a newcomer from Ireland who was relentlessly taunted as an "Irish slut" by some students after she briefly dated a popular senior football star.

The district attorney, [Elizabeth D. Scheibel](#), for her part, issued a terse statement on Thursday suggesting that the school superintendent did not know the facts. Lending support to the district attorney's account, some students said in interviews that they had seen teachers witness bullying incidents or had seen a teacher console Ms. Prince as she wept. On the day she committed suicide in mid-January, she was seen crying in the nurse's office, according to students.

As new details emerged about Ms. Prince's persecution, school district leaders, in a flurry of television appearances and interviews, insisted that neither they nor the principal had known the extent of the hazing. They said that teachers were instructed to report all incidents and that the principal of South Hadley High School learned only at the time about two examples of harassment of Ms. Prince, both about a week before her suicide, and had disciplined the two girls involved immediately.

Officials did not realize that several other girls continued

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Phoebe Prince, 15, who hanged herself Jan. 14.

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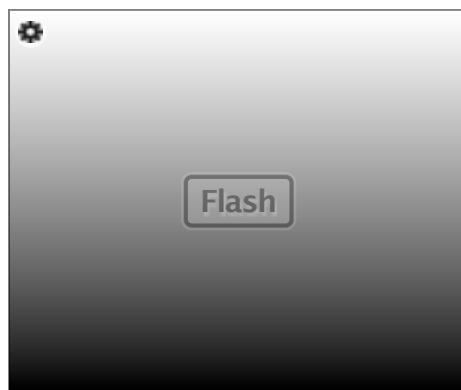
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Elizabeth D. Scheibel, the district attorney, maintains that Phoebe's parents had warned school officials about the hazing.

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"I can't buy the story that they were unaware. They are running for cover." DARBY O'BRIEN A friend of the Prince family said of school officials.

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to harass Ms. Prince in the days that followed, according to Gus Sayer, the superintendent, and Edward J. Boisselle, the chairman of the school committee, as the school board is known here. And only after her death, they said, did officials learn that she had been threatened and slurred since October.

The officials said they had no record of Ms. Prince's parents complaining to the school about the hazing, something that the district attorney and the parents say the mother did twice. They said they had taken districtwide measures to fight the problem of bullying well before Ms. Prince's torment came to light.

"We were proactive, but unfortunately, accidents and tragedies can still occur," Mr. Boisselle said in an interview.

Darby O'Brien, a friend of the Prince family, said Thursday that Ms. Prince's parents had told him that they had twice tried to alert the school and protect their daughter. Anne Prince, the mother, told him that in one case she had contacted a school official in November asking "whether this gang of girls was a threat to her daughter," and was told not to worry. The mother said she had contacted the school again in the first week of January as the taunting continued, Mr. O'Brien said.

The parents, who are discussing a possible civil suit, have refused to speak to reporters. Mr. O'Brien, a parent and head of an advertising agency here, called for the superintendent, board chairman and principal to resign. "I can't buy the story that they were unaware," he said. "They are running for cover."

Some parents defend the district. Jana Darrow-Rioux, who has been involved with the antibullying efforts started at the school last year, says she believes that the school is

being unfairly blamed.

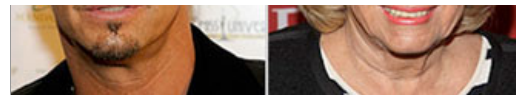
"I think it's convenient for people to want to punish the school because it's the only tangible organization in this mess," Ms. Darrow-Rioux said. She said that officials had not been able to share information during the investigations and that this had fueled unwarranted rumors.

In interviews, some students and parents described bullying incidents that they said were witnessed by teachers. A few times in December and early January, for example, Ms. Prince arrived at a class late and crying; a teacher tried to console her in the hallway and then left her there, said a student who did not want to be identified, citing the criminal proceedings.

Susan Smith said that her son had watched as one of the accused bullies screamed insults in Ms. Prince's face in the cafeteria while the teenager tried to ignore it — and that two teachers saw the verbal assault but did not act.

Questions continued to swirl about the case.

On Thursday, the district attorney, Ms. Scheibel, said in a statement: "I do not intend to address Superintendent Sayer's assertions point by point. I will, however, say that Mr. Sayer does not have access to our investigative materials. Therefore he can't have a basis for some of his comments."



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Some parents questioned the effectiveness of the school's internal investigation after Ms. Prince's death and what they described as a failure to discipline some of the offenders until the charges emerged this week.

"They had eyewitnesses to the bullying that they never interviewed," Ms. Smith said.

Some of the students who were accused were "removed from the school" this year, school officials said. Citing privacy rules, they would not say whether the students were suspended, expelled or sent to a different school.

But a few of them, school officials acknowledged, were removed only this week, after the announcement of charges against the six.

The various charges include statutory rape for the two boys, criminal harassment, violation of civil rights, stalking and other similar crimes.

The Princes lived in a small town in County Clare, Ireland, and Ms. Prince attended a boarding school in Limerick. The family had relatives in South Hadley, a region thick with Irish heritage, and decided to move here last year.

The mother, a schoolteacher, brought Ms. Prince and her 12-year-old sister to Massachusetts, renting the top floor of a house near the high school while their father stayed behind to sell their house.

By all accounts a lively girl, newly arrived at school last fall with an Irish brogue, Ms. Prince soon caught the eye of Sean Mulveyhill, a senior and a football star, and they briefly dated.

But Mr. Mulveyhill, 17, also dated Kayla Narey, 17, who like him was a longtime resident and part of a popular clique at the school, according to a friend of the students. He cut ties with Ms. Prince, and Ms. Narey and some of her friends started their campaign against her in October, students said. Mr. Mulveyhill and Ms. Narey have been charged.

Around the same time, other girls, including Flannery Mullins, 16, and Sharon Chanon Velasquez, 16, both of whom were charged, started harassing Ms. Prince, students said.

Some girls cursed Ms. Prince when she saw her in the hallways or cafeteria, shouting epithets and sometimes, in the library, whispering them as they went by.

"People were calling her a druggie or a slut, and she immediately got this horribly bad reputation," said Betty Czitcom, a sophomore.

They vilified her on Web sites and sent her text messages calling her a slut and a whore and telling her she deserved to die, according to Ms. Prince's friends.

On the afternoon of her death, on Jan. 14, other students said they saw Ms. Prince going into the nurse's office, crying. A school official confirmed that Ms. Prince had seen the nurse but said he could not comment on the reasons.

After 2 p.m., as Ms. Prince walked the three blocks to her home, girls from the younger group sped by and hit her with a can of Red Bull, according to friends of Ms. Prince.

Ms. Prince's younger sister found her at 4:30 p.m., hanging from the stairwell by the scarf her sister had given her for Christmas.

In the traumatic days that followed, Rebecca Brouillard, a student who spoke on a television interview about the hazing, was slammed against a wall and hit by one of the accused girls, said her father, Mitch Brouillard. He said that they were angry she had publicly discussed the bullying, and that some of the students who were accused had bullied his own daughter for years.

Dozens of parents attended a school committee meeting at the time and described a history of bullying at the school that many said had never been brought under control.

But school district officials noted that last fall, out of concern after the suicide of a boy in Springfield, Mass., they brought a leading consultant, Barbara Coloroso, to give a seminar about prevention and reporting of bullying.

Ms. Coloroso rushed back to South Hadley after Ms. Prince's death. She said in an interview this week that the high school had not fully carried out her recommendations to ensure reporting of any potential bullying and to involve parents early on.

"This was a horrible wake-up call," she said.

Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly credited a photograph of Phoebe Prince.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 8, 2010

A headline and an article on March 30 and another article on April 2 about the bullying and suicide of Phoebe Prince, a freshman at South Hadley High School in Massachusetts, reported that nine students had been charged with crimes including harassment, violating civil rights and statutory rape. The number of students was taken from a March 29 statement by Elizabeth D. Scheibel, the district attorney, in which she named six students who were charged with felonies, including an 18-year-old, two 17-year-olds and three 16-year-olds. Ms. Scheibel said that "in addition," delinquency complaints for similar crimes had been filed in juvenile court against three unnamed females. Her office refused to comment further, citing strict rules on the confidentiality of juvenile proceedings.

The Times has since learned from a court official that the juveniles referred to by the district attorney were the same three 16-year-old girls who are facing public criminal charges. Therefore six students — not nine — have been charged, although officials have said that the investigation is continuing.

A version of this article appeared in print on April 2, 2010, on page A1 of the New York edition.

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