

The Importance of Addressing Bullying and Harassment in Creating Safe Schools

Testimony Submitted to the United States House of Representatives Education Committee, Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education and Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities

Hearing: Strengthening School Safety through Prevention of Bullying

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The Trevor Project is the leading national organization focused on crisis and suicide prevention efforts among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Every day, The Trevor Project saves young lives through its free and confidential helpline, in-school workshops, educational materials, online resources and advocacy. The organization was founded in 1998 by three filmmakers whose film, Trevor, a comedy/drama about a gay teenager who attempts suicide, received the 1994 Academy Award® for Best Short Film (Live Action). For more information, visit TheTrevorProject.org.

Statement of the Problem

We thank Chairman Kildee and Chairwoman McCarthy, alongside with Ranking Members Castle and Platts for convening this important hearing to discuss the critical role of preventing bullying and creating safe schools, and for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record. Before speaking to the specific problem, we would like to share a story with you from a young person who recently called our national crisis and suicide prevention helpline.

John, a 14-year-old bisexual young person from rural New York state reached out to The Trevor Helpline on June 17, 2009 before making what would be his fourth suicide attempt. He was in ninth grade, and had been bullied since sixth grade for his perceived sexuality. He tried to hang himself at least twice before as a reaction to the way other people in school treated him, and has been seeing a therapist for several years now after being diagnosed with depression—an outcome both he and our helpline counselor attributed to the bullying in school. John was also very anxious when he reached out to The Trevor Helpline for help—an indication that much of the negativity he felt in his life was far beyond his sphere of control.

We share this story with you in the hopes that you will move swiftly and responsibly to address our nation's schools' longstanding challenges in preventing and effectively responding to instances of bullying and harassment. The U.S. Department of Education has noted this problem and recognized that bullying and harassment "affects nearly one in every three American schoolchildren in grades six through ten." Bullying and harassment interfere with a student's ability to achieve high standards. Bullying and harassment have a significant impact on GPAs, school attendance, dropout rates and likelihood of obtaining a post-secondary education. Research shows that nearly one in 11 students missed a class or a day of school because they felt unsafe. And we know that bullying and harassment can lead to even greater school safety

problems. Many high-profile cases of school violence – as well as incidents that are less noted – have been attributed to students who were bullied and harassed in school.

Bullying and harassment, whether based on race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, religion, gender identity or any other characteristic, interfere with a student's ability to learn. A study commissioned by GLSEN and conducted by Harris Interactiveⁱ found that physical appearance, sexual orientation (actual or perceived) and gender expression are the most common reasons for bullying and harassment in our nation's schools (39%, 33% and 28% respectively). The same study noted that only 36% of students who attend schools without enumerated anti-bullying and harassment policies report that they feel safe and 16% are likely to skip a class because they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

Aside from issues related to truancy and lost educational opportunities, bullying can have a deadly effect on youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT)—as well as youth who are unsure of their sexual orientation. Research from 2002 found that LGBT youth who report high levels of at-school bullying are more likely to engage in substance abuse, sexual risk behaviors and attempt suicide than those who are not bullied or do not identify as LGBT.ⁱⁱ Furthermore, this is just one of many studies that link being the victim of homophobia bullying and making a suicide attempt as an outcome of that victimization.ⁱⁱⁱ Another study from 2007 found that among middle school students, being the target of homophobic bullying significantly predicts increased anxiety, depression, personal distress, withdrawal and a lessened sense of school belonging.^{iv} Multiple studies have clearly linked post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) both in adolescence and in later life to being the victim of homophobic bullying while in school^v—indicating that this is a problem that begins in adolescence but can continue into adulthood.

Current Gaps in Federal Legislation

Although a limited number of federal laws address particular kinds of harassment, they do not prohibit all kinds of harassment in schools, and no federal law specifically prohibits bullying in schools. Therefore, the enactment of more comprehensive safe schools policies will fill a troubling gap in federal education policy – to ensure that *all* students, regardless of their background or characteristics, are provided with a safe environment in which to learn.

The problems of bullying and harassment are among the most prevalent and profound that schools face; they continue to seriously disrupt our school environments and affect the lives of millions of students every year, with major adverse academic and safety consequences. Congress should take steps to ensure that no student is denied access to a quality education based on fear or degradation associated with bullying and harassment.

Why Enumeration is important

We know that enumeration that not only focuses on race, sex or religion – all of which are very important – but also on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity is critical.

Students who attend schools with anti-harassment policies that enumerate categories of students for protection report that they feel safer (54% vs. 36%) and are less likely to skip a class because they feel uncomfortable or unsafe (5% vs. 16%). Specific enumerated policies against bullying

and harassment also make it more likely and easier for educators to intervene when they witness bullying and harassment. More than half of all teachers (53%) reported that bullying and harassment of students is a serious problem in their school. Students noted that teachers were more likely to intervene (25.3% vs. 12.3%) when bullying occurred, and were more likely to do so successfully (55.7% vs. 38.7%), if school policies included enumerated categories (compared to non-enumerated policies). Finally, research has shown a link between decreased reports of suicide attempts among LGBT youth who attend schools with anti-bullying policies when compared with those at schools without such protections.

As an enumerated policy, “bullying” means conduct that (A) adversely affects the ability of one or more students to participate in or benefit from the school's educational programs or activities by placing the student (or students) in reasonable fear of physical harm; and (B) includes conduct that is based on a student's actual or perceived: (I) race; (II) color; (III) national origin; (IV) sex; (V) disability; (VI) sexual orientation; (VII) gender identity; (VIII) religion; as well as (IX) any other distinguishing characteristics that may be defined by a state or local educational agency or (X) association with a person or group with one or more of the actual or perceived characteristics listed in clause (B). Enumeration does not provide special privileges to any one group. It is essential in protecting ALL students as research has consistently shown that students experience less bullying and harassment and feel safer overall in a school with an enumerated policy.

Proposed Legislative Action

Members of the National Safe Schools Partnership (including The Trevor Project) have proposed legislative language, HR 2262 (The Safe Schools Improvement Act) that would require that states, districts and schools develop policies and programs to prevent and appropriately respond to instances of bullying and harassment as a condition of receiving federal funding. This proposal would require that:

- States, districts and schools have in place policies prohibiting bullying and harassment; and
- Schools and districts establish complaint procedures to effectively respond to instances of harassment in a manner that is timely and results in educationally appropriate resolutions for students who are victims of bullying or harassment; and
- States include information regarding bullying and harassment in their required drug and violence prevention reports.

This proposed legislative language would also allow states, district and schools to use funding under the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act to:

- Provide professional development regarding strategies to prevent bullying and harassment and how to effectively intervene when such incidents occur; and
- Implement student education programs designed to teach students about the issues around, and consequences of, bullying and harassment.

It is with this in mind that the staff, Board of Directors and constituents who utilize The Trevor Project’s lifesaving resources ask you to please enact HR2262 (The Safe Schools Improvement Act) as well as endorse anti-bullying and harassment policies that include enumerated categories.

We also ask that you consider making enumerated anti-bullying and harassment policies a requirement of any comprehensive education legislation.

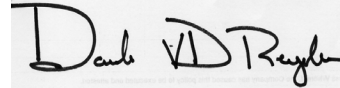
Sincerely yours,



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Phoenix Schneider, MSW
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David Reynolds, MPH
Advocacy and Education Manager

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