



# **Stand Up to Bullying!**

## **Strategies to Make Connecticut Safe for Learning**

**A forum held at the Legislative Office Building  
Hartford, Connecticut  
October 22, 2007**



### **Participating legislators**

Representative Andrew Fleischmann • Representative Bruce Morris  
Senator John McKinney • Senator Edith Prague  
Representative Catherine Abercrombie • Representative Henry Genga

### **Featuring experts from**

Connecticut Department of Education • Connecticut Family Support Council  
Anti-Defamation League • True Colors • Connecticut Children's Medical Center  
Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University • Brown University  
Mental Health Association of Connecticut • University of South Australia

### **Sponsors**

Connecticut Commission on Children  
(860) 240-0290  
[www.cga.ct.gov/coc/bullying.htm](http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/bullying.htm)

Office of the Child Advocate  
(860) 566-2106  
[www.ct.gov/oca](http://www.ct.gov/oca)



“We know that there are schools in this state, in this country, that have programs – school-wide programs – that create an atmosphere so that every child feels safe and knows where to go if they’re made to feel unsafe. And what I set before you, as a challenge today, is to help me, and to help this legislature, make sure that we can take those programs and get them into every school in Connecticut.”

-- Representative Andrew Fleischmann  
Co-Chair, Education Committee,  
“Stand Up to Bullying!” forum  
October 22, 2007

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## Why Bullying Matters in Connecticut Schools...

**One-third of Connecticut high school students – and more than 40 percent of the state’s 9th graders – reported having been bullied on school property in the past year, according to a 2005 survey.<sup>1</sup>**

**When we fail to prevent bullying, the results impact learning, safety, and personal well-being.** Targets of bullying often feel isolated, lonely or depressed. Sometimes they attempt suicide. Schools can become violent and dangerous places where children feel unsafe to go and less able to concentrate and learn.

**Bullying is an early warning sign that some students may be heading down a path of more serious antisocial behavior.** Bullies are more likely to drop out of school and to commit other antisocial acts such as truancy, fighting, theft, intoxication, and vandalism. Bullies are more likely to become adult criminals.<sup>2</sup>

**Moreover, victims of repeated bullying can explode in ways that harm themselves and others.** The Columbine High School massacre is one example.<sup>3</sup>

That’s why the Commission on Children and the Office of the Child Advocate organized *Stand Up to Bullying!*, a forum to learn the causes of bullying and explore strategies for making Connecticut safe for learning.

## Hundreds Gather at Capitol to ‘Stand Up to Bullying’

**More than 250 concerned parents, students, teachers, counselors, school administrators, police officers, social workers and others traveled to the state Capitol in Hartford for a state forum on bullying on October 22, 2007.** Several state legislators also participated in the discussion, which was co-moderated by Faith Vos Winkel of the Office of the Child Advocate and Elaine Zimmerman of the Commission on Children.

Experts explored the causes, effects, and possible solutions to the problem and a panel of students gave moving accounts of how bullying had affected their lives. Topics included: what schools can do to address bullying, cyberbullying, children with special needs, immigrant children, GLBTQI issues, working the legal system to prevent bullying, and weight bias and body image.

### **Rep. Fleischmann calls for effective anti-bullying programs in every school**

Representative Andrew Fleischmann, Co-Chair of the Education Committee, opened the forum with an overview of the General Assembly’s work on bullying. He recounted his efforts to pass legislation in 2007 and his commitment to an effective anti-bullying agenda for 2008. Fleischmann called it “critical....that we have protections for all children.”

Dozens of Connecticut schools, he said, had reported “that they had had not a single incident of bullying that occurred, not one.” Recalling his own experience as a bullied student, he said “those of in the legislature, you know we lived lives before we got here, and we didn’t believe that... Bullying is much too pervasive a thing among children for us to believe that there are so many schools who would have had zero incidents.”



**Representative Andrew Fleischmann**

Identifying and implementing effective programs for safe school climate is essential in preventing bullying, Fleischmann said. “As we work to craft our state laws...most important to me...is figuring out steps that we can take that change school climate, so that every school in this state has the kind of environment in which bullying is not acceptable behavior; in which difference and diversity are embraced; in which children who are smaller, or heavier, or slower, or a different race or religion all feel welcome and don’t feel targeted, ever.”

He called on those present to help him “make sure that we can take those programs and get them into every school in Connecticut.”

## Students, parents, and teachers share first-hand accounts of bullying

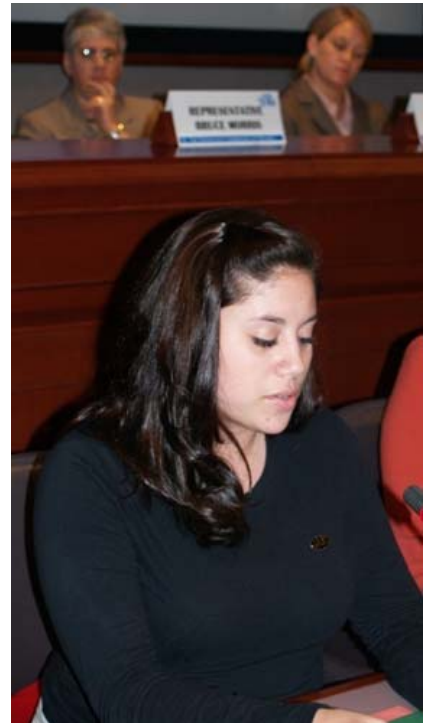
In vivid detail, several students, a parent and a teacher discussed how bullying had affected their lives. The panel was moderated by Marji Lipshez-Shapiro of the Anti-Defamation League.

Nicole Allinson talked about the anti-Semitism she encountered in Fairfield County schools. Targeted as “that Jewish girl” in middle school, she was subjected to repeated taunts, jokes and derisive words of hate by groups of boys. “No one seemed to think that the comments were unusual,” Allinson (pictured at right) said. “Although they were overheard by other students and teachers, nothing was done about them.”

“If my peers, teachers, or friends had spoken out for me when I was bombarded with words of hatred, the harassment might have ended. But no one spoke up for me, because the hate was not against them,” Allinson said.

Cerrone Bell, now a student at North Haven High School, described how being bullied on the bus at age 12 affected his physical and emotional health. “I was so upset that I would often get headaches and stomach aches before the bus came. I felt powerless. This kind of bullying went on for weeks.”

Fear of the bully caused Bell not to report what was happening to him. “Although I wanted the bullying to stop, I was afraid that he would retaliate against me.”



“I felt like I was in this world by myself, and that is a very lonely place to be.”

-- Cerrone Bell, a bullied student

Branford High School student Grady O’Keefe recounted the hate letters and violence he endured as a gay student. “[M]y locker [became] a personal mailbox for hate letters. These letters all promised the unthinkable. They all promised I would wish I was never born, and...did their words become true.” O’Keefe cited statistics showing that homosexual youth attempt suicide at a high rate. “I would pray to God asking him to make me not have to go to school... I figured I would die, I figured that this was my path and that there was nothing I could do because I chose to come out.... School was hell. Life was hell. And nobody did anything to stop them...those that could stop them, weren’t there then.”



“I hope you will use your abilities to create an educational system that will not tolerate this hate.”

-- Grady O'Keefe, Branford High School student

Tariq Islam, a Glastonbury High School student, discussed his experience as a Muslim American following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. A week later he was called a “dirty Palestinian” by a schoolmate; later he was asked whether it was his job to kill Americans and was physically attacked at school. “The only way to tackle this kind of hate is love and education,” Islam said.

Lorella Praeli, a graduate of New Milford High School, described the anti-immigrant tone of bullying against her in person and through e-mail and instant messenger. “The person made up screen names about me by using names like ‘Peg Leg’ or ‘Border Hopper’. I began to receive instant messages...the words read were only the beginning of a nightmare. I was being put down, made fun of, insulted...in the inside...I was falling apart.”

Parents discussed the impact of bullying from both sides. Guilford parent Jane Olson (pictured at right) offered advice for dealing with bullies, based on how she helped her daughter after learning that she had sent a bullying e-mail message. “Don’t condemn a kid...Instead try to participate in helping that kid learn to be a better person and to deal with it in a constructive way.”



Heather Begina, a former victim of bullying who now teaches at Wethersfield High School, testified as to the need to support bullied students. “As a teacher we need to give students hope and help these kids before they leave our classrooms. Believe me, I now see it every day...We need to teach our students and young people to care for one another and the proper avenues to seek the help they need.”

“Each of us has a right to not live an invisible life of pain and agony. Please understand that bullying can, and often does, have a lifelong impact.”

-- Heather Begina, Wethersfield High School teacher

## How educators and parents can reduce bullying in schools

The keynote address was given by Ken Rigby, Ph.D., an internationally acclaimed expert on bullying prevention. Dr. Rigby, an adjunct research professor and consultant based at the University of South Australia, is the author of “Bullying in Schools and What to Do about It and Children and Bullying: How Parents and Educators Can Reduce Bullying in Schools.”

Rigby identified steps that schools can take to address bullying, including the following:

- Education of staff
- Discovery of the extent and nature of the problem in the school, including student surveys
- Development of an anti-bullying program
- Surveillance of children’s behavior
- Working with children in classrooms on the problem
- Handling cases of bullying appropriately
- Collaborating with parents



“There are people who say, ‘Bullying produces Columbine, for instance, or Virginia Tech.’ Well, it does, there’s no doubt about it that what happened at those places was a result of bullying.”

-- Ken Rigby

Rigby said that parents “have been largely left out in the cold. Parents need to be brought into the discussion of what schools, as well as they themselves, can do to tackle the problem of bullying.”

Rigby identified several effective intervention strategies, including the Olweus Program (rules and sanctions), empowering the target of bullying, the Support Group Method and the Method of Shared Concern. He also strongly endorsed cooperative learning as an educational approach.

He identified eight elements of an effective anti-bullying policy:

- A statement of the school’s stand against bullying.
- A succinct definition of bullying with a listing of the different kinds, both direct and indirect -- with explicit reference to racial, sexual and cyber bullying.
- A declaration of the rights of individuals in the school community -- students, teachers, other workers and parents -- to be free of bullying.
- A statement of the responsibilities of those who see bullying going on to seek to stop it.

- A general description of what the school will do in seeking to prevent bullying, including undertaking risk management procedures and the inclusion of content relating to bullying in the school curriculum.
- In general terms, how the school proposes to deal with cases of bullying.
- An undertaking to collaborate with parents in addressing the problem of bullying, especially in the resolution of cases in which action is to be taken by both the school and parents.
- An undertaking to evaluate the policy in the near future.

In terms of how to construct the school policy, Rigby suggested beginning with “a statement of what stand this school is prepared to make about bullying. You start off, always, ‘Bullying is not acceptable. Bullying is wrong. It’s something that should be stopped.’ Some strong statement. It could connect with the values of the school...Secondly, a succinct definition of bullying and a listing of the different kinds of bullying, making sure that you do include racial, sexual, and cyber bullying...A declaration of the rights of individuals in the school community. Not only the rights of children, but the rights of teachers.”

Bystanders -- those students who witness acts of bullying -- are an important focus of bullying prevention efforts, Rigby said. Although many bystanders are reluctant to intervene due to danger to themselves or other reasons, many give strong moral reasons for helping the victim.

“Prevention is better than cure. We do want an environment in which children don’t want to bully -- a good, cooperative community.”

-- Ken Rigby

### **Accountability, professional development & technical assistance needs cited**

Susan Kennedy, Acting Chief of the Connecticut Department of Education’s Bureau of School & District Improvement, called for greater resources for schools and training of school personnel. Kennedy reported that her department is working with regional education resource centers to develop training modules for on-site school training. “We do need to have some required professional development for the schools and for the teachers,” she said.

Jo Ann Freiberg, Ph.D., a consultant for the Connecticut Department of Education, agreed with Kennedy’s assessment. She said that school districts would like guidance in defining bullying, “so that they honor the spirit of the law, which is to create safe places for children.” They also need professional assistance. In a recent survey of school superintendents conducted by the department, “virtually everybody said they want professional development, they want training, they want assistance, to make this a systemic effort, so that everybody is on the same page.”

Freiberg said that a key issue is the absence of accountability at the state level. She said that her department has actively helped schools for a decade to address school climate through professional development. However, schools do not even report to the state the total number of bullying cases, and there is a “wide variety” in school responses to bullying, ranging from suspension and detention to a “you should know better” response. She expressed support for

“amending the law to provide some form of accountability, so that when there are incidences of bullying, we can help families, we can help schools.”

Freiberg called the bullying issue central to student achievement. “We want students to be in an environment that supports high academic achievement. And when they are focused on whether somebody is going to tease them, call them a name, exclude, and more horrible things than that, they are not focused on their learning.”

## Experts highlight key issues related to bullying

Experts discussed issues that display the broad reach of bullying behavior:

*Legal Issues and Bullying:* William A. Howe, Ed.D., Consultant for Multicultural Education and State Title IX Coordinator, Connecticut Department of Education

William Howe, Ed.D. of the Connecticut Department of Education said that some bullying acts also constitute violations of state and federal law. If based upon sex, sexual orientation, disabilities, race or national origin, acts of bullying may be violations of civil rights law. Schools are held accountable not only for upholding the bullying legislation and following through with its requirements, but they’re also responsible for handling it as a possible state and federal civil rights violation.



From left: Chelsea Heuer, William Howe, Kevin Borrup, Karen Zrenda

Howe called on school districts to be more open and available concerning their bullying policies and procedures. “My advice...to schools, please advertise what your [bullying] policies are, make them available on your website. I suggest that schools have an 800 number, a special 800 number, that’s dedicated just to handling complaints around bullying and harassment...and also a special email address...and have someone monitor those phone calls 24 hours.”

*Weight Bias and Youth:* Chelsea A. Heuer, MPH, Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, Yale University

Chelsea Heuer of the Rudd Center said that youth who are bullied as a result of weight are especially vulnerable to resulting mental health and physical problems. She said that youth who are teased or bullied because of their weight are more likely to be depressed and have suicidal thoughts, anxiety, lower self-esteem and poor body image.

Overweight students who experience frequent weight-related teasing and bullying are more likely to engage in unhealthy eating behavior such as binge-eating or extreme dieting. According to Heuer, “This type of disordered eating, which often begins as a way to cope with the pain of

being teased, not only can be extremely damaging to a child's health, but can begin a lifelong battle that can only make their struggles with weight more difficult.”

Heuer called on schools to address bullying based on weight-related appearance. “School policies must treat weight and body size as legitimately as other diversity issues such as race, religion and sexual orientation, as part of an overall safe school climate.”

*Children with Disabilities and Bullying:* Kevin Borrup, JD, MPH, Director of Violence Prevention Program, Connecticut Children's Medical Center, and Karen Zrenda, Co-Chair, Connecticut Family Support Council

Kevin Borrup of the Connecticut Children's Medical Center reported that there is not much information available about children with disabilities and special needs and how they are impacted by bullying. Borrup presented results of a study he helped develop that looked at disabilities, teasing and social exclusion. The study found that students with a learning trouble were teased at twice the rate of those with no learning trouble. Children with a mobility need were teased at a lower rate than those without such a need.

Karen Zrenda of the Connecticut Family Support Council said that isolation, social exclusion and school failure are major issues for children with special needs. She cited the value of awareness fairs and classroom discussions on differences and disabilities, and more integrative sports programs, in order to build up a system of allies.

*GLBTQI and Bullying:* Robin McHaelen-Passerillo, Executive Director, True Colors, Inc.

Robin McHaelen-Passerillo of True Colors said that sexual orientation is included in non-discrimination language, but that gender expression is a key issue of harassment and intimidation by students, yet it is left out of legislative and non-legislative responses to bullying. She said no school addresses gender expression in its policies. McHaelen-Passerillo said that adults do not intervene in acts of intolerance as much as they think they do.

*Bullying, Harassment and Children from Immigrant Families:* Randy Ross, MS, MA  
Brown University

Randy Ross of Brown University focused on the issue of anti-immigrant bullying, especially against those students who are learning English as a second language. “There is a climate in this country of anti-immigrant feeling. It is perpetrated and moved forward by the media, by talk radio, by teachers, by administrators, by other parents. Students pick it up, and it is another one of those ‘it's-OK-to-bully-these-kids’ areas”. Ross called for an active “role of parents and educators in fueling the empathy and compassion of young people.”

Ross said that a research study conducted in Massachusetts showed that students who were English language learners said that have experienced physical or verbal bullying at twice the general rate.

*Cyber Bullying:* Debbie Colucci, Assistant Project Director, Anti-Defamation League

Debbie Colucci of the Anti-Defamation League cited cyberbullying as an increasingly common form of bullying. Cyberbullying takes the form of e-mailing, instant messaging, chatting, blogging, or text messaging. A new school curriculum, *Trickery, Trolling and Threats*, is being introduced in Connecticut. It provides practical information for school administrators to deal with cyberbullying.

Colucci said that cyberbullying potentially can cause more distress than traditional bullying because it's so pervasive and sometimes anonymous. "Modern technology allows it to be everywhere," she said. "The victimization is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week...it doesn't happen just in school...there's going to be text messages on my phone or there's going to be emails waiting for me on the computer." The invisibility of cyberbullying may make it easier for bullies to continue the harassment: "I don't get to see your reaction, I don't get to see how hurt you are. It makes it easier for me to keep doing it."



**Debbie Colucci**

Cyberbullying requires a change in our concept of what is a community to include the online world as well, Colucci said. "We teach our kids when they're little how to behave in public, we teach our kids how to behave in a restaurant. We need to teach them from a young age how to behave in a cyberworld."

*"Anti-Bullying Day" proclamation*

Elaine Ducharme, Ph.D., of the Mental Health Association of Connecticut presented a proclamation by Governor M. Jodi Rell, declaring the day of the forum "Anti-Bullying Day".

### **Connecticut lawmakers declare commitment to building safe school climate**

The bullying forum concluded with a rich discussion by Democratic and Republican state legislators and a Department of Education policymaker of bullying-related policy issues and opportunities.

Legislators discussed the impact of bullying in their communities. "Our graduating class of 2005 had three suicides from that same class within five years," said Representative Catherine Abercrombie. "The first suicide was the Daniel Scruggs case....He was a middle school student. I just think it's appalling what we're doing to our young people and that there's nobody out there fighting for them....There's definitely a connection between how they're being treated in the early ages and by the time they get to high school they've had it, and you can't blame them." Educating schools and helping them adopt best practices in anti-bullying is a priority, several legislators said. Senate Minority Leader John McKinney said: "Some towns don't think bullying is really happening in their school district. I think that just comes from a lack of knowledge and education on their part. We need to give them that education."



Representative Bruce Morris (pictured left) agreed: “Districts want to be trained. So we need to be certain to identify what those best practices are, and then place [State Department of Education] individuals in position or whatever is necessary so that staff across the state can receive the proper and adequate professional development.” The re-funding of the Safe Learning Grant Program and the use of health classes to promote safe school climate were also identified as an important strategy to pursue.

Reaching non-teachers who interact with young people was cited as a key issue. Senator McKinney said: “We need to talk to coaches too...you see things happening in sports that tend to be more aggressive behavior. And we need to talk with those youth athletic coaches too about what’s right and what’s wrong in terms of that aggressive behavior.”

Teacher training was also identified as an important strategy by several legislators. Senator Edith Prague said higher education should make it part of teachers’ “professional commitment [to] teach kids how to respect each other.”

Accountability and data collection issues also received attention. Representative Morris called for a school climate assessment “that is taken at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year, “so you’re able to determine if the policies that the school has in place have been effective or not.” Senator Prague called for “funding punishment in cases where a bullying program has not been developed.”

Some legislators agreed that schools should be required to report on what “intervention strategy” they have developed, as required by state law, and how that strategy is being implemented. They also discussed expanding that strategy provision to include a “prevention and intervention strategy”. Support to help schools carry out this requirement is important, Representative Morris said. If the state is to “ask [schools] what that intervention is”, he said, it should also be “providing some resources as to what some of the better interventions would be.”

Some legislators questioned budget priorities affecting education. “Our budget for criminal justice is four times more than it is for education,” Representative Morris said. “We spend four times more money to incarcerate those people who, our research is telling us, are just bullies gone wild. To me that is appalling. It is a misplaced sense of our priorities.”

## Summary of Recommendations

### Forum participants identified priorities to build a safe school climate in Connecticut:

- More comprehensive school anti-bullying policies
- In each school, adoption of bullying best practices, such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program
- Greater distribution of information about best practices, school anti-bullying policies
- More resources to support school efforts
- Incentive grants for schools that implement best practices
- Training, technical assistance and professional development for teachers, administrators, other school personnel, and youth sports coaches -- including a pre-service learning curriculum
- Refunding the Safe Learning Grant Program
- Use of health classes to promote safe school climate
- Greater accountability of school leadership for anti-bullying
- Clarification, strengthening of existing bullying policy law and bullying definition
- Recognition of cyberbullying as bullying threat
- A greater role for state education department in accountability and anti-bullying services.
- Stronger data collection and reporting, including use of student surveys and school climate assessments, to ensure results-based accountability
- Reporting by school on their chosen strategies, and resources to help them address bullying
- Addition of prevention strategy requirement to existing school intervention strategy element of school policy law
- Regular statewide review and analysis of the effectiveness of bullying policies adopted by schools
- Inclusion of weight, gender, disability and other issues in school policies and practices
- Involvement of parents, all school personnel, communities in anti-bullying strategy

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<sup>1</sup> Connecticut Department of Public Health. (2007, Mar.). *2005 Connecticut School Health Survey*, 29-37. Hartford: Author. Online at [http://www.ct.gov/dph/lib/dph/hisr/pdf/cshsresults\\_2005.pdf](http://www.ct.gov/dph/lib/dph/hisr/pdf/cshsresults_2005.pdf) (as of Oct. 12, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Olweus, D., Limber, S., & Mihalic, S. (1999). Bullying Prevention Program. In D.S. Elliott (Series Ed.), *Blueprints for Violence Prevention: Book Nine*. Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.

<sup>3</sup> Vossekuil, B., et al. (2002, May). *The final report and findings of the Safe School Initiative*, 35. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education.