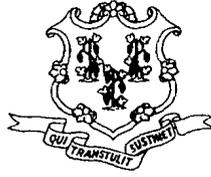


State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

Education Committee
Public Hearing
February 13, 2007
Testimony Submitted by
Elizabeth C. Brown, Legislative Director

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Committee, my name is Elizabeth C. Brown and I would like to testify in support of some provisions in SB 1094, An Act Concerning School Bullying and SB 1110, An Act Concerning Security Assistance for Education, as well as RB 7047 An Act Concerning School District Accountability.

Safe Learning Environment: Bullying Prevention and School Security

• **SB 1094, An Act Concerning School Bullying**

The Commission applauds the leadership of the Education Committee in addressing the serious issue of school bullying. Bullying is an all-too-common and harmful form of violence that threatens the safe learning environment. Bullying among primary school children has been identified as one precursor to more aggressive and sometimes violent behavior in later grades.

Bullying detracts from students' chances for academic success. According to a U.S. Department of Education report, 14 percent of U.S. schoolchildren reported being the victims of bullying within the last six months. Of those students who reported lower grades, victims of bullying were more likely to report receiving D's and F's than their nonbullied counterparts.

In Connecticut, bullying has increasingly been linked to youth suicide, according to the Child Advocate.

Raised SB 1094 takes some sensible steps to address bullying and others that would represent a step backward.

Recommendations:

- Support section 2 of the bill that provides for antibullying training and materials and recommend attention to implementing best practices in the field.

- Funding for Section 2 be directed to the already-authorized Safe Learning Grant Program. School districts should have latitude to choose among a range of proven practices, as determined by the Commissioner of Education.¹
- Substitute language for section 2 in the appendix, which would add funding and reporting requirements for the Safe Learning Grant Program. Under our recommendation below, SDE would analyze school policies and practices funded under the Safe Learning program.
- Support section 3 of the bill, which adds “prevention of bullying” to the topics for in-service training programs for teachers.
- Imposing a state fine on teachers and administrators and other school staff for failing to comply would be very difficult to prove that a teacher had failed to report an oral or anonymous report by a student. Second, the bill would place teachers on the defensive, rather than involving them in changing the culture of the school to shape a safe learning environment.
- Under current law, schools keep data on the number of incidents. Attached is recommended language, to institute a review and analysis as part of the technical assistance component of a comprehensive bullying policy.
- Establish a state anti-bullying ombudsperson within the Office of the Child Advocate to address bullying concerns related to public schools. This ombudsperson would be responsible for receiving reports of unresolved problems in schools concerning bullying and related behaviors, and for making recommendations to the Commissioner of Education and the Child Advocate to resolve such problems.

Attached is recommended language to incorporate these suggestions into SB 1094.

SB 1110, An Act Concerning Security Assistance for Education

Raised SB 1110 would appropriate funds for assessments and audits of security for school entrances; design, purchase and installation of security cameras, panic alarms and other devices; and training and equipment.

¹ The Safe Learning Grant program was established in 2001 (CGS § 10-263e). This program provides competitive grants to assist school districts in (1) developing a school environment where children learn in safety without fear of physical or verbal harm or intimidation, (2) activities that encourage respect for each student, (3) decreasing early youth aggression, (4) establishing student conflict and intervention policies and strategies, (5) eliminating bullying behaviors among students, (6) extending safe school environment programs to extracurricular activities, (7) after school programs, and (8) the development of crisis and violence prevention policies and strategies which make school environments safe. Each local and regional board of education would be eligible to apply for a grant.

We recommend that school districts be given the ability to use a portion of their grant funds under SB 1110 for anti-bullying purposes. Schools should decide themselves whether their greatest threats come from inside or outside the school community.

RB 7047, An Act Concerning School District Accountability

The bill before seeks to address the persistent underperforming of specific school districts under the No Child Left Behind Federal Law and Connecticut's law on School Accountability. When a school is routinely underperforming, the state needs to intensify supervision and direction. In order to address the achievement gap and to ensure equal and fair learning, the state must take a leadership role and provide school districts with specific guidance as to curriculum, professional development, school discipline, parent engagement and instructional excellence based on best practices and the science of teaching. Specific attention should be paid to improved reading instruction and implementing school wide discipline policies to address the correlation between school discipline issues, including school attendance, truancy and suspensions and expulsions and academic achievement. Connecticut has the expertise and know how to ensure all school districts meet high standards. Providing the tools and leadership are the keys to ultimate success.

APPENDIX

Proposed Language to Amend SB 1094

Recommended substitute language for Section 2 of the bill

Sec. 2. Section 10-263e of the general statutes is amended by adding subsections (d) and (e) as follows: (*Effective July 1, 2007*)

(d) Each school district that receives a grant under this section shall report to the Commissioner of Education by the close of the grant period on (1) how it used the grant funds, (2) whether the use of funds was based on model programs and practices that have been evaluated and proven to be effective in addressing one or more of the goals listed in subsection (a) of this section, and (3) prevention-based outcomes related to the goals in subsection (a) that were achieved through the grant. The Department of Education shall make available to the public each such report on its website.

(e) On or before January 1, 2008, and biennially thereafter, the Department shall report on grants awarded pursuant to this section and prevention-based outcomes achieved, in accordance with section 11-4a, to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to education and to the select committee having cognizance of matters relating to children.

(*NEW*) The sum of one million dollars is appropriated to the Department of Education, from the General Fund, for each of the fiscal years ending June 30, 2008 and June 30, 2009, for the purposes of section 10-263e, in order to promote a safe learning environment.

Recommended additional language

Sec. 4. (*NEW*) (*Effective July 1, 2007*) (a) The Department of Education shall, in collaboration with the anti-bullying ombudsperson established by section 5 of this act, conduct a biennial analysis of safe learning policies and practices in school districts, including but not limited to policies and practices developed pursuant to sections 10-222d and 10-263e. This analysis shall (1) examine the effectiveness of such policies and practices in reducing bullying and harassment in schools, (2) report on the relationship of bullying to the incidence of school dropout and student suicide, (3) document school districts' articulated needs for technical assistance and training, including whole-school training, related to safe learning and bullying prevention, (4) report on the prevention strategies, and the intervention strategies developed pursuant to section 10-222d, that are utilized by schools to reduce the incidence of bullying, and the relationship of such strategies to model programs and practices that have been evaluated and proven to be effective in reducing the incidence of bullying in Connecticut or outside the State, and (5) report on the department's response to the needs of school districts identified pursuant to subdivision (3) of this subsection. On or before January 1, 2008, and biennially thereafter, the Department shall report on this analysis, in accordance with section 11-4a, to the joint standing committee of

the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to education and to the select committee having cognizance of matters relating to children.

(b) The department shall regularly present to local school officials and boards of education (1) the most effective and promising examples of local school policies and practices analyzed pursuant to this section, (2) model programs and practices from Connecticut and elsewhere that have been identified pursuant to this section, and (3) evidence of the success of all policies, practices and programs presented pursuant to this subsection.

(c) The department may accept private donations for purposes of this section.

Sec. 5. (NEW) (Effective July 1, 2007) (a) An anti-bullying ombudsperson shall be appointed who shall be responsible for receiving reports of unresolved problems in schools concerning bullying and related behaviors and making recommendations to the Commissioner of Education and the Child Advocate for resolving complaints related to bullying in public schools.

(b) The anti-bullying ombudsperson shall be appointed by the Child Advocate, in consultation with the Commissioner of Education, and shall work within the Office of the Child Advocate. Said ombudsperson shall be an elector of the state with expertise and experience in the fields of education, child welfare, and advocacy for the rights of children and families affected by bullying, and shall be exempt from the classified service.

(c) The anti-bullying ombudsperson shall report monthly to the commissioner of education and the child advocate and, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a, annually to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to education.