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CONNECTICUT
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Education Committee

S.B. No. 649 An Act Concerning School Learning Environment

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Women's Education and Legal Fund

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My name is Amy Miller and I am the Program & Public Policy Director from the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF). CWEALF is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to empowering women, girls and their families to achieve equal opportunities in their personal and professional lives. Throughout our 35-year history we have worked to ensure that all students have equal access to education and job training, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation.

I am writing to urge you to support of *SB 649 – An Act Concerning School Learning Environment*. Connecticut's bullying legislation as it currently exists has not done enough to address and stop bullying. This bill will have a positive impact on Connecticut students and will have a particularly strong impact on young women and students that identify as Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender or Questioning (LGBTQ) by combining a clear definition, training and *enforcement mechanisms* to encourage schools to combat bullying. CWEALF is often invited into schools to train Title IX coordinators on reporting requirements and to maintain compliance, however this training often does not reach enough staff to affect permanent change in the school learning environment. This bill highlights the importance of comprehensive training for school districts so staff will be better equipped to recognize and address bullying behaviors.

In the 2002 *Bullying in Elementary Schools in Connecticut Study*, principals and teachers were surveyed about the prevalence of bullying in schools. According to the survey participants, bullying and aggression are commonly seen in elementary schools – bullying incidents occur “sometimes” or “more often” in nearly 9 out of 10 elementary schools in the state. A 2003 Massachusetts study found that in an initial survey of 3rd-8th graders in 14 Massachusetts schools, over 14% reported that they were afraid of being bullied “fairly often or more frequently.” Additionally, the US Department of Education reported that 8% of all students reported that they had been bullied at school within the last 6 months.

And the bullying does not end there. Studies such as the American Association of University Women's (AAUW) *Hostile Hallways* report, published in 2001 and the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educational Network's (GLSEN) *National School Climate Survey*, published in 2003, focused on students' experience with a more specific type of bullying, one based on gender and/or sexual orientation – sexual harassment. According to the AAUW study, 4 out of 5 students has personally experienced one or another form of sexual harassment in school. The GLSEN study found that 75% of their sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered teens felt unsafe in school, due to homophobic words and actions they encountered on a regular basis. In Connecticut schools during the 2005-2006

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school year, there were over 46,000 reported disciplinary actions according to data gathered by the Connecticut State Department of Education. Of these, 17.4% were categorized as threat, intimidation, harassment and another 4.1% were robbery, sexual harassment, blackmail, arson.

And what of the effects on students? In studies such as the AAUW and GLSEN reports, there are statistics that reflect the grave toll this victimization can take on the lives of students. Bullying and sexual harassment not only deprive students of their right to an equal education, but also profoundly affect their emotional and physical well-being. Victims often exhibit school avoidance behaviors, physical symptoms (like stomach ailments), act out in school and with parents and peers, and lose their learning focus. At the most extreme, they leave school altogether and attempt suicide.

CWEALF has had the opportunity to speak to students and youth about their personal experiences in schools. And what we have heard supports much of the research provided. Students have stated that they witness and/or experience harassment and bullying based on gender and sexual orientation on a daily basis. There is a pervasive feeling that there is little or nothing that can be done. LGBTQ youth in high school report disproportionate risk for a variety of health risk and problem behaviors, including suicide, victimization, sexual risk behaviors, and multiple substance use. These findings suggest that educational efforts, prevention programs, and health services must be designed to address the unique needs of LGBTQ youth¹.

Connecticut can and should continue to strengthen these laws to ensure students can thrive in their schools. The recent survey completed by Connecticut schools² indicates that schools want and need professional development and training on addressing bullying in their schools. Unfortunately, only 18% of Connecticut schools responded to the survey. Understanding the complexity of the issue must be better addressed and understood and therefore this bill does not go far enough. Additional measures should be taken such as: annual reviews of the current effectiveness of policies, report on the relationship of bullying and school drop-out rates and student suicide, identify practices that work to reduce bullying and harassment, and develop an independent Office of School Bullying Ombudsman. These actions may improve the State Department of Education's knowledge base on anti-bullying practices throughout the state, and move us toward guaranteeing all students, teachers and administrators a safe environment in which to learn and flourish.

¹ Robert Garofalo, R. Cameron Wol, Shari Kessel, Judith Palfrey, and Robert H. DuRant "The Association Between Health Risk Behaviors and Sexual Orientation Among a School-based Sample of Adolescents". Jan 2, 1998. <<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/101/5/895>>

² "Anti-bullying Principle Survey" October 2007