

My name is Kathleen Barrett.

I consider it an honor and a privilege to be able to testify regarding S.B. 1138

I come to testify today as a former school counselor, who saw and was powerfully moved by the devastating impact of bullying on child development, and school success. The faces and stories of the children with whom I worked are very present as I speak these words to you today. They inspired me to use whatever tools I had to try to make a difference. I chose bullying to be the topic of my doctoral dissertation work because of these children. I left school counseling to become a school counseling professor because of them. I come to you today, because of them.

My guess is that if I asked you all to close your eyes and remember an experience you had or witnessed involving bullying during your school years, you'd be able to do so. My guess too, is that there would be a strong emotional component to your memory. I'd ask you to hold onto that today as you hear testimony about S.B. 1138 and that you use the power you hold as legislators to bring our state a step closer to becoming a place where all children can feel safe in their school environments.

I am confident that you have heard, or will hear a great deal about the impact of bullying. For children who are victimized, this experience leaves scars that last a lifetime. Some of you probably bear those scars. For children who witness bullying but are unable to respond to help, another kind of scar is carried into adulthood. For children who step into these patterns of hurtful bullying behavior early in life, we know that without intervention, these patterns likely continue into adulthood. For all of these children, for all of *our* children, we need to respond. You have an opportunity to do so in supporting this bill. Specifically...

1. S.B. 1132 recognizes the importance of prevention. First and foremost, schools need to establish formal policy to *prevent* bullying. This cannot be a recommendation or a guideline – it needs your help to be a mandate. Children need to learn to be a part of school communities that value civil behavior, emphasize individual rights and embrace diversity. Part of this involves giving children the social skills they need, including supporting the development of empathy, managing emotions, social problem solving, and assertive and respectful communication skills. As a school counselor and school counseling professor I know that school counselors play an essential role in this regard – especially so on in earliest school years. Schools must identify sound prevention strategies – in my opinion – using the tools that research shows to be effective ones, like the Olweus model, or the Committee for Children's Steps to Respect – and to regularly collect data to see that they are working.

2. We need everyone's involvement to be successful in this effort. S.B. 1138 specifies that all adults in schools need to be trained to recognize and respond to bullying. In my experience, a lot of bullying takes place outside the eyes of adults, and simply saying to children that they need to make a report is not enough, when the person who hears that report may respond poorly. Attitudes such as that bullying is part of growing up, that it somehow helps us be stronger, that it is no big deal, that walking away is the right thing to do, or that the child must have somehow brought it on themselves because "it takes two"...are all

responses commonly heard by children who reach out for help. When definitions are not clear and a teacher or administrator tells a child that they are over-reacting because it was just teasing, or not really bullying when in fact it was, we let them down profoundly. Children learn to stop reaching out quickly and often suffer in silence and humiliation. S.B. 1132 calls for clear definitions and clear response, we need to make that a reality.

S.B.1138 calls for the creation of the systems that will support school's efforts to address bullying in calling for a statewide safe school resource network to train and to analyze data. Bullying has been invisible in schools for far too long and current existing vagueness or inconsistency from school to school in definition has perpetuated the problem and served as an obstacle in both our understanding of prevalence, and especially, our ability to be accountable and determine what works. For this reason, data collection – by all schools – and visible to all stakeholders, for better or for worse is an essential element in identifying and in responding to this problem. I would encourage attention to the city of New Haven, which admirably instituted a district wide climate survey, involving students, parents, and teachers, and posts results on a website accessible to all. In seeing S.B. 1132's attention to the creation of a statewide resource, I see this attention to gathering data uniformly as its most valuable potential contribution. S.B.1138 calls for schools to identify both a team, and a single responsible individual, a safe schools environment coordinator – this is essential. School counselors are uniquely able to lend their talents here – please help protect them from budgetary axes.

I applaud S.B. 1138's attention to parents, and remember so well, the pain of a parent who tries to help her child, but cannot. Some of you may know this pain. I remember this pain. It is for the parents, as well as for the children, that I come and testify and ask your help today.

Finally, schools are social institutions, the first communities outside of family that children experience, and the first setting in which we prepare them to become civil and responsible adults in our world. Changes proposed here have potential to have an impact that reverberates profoundly into our future.

Thank you sincerely.