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Testimony in support of Senate Bill #1138
An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws

My name is Jennifer Carroll and **I support Senate Bill #1138**. My husband and I have four children ranging in age from 10 – 17 years old. Our son, Jamie, is diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and he is completely nonverbal. I am also the Executive Director of a statewide family advocacy organization called the Connecticut Family Support Network.

The Connecticut Family Support Network (CTFSN) exists to provide support to families who are raising children with disabilities and special healthcare needs and to assist them to find and promote the development of resources they need in their homes, schools and communities. Ten CTFSN staff members are all parents of children with special needs. Our job, derived from personal experience, is to help families navigate the state's service systems and locate necessary community resources for their children and families. We advocate at the state and community levels, working with state leaders to develop policy and help grow existing resources for children with disabilities.

Too many children are being bullied.

Now is the time for strong school climate legislation. One in four (25 percent) Connecticut high school students – and 35 percent of the state's 9th graders – reported having been bullied or harassed on school property in the past year. More than 900,000 U.S. high school students reported being cyberbullied in one year. Elementary and middle school children also experience bullying. Connecticut high school students who report being bullied are more likely to get less sleep, miss school because they feel unsafe, have property stolen at school, carry a weapon to school, experience dating violence, be depressed and attempt suicide.

S.B. 1138 takes comprehensive steps to prevent bullying and ensure every child the right to learn in school without fear of teasing, humiliation or assault. At the Commission on Children's Nov. 2010 forum on bullying in schools, more than 500 people heard Kevin Jennings of the U.S. Department of Education tell us that every school should have a clear policy against bullying behaviors, train all staff who interact with students, ensure that all staff members take immediate action when bullying is observed, and gather data to assess bullying. S.B. 1138 takes all of these steps.

Children with disabilities are targeted by bullies, and those with invisible disabilities suffer the most.

The Connecticut Family Support Network receives calls regularly from parents who have children with invisible disabilities who are being bullied in schools that are not responding. These victims are at a disadvantage already, and do not have the skills and understanding for effective response and to defend themselves. In order to make this bill most effective, we must provide **enumeration of specific characteristics** to the bullying definition in the bill. This makes clear to schools that bullying is often based on actual or perceived characteristics of students, including "mental, physical, developmental or sensory disability" and "physical appearance", and it also ties the state and local bullying response to federal laws prohibiting harassment based on these characteristics.

It is our responsibility to strengthen Connecticut laws to protect all children, and those with disabilities in particular.

Please support Senate Bill #1138 ~ Please take a stand to prevent bullying.