



Chairperson Andrea Stillman
Education Committee
Connecticut Senate
Room 3100, Legislative Office Building
Hartford, CT 06106

March 8, 2011

RE: Hearing on an Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws (Senate Bill 1138)

Dear Chairperson Stillman:

On behalf of the approximately 1,900 same-sex couples raising about 3,800 children in Connecticut, Family Equality Council, the national organization working to ensure full social and legal equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) parents and their children by providing direct support, educating the American public, and securing inclusion in legislation, policies, and practices impacting families, would like to thank the Committee for holding this important hearing Senate Bill 1138, "An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws."

Bullying cannot be dismissed as "kids being kids." It is a serious public health issue that impacts the long-term social, academic, psychological and physical well-being of our youth, with outcomes ranging from academic decline to suicide. This hearing is an important step towards passing this critical piece of legislation.

The mission of Family Equality Council is to assist in the creation and protection of happy, healthy LGBT-headed families. Central to this is the ability of our children to attend school without fear of bullying, violence and harassment because of who their parents are or how their families were formed. Studies show that alarming numbers of children of LGBT parents report experiencing bullying and harassment at school because of the families they come from. In 2008, Family Equality Council issued a report in partnership with the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educators Network which found that nearly half of surveyed children with LGBT parents – forty-two percent – reported experiencing verbal harassment in the previous twelve months at school because of their family composition, including negative remarks specifically about having an LGBT parent. In addition, over one third reported that they had been verbally harassed because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation and nearly one third had experienced verbal harassment because of the way they expressed their gender.

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Studies such as this, and many others, demonstrate why anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies that enumerate protected categories including sexual orientation and gender identity are vital to school safety and protection from bullying and harassment. Students who attend schools with anti-harassment policies that enumerate categories of students for protection report that they feel safer and are less likely to skip a class because they feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Enumerating categories provides protection in a way that research has shown is essential for helping children to feel safer in school.

Additionally, it is crucial that the anti-bullying legislation contain language that protects students from bullying and harassment based on their "association" with persons who fall within the list of enumerated characteristics. For example, legislation must protect a student from harassment based on the fact that she has two fathers or if she is the close friend of another student who identifies as LGBT. This associational language is vital for protecting *all* students, no matter who their friends are or what their family structure.

Thus, while Family Equality Council supports comprehensive anti-bullying and harassment protections, we cannot support SB 1138 in its current form because it lacks enumeration and associational language, critical elements for protecting *all* students. We strongly urge you to amend this bill to include enumeration and associational language.

Therefore, we propose that the definition of bullying in SB 1138 be amended to include the following language:

Bullying means the repeated use by one or more students of a written, verbal or electronic communication or a physical act or gesture, including but not limited to a communication or gesture based on any actual or perceived characteristic, such as race, color, ethnicity, religion, ancestry, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or a mental, physical or sensory disability, or by any other distinguishing characteristic or association with a person or group with one or more of the abovementioned actual or perceived characteristics, ...

Conclusion

All students, regardless of their personal characteristics, who their parents are, or how their families were created, deserve to attend schools conducive to learning and achievement. It is Family Equality Council's request that the Connecticut Senate Education Committee amend SB 1138 to incorporate



the suggested changes outlined above and pass "An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws" to ensure *all* students are respected and safe and that *all* students have the opportunity to succeed in school. Establishing and maintaining a commitment to anti-harassment and anti-bullying principles can help achieve that goal.

I very much appreciate your leadership and look forward to answering any questions you or your staff may have about this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jennifer Chrisler".

Jennifer Chrisler
Executive Director
Family Equality Council