

## Focused on Learning

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Public Hearing Testimony  
Bullying  
March 11, 2011

My name is Jim Colandrea and I am currently a social studies teacher at Guilford High School. I have advanced degrees in public policy and educational leadership and I am also a part-time police officer for the town of Clinton. I come before you as a concerned citizen and want to thank you for the opportunity to address you concerning the topic of bullying, school climate, and culture.

When serious incidents occur, there is little debate on what to do. But what about this phenomenon called bullying. It has been defined as "overt acts". Acts that are overt have always been responded to, it is the covert acts that present such a challenge for administrators. Most bullying behaviors do not occur in the presence of adults. As a veteran teacher of 10 years, I have sometimes felt uneasiness about the class. When I questioned students regarding my suspicions they would answer with non-descriptive responses and only later discover that students were harassing another.

To offset this perceived lack of cooperation by students, the state legislature has adopted a bullying policy with a low threshold for action. Police need probable cause to make an arrest, school administrators need reasonable suspicion to search a student's belongings, but they only need to establish that bullying behavior has occurred **MORE LIKELY THAN NOT**, to assess disciplinary actions. I wonder if administrators are hesitant to use such a tool when investigating bullying behavior. A student is removed, their education impaired, and most likely they return worse off than when they left only to repeat the same type of behavior.

I don't deny the responsibility to create a safe learning environment for all students nor do I deny the severe outcomes of bullying behavior that are left unchecked. We need only look to the many high profile suicides that resulted from alleged bullying behavior. In these cases there were systemic failures. Students, teachers, school administrators and parents all bear some responsibility. I support the bill's provisions to mandate training for all adults regarding the prevention of and response to bullying behavior but wonder if creating a "one-size fits all" policy regarding school bullying is necessary. Recently the Connecticut General Assembly has passed legislation that forces schools to adopt school-wide research based interventions to improve academic performance. More and more research is showing the connection between affective and cognitive processes in student achievement. Schools are making tremendous progress adopting frameworks that are tiered. 80% of the students respond well to tier 1 services and 20% require additional interventions. Schools are just beginning to develop affective supports. Allow them the opportunity to fully infuse these frameworks into their school communities.

Should student behavior violate criminal law, local authorities can affect an arrest and use the state's juvenile justice system to remediate behavior. Duplicating systems already in place is inefficient and creates confusion. With all children who are 17 year olds or younger soon to be recognized as juveniles, alignment between agencies and services they offer will help keep CT a fiscally responsible government.

Schools do many good things for students. Allow administrators more latitude in developing a school policy that responds to the needs of each school community. Tailored approaches allow for ingenuity, creativity and the opportunity to reflect the values of each unique community. Thank you.