

**TESTIMONY OF**  
**GEORGE A. COLEMAN, ACTING COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION**  
**ON**  
**RAISED BILL 1138**  
**AN ACT CONCERNING THE STRENGTHENING OF SCHOOL BULLYING LAWS**

The State Department of Education (CSDE) **supports the intent** of Raised Bill No. 1138, *An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws* in the interest of providing a safe and healthy school climate to diminish bullying for students and staff.

Students and staff must be able to attend school and work in an environment where they are physically, emotionally and intellectually safe and healthy. Therefore, CSDE recommends that the focus of this bill be more on improving school climate as a whole, which encompasses diminishing bullying. CSDE's recommendation would be to include the term school climate when discussing plans, policies and assessments.

Also, in aligning with national guidelines, CSDE recommends that the terms bullying and harassment be used together to ensure the recognition of interrelated concepts. Each time the term "bullying" is used, it is recommended that it references both "bullying and harassment."

**Section 1**

The CSDE has concerns with the current definition of "bullying". Drawing from the best of our nations anti-bullying laws, the CSDE recommends a more comprehensive and clear definition of bullying, such as,

any use by one or more students or school employees of a written, verbal or electronic communication or a physical act or gesture directed against another student or school employee that any reasonable person would conclude that: (A) causes physical or emotional harm; (B) damages property or reputation; (C) creates a hostile environment; (D) infringes on an individual's rights; or (E) is sufficiently severe, persistent or pervasive that it creates an intimidating, threatening, or abusive educational environment for another individual.

CSDE also recommends that definitions of "school climate" and "harassment" be included, such as the following:

- *School climate* means the quality and character of school life with a particular focus on the quality of the relationships within the school community, adult to adult, adult to student and student to student.

- *Harassment* means the any physical or verbal hostility toward someone with legally protected status. Such status pertains to race, color, religious creed, sex, age, national origin, ancestry, marital status, sexual orientation, disability (including past or present history of mental disability), physical disability, learning disability, mental retardation, genetic information, prior criminal conviction, or other lawfully protected status. Such hostility can be severe, persistent or pervasive.”

The CSDE also supports the intent of having plans to address school climate and identified teams to carry out the work; however this proposed language would create an unnecessary burden and duplication of existing district-wide efforts to address bullying prevention and positive school climates. The CSDE recommends that the proposed language requires districts to develop school climate plans within their existing school improvement / strategic plans. By incorporating this work into existing plans, it will increase accountability and transparency as these are public documents, often posted on the district website; and developed by school and districts teams including administrators, educators, support staff, students and families. Additionally, many of the elements described in Section 1 (b) could be further developed as guidelines rather than through legislation.

## **Section 2**

The CSDE supports the need for comprehensive assessment of school districts’ current school climate. The assessment of school climate is essential to diminishing bullying, rather than assessing the prevalence of bullying. Creating and implementing common school climate assessments can currently be accomplished with minimal to no fiscal impact. There is a national movement toward assessing school climate rather than surveying for levels of bullying. (i.e. USDOE Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools Competitive Grants, National School Climate Standards, etc.). Many districts and schools throughout Connecticut are already assessing school climate and using these data to inform their district and school improvement plans. Requiring districts and schools to assess school climate (which necessarily includes a focus on bullying) would mirror and complement current national and state trends and will ultimately benefit students.

The CSDE has concerns with the establishment of a separate safe school environment team as this would create an unnecessary burden and duplication of existing district-wide efforts to address bullying prevention and positive school climates. As mentioned previously, CSDE recommends that school districts develop school climate plans within their existing school improvement/strategic plans.

## **Section 3**

CSDE is opposed to collecting and reviewing Safe School Environment Plans, as resources would be better spent on improving school climate assessments and prevention efforts.

**Section 6**

The CSDE supports the need for the Department to provide annual training to school employees through a variety of means, as listed within this section of the bill; however CSDE has concerns that this section of bill does not cite that CSDE is required to provide annual training to school employees “within available appropriations”.

**Section 8**

The CSDE has concerns with changing the requirement from “encouraged” to “shall” as additional resources would be required to implement this section.

**Section 9**

The CSDE supports the intent of this section, however, opposes the requirement of each district appointing a safe school coordinator. CSDE recommends this task be accomplished through existing school teams that are charged with addressing school climate without incurring additional cost for the districts.

Therefore, the CSDE **supports the intent** of Raised Bill # 1138, with the above recommendations.