

Testimony - SB1138

An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws

By - Richard Dellinger, Principal, Amity Middle School, Bethany Campus, 190 Luke Hill Road, Bethany, CT

Good afternoon. My name is Richard Dellinger and I am the principal of the Amity Middle School - Bethany (AMSB), one of two middle schools in the Amity Regional School District #5. We are a member school of the Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS). I am currently a member of the CAS Board of Directors and have been actively involved with CAS for the past seven years. I welcome this opportunity to help shape legislation that can assist school leaders to create even more positive school climates that can prevent not just bullying, but also meanness, cruelty, humiliation, and harassment.

Our most recent efforts to improve the school climate at AMSB came from a survey administered to all eighth graders in April, 2007. The instrument, the Social and Health Assessment (SAHA) was developed and administered by the Yale School Evaluation Research Team. It revealed the following about peer victimization at AMSB: 65% reported that during that school year other kids at school called them names or swore at them (1 time or more); 59% had made fun of them for some reason; and over 20% were hurt physically in some way. Our response to these findings was as follows:

- We gathered reliable and valid data on the school climate. Discipline data is analyzed on a yearly basis using the data provided to the state on the annual ED 166 report. In addition, most years we survey all students and staff using SurveyMonkey about the school climate. Last year we utilized an instrument developed by Dickon Pownall-Gray, a successful businessman, who established "The Surviving Bullies Charity." His approach is to assess the degree of bullying, in a safe and confidential manner for each student in our school. He then provides immediate psychological support to the victims while training student "by-standers" to also provide support. His program was promoted through CAS. His website, which has many resources, is at: <http://www.survivingbullies.com/>.
- Last August our school psychologist provided a workshop to all district bus drivers and provided bus drivers with strategies and procedures for dealing with peer victimization.
- This year, we provided all middle school teachers "Safe Schools Training" particularly focusing on student issues from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN).
- Four years ago, we initiated a summer reading program where all middle school students read about bullying behavior as part of their required summer reading. Incoming seventh graders read *The Revealers* by Doug Wilhelm and incoming eighth graders read *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. Book talks are held with all staff and students in September about bullying.
- We initiated annual internet safety instruction to students – by our media specialist who frequently involves speakers from the FBI and state police.
- AMSB expanded after-school activities by adding a spirit team, a fall volleyball team, a fall acting club, and other activities to encourage team cooperation and school involvement.
- We enhanced classroom presentations by school guidance counselors and health teachers on bullying and peer harassment by revising the guidance curriculum.

- We continue to maintain a robust Character Education Committee which promotes a healthy school climate and organizes character education assemblies for all students. This year's assemblies included an assembly by Len Cabral, an African/American story teller, who tells stories about tolerance and a Jim Lehman, Anti-Bullying Dance ensemble scheduled for next Friday.
- We continue to provide support to students in small groups by school counselors/psychologist on themes of increasing academic success, stress management, decision making, handling peer pressure, improving social skills and improving self esteem.
- The Student Council became involved with "Use a better Word" and other student initiatives to improve school climate.
- We continue to provide a rigorous and engaging curriculum where all students are successful.

The results of this total school-climate approach have been encouraging. According to the survey from January 2010, administered by "The Surviving Bullies Charity," only 4% (8 students) reported being physically bullied; 5% (9 students) reported experiencing someone intentionally spreading rumors or trying to hurt their feelings; 14% (19 students) reported seeing acts of bullying. All forms of bullying were lower at AMSB than any other school who administered this particular instrument.

Based on our experience at AMSB, I would offer the following suggestions in terms of the new legislation:

- Focus on school climate, not just on bullying.
- Use the best research...the most recent CAS Bulletin, reported on a study from the University of California which suggested that students in the middle of the social hierarchies at their schools, rather than the most popular or the most socially outcast, are more likely to be bullies.
- Gather reliable and valid data on school climate.
- Hold districts accountable for school climate.
- Use CAS and programs it promotes, like "The Surviving Bullies Charity" and the CAS Exemplary School Climate Assessment which was created by the CAS Middle Level Professional Studies Committee.
- Do not create a separate school environment committee...make it part of school improvement plans that include creating safe, respectful, positive school climates.
- Do not create a safe school environment specialist...it is the principal's responsibility for school climate. Students report issues to staff with whom they are most comfortable, school counselors usually are the "first responders."
- Do not have just one day devoted to Safe School Awareness; it should be embedded in the school improvement plan and on-going curriculum and instruction.
- Involve student governments and student leaders more. Teach and empower students to assist victims and confront acts of peer victimization.

Thank you once again for this opportunity to help shape legislation that can assist school leaders to create even more positive school climates so Connecticut can lead the nation.