

**Testimony of Gary Jones  
On Behalf Of The  
Connecticut Regional Office of the  
Anti-Defamation League**

**IN SUPPORT OF  
RAISED BILL NO. 1138  
AN ACT CONCERNING THE  
STRENGTHENING OF SCHOOL BULLYING LAWS**

**March 11, 2011**

My name is Gary Jones and I am Connecticut Regional Director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). The Anti-Defamation League was founded in 1913 with a mandate to fight the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment for all. Today the ADL is one of the country's leading civil rights and human relations organizations, committed to combating hatred and bigotry in all forms.

On behalf of ADL, I am here today to express our support for Raised Bill No. 1138, An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws, and to recommend how we believe some provisions of the bill could be strengthened even further.

ADL has long been at the forefront of national, state, and local efforts to deter and counteract intolerance and hate. For many years, ADL has been concerned about bullying and, more recently, cyber-bullying. Through our A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE® Institute and other educational initiatives, ADL delivers over 200 highly interactive and challenging diversity and anti-bias programs throughout the state in schools, community organizations, campuses and workplaces, reaching over 25,000 people last year in Connecticut alone. Our work with students has shown us the extent and scope of bullying in Connecticut's schools. ADL has developed curricula and programming for teachers, students and the community relating to bullying, and created a model anti-bullying statute that is being used across the country in the drafting of anti-bullying prevention laws.

Anti-bullying legislation is critical to securing safe learning environments for Connecticut's children. Research has shown that harassment and bullying can have devastating consequences and pose significant threats to student safety and academic achievement. Children who are bullied are more likely to suffer from depression, loneliness, anxiety, low self-esteem and even thoughts of suicide. Children who bully are more likely than their peers to engage in physical violence, vandalism, smoking, drinking alcohol and school absenteeism. A strong and comprehensive anti-bullying law is therefore crucial to ensure that children can learn and thrive in a safe school environment.

In Connecticut, we are fortunate to have an anti-bullying statute as part of our state's law. Bill 1138 contains many of the provisions contained in ADL's model statute and, with the recommendations set forth below, would strengthen Connecticut's existing anti-bullying law in

important ways, making the law more effective in preventing and responding to bullying and in making our schools safe.

### *Enumerated Categories*

Bill 1138 clarifies conduct that constitutes bullying and, importantly, eliminates the requirement that bullying consist of more than one act during the school year, which may allow school officials to “wipe the slate clean” and ignore bullying incidents that had taken place in a prior school year.

We believe, however, that in addition to these improvements, Bill 1138 should include in the definition of bullying enumerated categories, where specific motives for bullying such as race, color, religion, national origin, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation would be listed.

Last fall, the US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights published a list of provisions from the best anti-bullying laws in the country. Among them was North Carolina’s *School Violence Prevention Act*, which includes a comprehensive list of perceived characteristics that may motivate bullying or harassment, and thus make certain groups particularly vulnerable to this type of destructive behavior. Inclusion of enumerated characteristics in state anti-bullying policies does not affect protection for all other students. This approach has been adopted by a number of other states, including Illinois, Iowa, Washington, and Oregon. According to the US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, the enumeration of specific characteristics is one of the key components of state anti-bullying laws.

Recent research has shown that school anti-bullying policies that include enumerated categories play a role in reducing bullying and harassment and thus make for a safer learning environment. A national survey of students aged 13 to 18, conducted by the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), has shown that students in schools with bullying and harassment policies inclusive of sexual orientation or gender identity are less likely than other students to report a serious harassment problem at their schools. We at ADL know that hatred based on bigotry and stereotypes affects communities in a serious way and it is very important that anti-bullying legislation reflect this concept.

### *Cyber-Bullying*

Bill 1138 strengthens the definition of bullying in significant ways to improve the ability of schools to address and prevent bullying. Perhaps most important is the addition of cyber-bullying to the definition of bullying.

Most young people today consider e-mailing, text messaging, instant messaging, and blogging a vital means of self-expression and a central part of their social lives. While the Internet brings substantial value to young people both socially and educationally, it can also bring trouble. An increasing number of young people are misusing online technology to bully, harass, and even incite violence against others. Cyber-bullying is ubiquitous, often anonymous, and can rapidly escalate and intensify as countless and unknown others join in.

Students, parents, teachers and administrators must be prepared to handle bullying in this new age of technology. Despite the prevalence and impact of cyber-bullying, many adults are unaware of the scope of the problem because they are not familiar with new technologies, because parents frequently have limited involvement in and oversight of online activity, and because young people generally do not discuss their online behavior.

One constant is that schools remain the place where targets and perpetrators convene, and remain the focal point for bullying and cyber-bullying. Anti-bullying legislation that does not include electronic communications cannot be effective in today's world. Bill 1138 recognizes this reality and properly includes cyber-bullying in Connecticut's definition of bullying.

### *Conduct Off School Grounds*

Through ADL's extensive anti-bias educational programming, we have heard the stories of many young people who have been targeted by bullying. It is clear from these accounts that bullying, and cyber-bullying in particular, is not limited to the confines of the schoolyard, and that conduct that takes place outside the school setting indeed has serious consequences and a profound impact on a student's ability to learn.

Today, online technology plays an increasing and sometimes exclusive role in the way young people communicate and interact and children readily have access to cell phones and the Internet at almost any time of the day. Incidents of bullying and harassment do not stop at the school gates. With this new reality, any effective anti-bullying law must address off-campus bullying and cyber-bullying that interferes with the school's educational mission and environment, whether this takes place in a classroom, in a hallway, in an off-campus school sponsored activity or on a computer at home. The US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights has also recognized this provision as a key component of states' anti-bullying laws.

Bill 1138 takes an important step in addressing conduct off school grounds, directing schools to include in their safe school environment plans provisions addressing bullying outside of the school setting if such bullying "(A) creates a hostile environment at school for the victim, (B) infringes on the rights of the victim at school, or (C) substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school."

While Bill 1138 sets forth appropriate and valuable standards addressing this issue, we believe that the language included in the requirements of safe school environment plans should be incorporated *specifically in the definition in bullying*. Explicit inclusion of these standards will avoid confusion and provide clarity as to when a school can and should act in connection with such conduct, and will preclude challenges to a school's anti-bullying efforts that suggest a school may not act because conduct took place off school grounds or involved the use of a student's personal electronic device.

### *Safe School Environment Plans*

Bill 1138 requires that each local and regional board of education develop and implement a safe school environment plan, and sets forth eighteen specific elements that must, at a minimum, be

incorporated in each district's plan. The enumeration of these requirements is important to create consistency in bullying policies across the state, creating a statewide framework and understanding of bullying through which incidents are viewed and addressed. Moreover, standard criteria will make the Department of Education's collection and reporting of information about district plans and bullying incidents a more meaningful tool in the effort to combat bullying throughout the state.

Bill 1138 also requires the Department of Education to develop or recommend model safe school environment plans. A model plan will provide important guidance to school districts as they engage in the complicated and sometimes difficult task of creating effective and workable plans to address and prevent bullying in their schools, and will further ensure the consistency of a statewide understanding of bullying.

### *School Employee Training*

Bill 1138 requires the Department of Education to provide annual training to school employees and new teachers. This measure is critical, since teachers, administrators, school psychologists, athletic coaches and even bus drivers are on the frontlines of student conduct and are most likely to observe and identify incidents of bullying in the course of their work. Without properly trained staff, bullying is likely in many instances to go unnoticed or be addressed ineffectively.

However, while such training can effectively be provided in person or through on-line courses, we believe that the training requirement should not be fulfilled by the "dissemination of reading materials." Without appropriate accompanying training, a review of written materials will not adequately prepare staff for the complex challenges inherent in the prevention of and response to bullying. We recognize the limited resources with which the Department of Education will undertake annual training and support efforts by the Department to work with others who could help provide in-person or on-line training as appropriate and necessary. We are concerned, however, that the dissemination of written materials alone will not ensure that school employees receive or read the material or that they have the opportunity to explore the difficult and complicated issues that arise in real life incidents of bullying.

For these reasons, ADL urges the Committee to consider these recommendations and to support Bill 1138 with the modifications set forth above relating to enumerated categories, conduct off school grounds and the dissemination of written training materials.