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Testimony of Rep. Mary Mushinsky (85th) in Support of RB 1138, AN ACT CONCERNING
THE STRENGTHENING OF SCHOOL BULLYING LAWS

Before the Education Committee

Public Hearing March 11, 2011

I'm here in support of long overdue strengthening of the state's bullying law, which I sponsored in 2003 after the suicide death of an eleven-year old child who had been mercilessly bullied by fellow students. I regret that in the eight years since then, children have gained access to new ways of tormenting each other—specifically, they can harass fellow students away from school by using the social network of electronic communications. We need to respond and update the law. Adolescents can be capable of great cruelty without monitoring and guidance from adults and the establishment of rules and a prevention plan to protect vulnerable students.

In my own district, a renowned private school found it had to take action against six students who posted derogatory sexual accusations on Facebook against classmates they did not like. The material quickly spread throughout the campus community and the school temporarily restricted access to Facebook and dismissed the students. In the past year, the northeast U.S. has experienced suicides on college campuses provoked by malicious attacks on students' sexual orientation. In addition to these cases, we know from research that students different from the norm are more frequently targeted--in particular, those with developmental or physical disabilities. Students under daily attack cannot concentrate on their studies, and under significant stress are at higher risk of suicide. We adults have the power, and the responsibility, to protect these vulnerable students, at least in the public schools under our jurisdiction.

The bill is a sweeping expansion and update with the important addition of cyberbullying. It is important that bullying by electronic communication remain in the bill even if a fiscal note delays other requirements. The concept of repeated use should be retained in the definition of bullying to distinguish it from a single incident. Other

important features include: the addition of acts outside the school setting (as they impact the student at school); development of a safe school plan; more rapid response and review of reports; documentation of records (to compare responses between schools); protection of reporters; training of employees (as training can reduce bullying incidents at least by half); a statewide model plan; addition of bullying prevention to in-service training; addition to beginning teacher training; and designation of a responsible coordinator for schools. These tools will allow us to determine if the incidences of bullying are declining, which should be our goal.

My own family lost a young high school student to suicide. While we will never know for certain the cause, we do know that students' brains are still developing and they may not yet have the coping skills that allow them to deflect stresses as well as adults. I thank the Education Committee for raising this bill and allowing students to learn in a safe environment.