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Testimony of

Ray Rossomando

Connecticut Education Association

*Before the
Education Committee*

**Re: SB 1138 An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying
Laws**

March 11, 2011

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Ray Rossomando, Legislative Coordinator for the Connecticut Education Association, representing 45,000 active and retired teachers across the state.

We testify today in support of the goals and framework sought in *SB1138 An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws*. We thank the members of this committee, as well as Senator Looney, for their leadership in addressing this important issue.

CEA strongly supports bullying prevention policies, especially those that enhance awareness among students and staff. Addressing bullying has been a major initiative of our national organization, the National Education Association (NEA), which earlier this month released a national study on bullying conducted in partnership with Johns Hopkins University. I have attached the executive summary of this report, which studied school employees' perspectives regarding bullying incidents and district policies that could help address the problem.¹

We agree with President Obama, who while standing side-by-side with our teachers, announced his anti-bullying initiative yesterday:

"Bullying can have destructive consequences for our young people. And it's not something we have to accept. As parents and students, teachers and communities, we can take steps that will help prevent bullying and create a climate in our schools in which all of our children can feel safe."

We have supported the legislature's efforts to address bullying, including the state's first state-wide bullying policy enacted in 2002 (PA 02-119) and its revisions ever since. We support the goal of this bill to enhance protection and to ensure policies keep pace with the changing technologies that serve as a medium for bullying. And, we support a framework that involves more school personnel in bullying prevention.

While we support such goals, we believe that there are portions of the bill that require further review. As the NEA research illustrates, appropriate training of staff is a key ingredient to bullying prevention. School personnel surveyed in NEA's research particularly noted a need for training in how to intervene in cyber-bullying and sexting. We suggest that the benefits and provision of staff training in bullying prevention/intervention be considered in any final action on this bill.

Regarding oversight of investigations of bullying incidents, SB1138 changes current law by taking such investigations out of the hands of a building administrator (or other appropriate school personnel) and putting them, specifically, into the hands of a designated guidance counselors or school psychologists. This raises three concerns:

- 1) School counselors are expected to be unbiased supporters of the children under their guidance. For this reason they normally refrain from disciplinary matters involving student-to-student conflicts. There is a concern that if a counselor is required to investigate matters involving the actions of one student against another a chilling effect could result, hindering the trust between counselors and their students.
- 2) Current law provides for investigations to be conducted by an administrator, among other potential school employees. The proposed legislation eliminates the possibility that a more sensitive investigation, or one that may include an investigation of another school employee, could be referred to an administrator.
- 3) The development of school polices, including those ensuring the safety of students, is a task best done with input by all stakeholders – teachers, students, parents, and administrators. However, oversight of the school environment, policies, and safety of students, is ultimately an administrative responsibility that should not be exclusively devolved to subordinate school employees.

The bill also requires the Superintendent to appoint a district staff member as the "Safe School Environment Coordinator". It requires each school principal to appoint a school psychologist or guidance counselor as a "Safe School Environment Specialist". And it requires special education teachers and other specific employees to serve on a "Safe School Environment Specialist Team". Each of these positions will likely require a significant amount of time and, as the NEA study would notes, enhanced training.

Many employees may have an interest in serving, while others may not be able to do so due to their workload or other obligations. Yet, the bill appears to require appointees to serve whether or not they wish to do so and practically mandates service of special education teachers, school counselors and psychologists (the latter of which is already designated as a teacher shortage area). We believe that Safe School Environment positions should be funded, posted, and awarded to interested candidates pursuant to their districts' respective bargaining agreements.

There is a third concern regarding SB1138 as drafted. There are various areas of the proposal that leave unclear the linkage between an incident of bullying and the interests of the school district. These raise questions regarding employee responsibilities when bullying is suspected across district lines – situations increasingly possible given the expansion of cyber and mobile technologies that this proposal seeks to address. These blurred jurisdictional lines result in unclear expectations for school boards and their employees.

One example of these blurred inter-jurisdictional lines appears in the definitions. The bill defines the phrase "outside of the school setting" as "a location, activity or program that is not school related, or through the use of an electronic device or a mobile electronic device." It does not define "outside of the school setting" within the constellation of the board's interest. This becomes problematic when parts of the definition are used elsewhere in the bill.

Section 1 subsection (b) requires school boards to implement plans for addressing bullying. Such plans are required to prohibit certain acts. More specifically, lines 103-108 require a school board to have a plan that prohibits bullying on school grounds or at school sponsored events – a requirement that is welcomed, justified, and enforceable. The prohibition also extends to bullying “*through the use of an electronic device or an electronic mobile device*”. The rationale for such prohibition is clear and also justifiable. However, the language does not define use of an electronic device within the constellation of the board’s interest. The language appears to require school boards to prohibit cyber-bullying that may occur outside of the school environment and even involve perpetrators or victims outside of its jurisdiction. This latter provision not only raises a question regarding enforceability, but also raises questions relating to what is asked of school personnel to investigate, report, and record such incidents.

CEA supports policies that promote appropriate responses to any suspected incidents of student bullying and urges the committee to carefully review this jurisdictional question with an eye toward ensuring victims and perpetrators of cyber-bullying do not inadvertently fall through the cracks.

We thank the proponents of this legislation for your continued work on reducing school bullying and look forward to working with you in the furtherance of this goal.

Thank you.

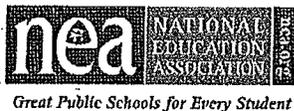
ⁱ The full study, *Findings from the National Education Association’s Nationwide Study of Bullying: Teachers’ and Education Support Professionals’ Perspectives* is available at: http://www.nea.org/assets/img/content/Findings_from_NEAs_Nationwide_Study_of_Bullying.pdf

Findings from the National Education Association's Nationwide Study of Bullying: Teachers' and Education Support Professionals' Perspectives

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The National Education Association (NEA) has a long history of involvement in bullying prevention efforts. In the mid-1990s, the NEA membership mandated that the Association create a training program for its members on student-to-student sexual harassment and bullying. In response, NEA developed curricula on these topics and has continuously offered such training since that time.

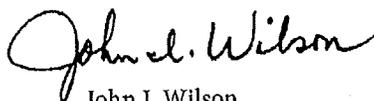
Still, it's possible that what we think we know about bullying isn't all we need to know. With 3.2 million members nationwide, the NEA is in an ideal position to address the critical issue of bullying through its current programs, while simultaneously advancing the field through rigorous research. Finding the right answers is critical to NEA's mission of ensuring a quality education for every student.

This study of staff members' perceptions of bullying represents an important step in enhancing our understanding of the perspectives of teachers and education support professionals. To our knowledge, it represents the first large-scale nationwide study examining different staff members' perspectives on bullying and bullying prevention efforts.

We hope these findings will inform the creation of professional development and training materials tailored for different school staff, as well as for those working with various groups of students across different grade levels and community contexts. Bullying robs students of their opportunity to learn. It is our shared responsibility to ensure that every child can attend a safe public school.



Dennis Van Roekel
President



John I. Wilson
Executive Director

Executive Summary

Bullying affects nearly 30 percent of school-aged youth on a monthly basis (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Murton, and Scheidt, 2001). Research indicates that many of these students will experience academic, interpersonal, and physical and mental health problems as a consequence of their involvement in bullying (O'Brennan, Bradshaw, and Sawyer, 2009; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, and Hymel, 2010). These findings on the impact of bullying on students and on the school environment illustrate a need for improved bullying intervention and prevention efforts in schools across the country.

The National Education Association (NEA) has a long history of involvement in bullying intervention and prevention.¹ With 3.2 million members nationwide, the NEA is in an ideal position to both address the critical issue of bullying through its existing programs and to advance the research on staff members' perceptions of and involvement in bullying intervention and prevention. Toward that end, the NEA recently drew upon its membership to launch a national study of school staff members' perceptions of bullying. The study's overall goal was to identify strengths and areas of need related to bullying in order to inform the next phase of intervention and prevention, both within the NEA and in collaboration with other agencies. This report summarizes study findings in an effort to promote collaboration in schools across America.

The data were collected from a nationally representative sample of 5,064 NEA members—including 2,163 professional staff (Teachers²) and 2,901 education support professionals (ESPs³)—in April 2010 using either a Web- or phone-based survey. The sample was designed to allow for comparisons across grade level and job category, with particular emphasis on ESPs, who have been largely overlooked in previous research on bullying (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, and O'Brennan, 2010a).

Data from the survey indicated that members perceived bullying to be a problem in their school; they witnessed bullying frequently and students reported it to them in large numbers. Although approximately 43 percent of NEA members perceived bullying to be a moderate or major problem at their school, over half of the members surveyed

¹ In the mid-1990s, the NEA membership mandated that the Association create a training program for its members on student-to-student sexual harassment and bullying. The NEA developed and constantly updated training curricula on these topics and has continued to conduct such training since that time.

² 'Teachers' includes classroom teachers, special educators, remedial/ESL, librarians, counselors, and other professional staff. Because the majority of the professional staff group was teachers, this entire group is referred to as Teachers, with a capital T, throughout this report.

³ 'ESPs' includes paraprofessionals, maintenance staff, clerical staff, school transportation staff, food service staff, security staff, health and student services, technical staff and skilled trades staff, and other non-teaching support staff.

(62%) indicated that they had witnessed bullying two or more times in the last month and 41 percent indicated that they had witnessed bullying once a week or more. Teachers reported witnessing significantly more students being bullied at their school in the past month than did ESPs. Teachers also viewed bullying as a significantly greater problem at their school than did ESPs. Although more Teachers (45%) than ESPs (35%) indicated that a student reported bullying to them within the past month, both groups of staff members indicated equally that parents had reported bullying to them (16%). Staff working in middle schools and in urban areas were more likely to report that they had frequently witnessed bullying (66% and 65%, respectively) and were more likely to perceive it as a serious problem (59% and 54%, respectively).

Bullying takes many forms, with school staff reporting that verbal (59%), social/relational (50%), and physical (39%) forms were of greater concern in their school than was cyberbullying (17%). The most common form of bullying reported to both Teachers and ESPs was verbal bullying, whereas cyberbullying and sexting were the least likely to be reported. Members also reported that bullying based on a student's weight (23%), gender (20%), perceived sexual orientation (18%), or disability (12%) were of concern in their school. Although Teachers generally reported feeling more comfortable intervening with different forms of bullying than did ESPs, all staff members reported being the least comfortable intervening in bullying situations related to sexual orientation and gender issues.

There was a discrepancy between the existence of school district bullying policies and staff members' self-reported training on these policies. Although the vast majority of school employees (93%) reported that their district had implemented a bullying prevention policy, just over half of all staff (54%) had received training related to the policy. Furthermore, ESPs were significantly less likely to report that they had received training on their policy (46%) than Teachers (55%). Staff in urban schools, where the rates of staff-reported bullying were highest, were less likely to report the existence of district policy (88%) and less likely to have received training on the policy (51%). Over 80 percent felt their district's policy was adequate, and approximately 80 percent thought it was clear and easy to implement.

Although school staff reported a willingness to intervene in bullying situations, less than 40 percent of staff reported being directly involved in formal bullying prevention activities. Across all school levels and communities, nearly all participants (98%) said they thought it was "their job" to intervene when they witnessed bullying incidents. Overall, however, only 58 percent reported that their school had implemented formal bullying prevention activities such as school teams, a committee, or a prevention program. Even fewer reported the presence of such prevention activities in schools located in urban areas (47%) and in high schools (51%). Teachers (42%) were significantly more likely to indicate direct involvement in bullying prevention activities than were ESPs (27%). The lowest overall level of staff involvement was in high schools (24%).

An important predictor of staff members' willingness to intervene in bullying situations was their perception of connectedness to the school, defined here as "the belief held by adults in the school that they are valued as individuals and professionals involved in the learning process." Staff who were more connected to their school were more likely to feel comfortable intervening in all forms of bullying. Staff with higher feelings of connectedness were also more likely to report being comfortable intervening in several different types of bullying situations. Both Teachers and ESPs—particularly the

latter—reported high levels of connectedness. Two factors were significantly correlated with greater comfort intervening in bullying situations: 1) having effective strategies and 2) perceiving that others in the school were also likely to intervene. These two factors remained significant across all examined forms of bullying and of bullying that targets special student populations.⁴

Although the majority of all staff reported that they already had effective strategies for handling bullying situations, several professional development needs were identified. For example, cyberbullying and sexting were identified as areas where all staff needed additional training. More ESPs reported needing professional development on how to intervene in situations involving physical bullying, verbal bullying, relational bullying, and sexting than did Teachers. With regard to special populations, areas of greatest need for additional training related to sexual orientation, gender issues, and disability, with ESPs reporting a greater need than Teachers. ESPs were more likely than Teachers to report that they had resources available to them when faced with a bullying situation.

Taken together, these findings provide great insight into school staff members' perceptions of bullying, including the unique perspectives of different groups of ESPs (e.g., school transportation staff, food service staff, security staff) who are often overlooked in the literature. To our knowledge, the NEA Bullying Study is the only large-scale nationwide study that examines different staff members' perspectives on bullying intervention and prevention. As such, it helps to elucidate the specific needs of various groups of adults who work in schools across the country. These findings may also inform the creation of professional development and training materials tailored for different school staff, as well as for those working with special populations of students across different grade levels and community contexts.

⁴ 'Special student populations' is used here to include groups that are the target of bullying due to some particular identifying factor, such as sexual orientation, disability, or weight, for example.