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Testimony before the Education Committee

Friday, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011

12:30 AM in Room 1E

Good morning/afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee. My name is Frank Sykes the Legislative Analyst with the African-American Affairs Commission (AAAC) a non-partisan state agency. This Commission is an advocate for the African-American community and for the people. We are here today to speak in support of **HB 1138** – *An act concerning the strengthening of bullying laws*. While I speak as a representative of an agency I am also a parent of a six year old.

The Commission supports the overall intent of this bill but with some minor concerns. Strengthening anti-bullying legislation is important for creating safer school environments and improving student academic achievement. The reasons often given for poor academic performance are lack of early childhood education, lack of after school programs and mentors etc, bullying is not often discussed. However bullying is an equally important reason for school failure. It causes dropping out of school, isolation, violence and even suicide. Each day in this nation it is estimated that a 160,000 students miss school for fear of being

bullied.<sup>1</sup> Bullying statistics surveys show that 77 percent of students are bullied mentally, verbally, & physically.<sup>2</sup> For African-American students with drop out rates significantly higher than the average, bullying is totally unacceptable in the school environment or off school grounds.

One of the concerns we have is that reports sent to the Department of Education regarding bullying complaints are very general. There needs to be more specificity regarding race, ethnicity, students profile for example whether they have special needs etc, other important indicators. This information will assist the State Department of Education (SDE) to identify trends, patterns in school bullying and ultimately assess the nature and severity of the problem.

Another concern is that students of immigrant parents and children with special needs may be the most vulnerable. A Connecticut study confirms these findings reporting that more than 50 percent of all complaints involved a student with an individualized education program (IEP) or a disability.<sup>3</sup> While evidence on the impact of bullying on immigrant students is limited there is consensus that individual differences in behavior, skin color, religion and culture are strong determinants in who gets bullied and who doesn't. There is language addressing culture in the bill however we believe stronger cultural sensitivity training is needed not only for staff and students but especially parents. It is our understanding that the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunity has developed informational material to educate parents about bullying. This is a good first step however all parents need to be informed and educated about different student behaviors, conditions especially in the area of cultural tolerance.

Finally we are not fully confident in a system in which the reporting of incidents to the SDE is conducted by school staff. While we respect the hard work that staff put in daily we are concerned that there is a conflict of interest, as such incidents may be under reported to avoid to the stigma of the school being unsafe. We

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Education Statistics, *Facts About Bullying*

<sup>2</sup> [www.how-to-stop-bullying.com](http://www.how-to-stop-bullying.com), *Recent Statistics on Bullying*

<sup>3</sup> AbilityPath.Org, *Walk a Mile In Their Shoes: Bullying and the Child With Special Needs*

would prefer to see a neutral, independent authority perform this function. In any event we are supportive of the bill because it strengthens school safety policy, fostering a more productive learning environment.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.