

Testimony regarding S.B. 1138

We at the Dispute Settlement Center, a non-profit agency helping resolve conflicts in Connecticut for over 20 years, applaud efforts to curb bullying and to promote safe school environments. A healthy school climate has positive and meaningful relationships --between adults and students, between students and their peers, and also among adults – a climate where everyone looks to eliminate *any* form of hurtful, unkind, mean-spirited, disrespectful interaction, (verbal, non-verbal, emotional or physical). A key part of achieving this goal is through restorative processes such as facilitated dialogue which can allow the root causes of the mean-spirited behavior to surface and prevent its recurrence.

From our work in the schools, we know there is virtually always more to an incident than meets the eye. Schools need to be encouraged to take the time to find out the whole story. We and others trained to facilitate dialogue between youth often see kids work out an arrangement on how to deal with each other in a respectful manner going forward. Also, it often comes as a surprise for parents to hear the full story about what happened and the many varied actions and words that led up to an incident. Kids don't like to tell either their parents or school administrators everything, so creating the right process so that can happen, is a skill and takes time.

Students can play a key role in bullying prevention as recognized in the bill's provision for student peer training, education and support. Students should be taught to recognize bullying and other mean behaviors and how to react, depending on the severity of the incidents. At one end of the spectrum, a peer saying "Hey stop that" is a potent intervention to stop mean behavior from escalating. At the other end of the spectrum, kids should be encouraged to report bullying behavior and shown that reporting can be done in a safe, confidential way, so as to avoid the fear of revenge or being called a "snitch". In these instances, students should refrain from actually taking it upon themselves to conduct a dialogue between the bully and the target. Assessment of an incident and, if appropriate, facilitation of a dialogue, is best left to trained adults to handle.

We hope the final version of the bill will recognize what we all know - that students are in the formative stage of their lives. They are testing out a range of behaviors and we adults should be careful not to label any child. When dealing with mean behavior, schools can and should be encouraged to use restorative approaches rather than be forced to use only punitive ones. Each incident merits careful, thoughtful consideration.

In sum, based on our experience with facilitated dialogue both inside and outside of schools, we encourage the committee to refrain from putting requirements on schools to impose automatic punishments based on fragmentary information. Give schools the support to put in place sustainable long-term improvements in their school climate. A positive school climate is the best remedy for all forms of meanness.

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