

Testimony

Minnesota: Governor's Task Force on the Prevention of School Bullying

Stuart Green, DMH, LCSW

June 18, 2012

1- Thank you to Julie Herzog and colleagues for this opportunity to talk with you today. Julie's organization, PACER, has made a tremendous contribution to our national anti-bullying work, and Julie certainly deserves the leadership role she has.

2- NJ Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention at www.njbullying.org which I founded and direct is an informal networking association of non-governmental and government organizations in NJ concerned about childhood bullying. Right after Columbine, the bullying-related school shooting in Colorado on April 20th, 1999, when I started, there was nothing like that in NJ, and there's still little like it nationally. Our focus has been bringing organizations together to do projects: a recent example is a Pro Bono law project to help limited finance families have legal representation, led by Education Law Center, with Volunteer Lawyers for Justice, in which private attorneys agree to represent a family pro bono in exchange for the free training we provide. Our other focus has been the development and strengthening of law. So I chaired the government commission, developed a report, and this led to the new law we helped develop, the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, widely described as the strongest anti-bullying law in the country. *1 minute 15 seconds*

3- Strong law changes things. It raises community expectations. It supports and motivates those whose hearts are in the right place to do even more, and pushes those less willing a bit further than they'd go on their own. Schools in NJ were not addressing bullying in 2000, when our first state law was developed. That law heightened awareness and was a proper response to the Columbine tragedy, and at that point NJ was one of a minority of states that had bullying law at all. But that first law lacked detail and consequences, and so most schools continued not addressing bullying adequately or at all. With this new law, we have much more anti-bullying work going on – school climate teams in every school to prevent and

address bullying, designated staff when problems occur, so there's a clear contact for parents, and more. We are making progress. But not every school is enacting the law as intended. And that's partly because strong law also elicits resistance/pushback, a sign of its strength. *to 2 minutes 10 seconds*

4-This year, the first year of our law, we faced such a challenge mid-year, in which several school districts, two in particular, complained that the law was an unfunded mandate, requiring them to do something 'extra' without receiving funding to do it. And those districts and their administrators do not 'get it' – they don't understand that protecting and supporting all children in a school is what it means to be an educator, what it means to have a school. So our government – the Governor and Legislature – responded by adding to the law an allocation of one million dollars into the law's Bullying Prevention Fund, and creating a Task Force to make recommendations for the law's implementation. But I'd like to say that those who complain the most are typically those who have done the least and who are comfortable for their reasons with the status quo. *2 minutes 52 seconds*

5-The most important thing an administrator and staff have to understand is that childhood bullying is the most serious common problem of the school age child. And that it's terribly important. That's of course because of the suffering of the mistreated child and the despair of the family. But it's also important because bullying is the engine for most of the other violence and problems we experience in human relations in the world. It's what poisons the well and creates in us as children a fundamental cynicism about adults and life. It's at the root and a sustainer of racism, of xenophobia, a major cause of the inhibited, risk-avoidant, fearful life many adults lead, the anger and even hatred with which we express our differences. It's because one learns in school, during the most formative years of our lives, and while forced to be every day in institutions – schools! – inadequately controlled for violence by the adults who run and staff them – that we first and most powerfully learn that the world is a 'dog eat dog' place, that people are divided into categories of the weak and the strong, and that the vulnerable are likely to suffer. *3 minutes 52 seconds*

6-In fact, as we know, childhood bullying is not inevitable, not developmentally normal, and not inherent in the nature of children. Bullying is instead a problem created in children by adults – by adult modeling of bullying behavior in relations with children and with other adults, and by the failure to adequately prevent bullying and address it adequately when it occurs. *4 minutes 12 seconds*

7-So we respond to this understanding in part with strong law (and NJ's is still not strong enough, but we're not finished). To be strong, an anti-bullying law must do two things above all: First, the law must enumerate – specifically name the most vulnerable populations, and at the top of that list is diverse gender identity and expression, children who identify as lesbian, gay or transgender or don't fit gender stereotypes; and also children with special health or learning needs. The law must require that schools strongly affirm and support all those minorities and vulnerable populations. Second, the law must require that adults address bullying. And a key part of that is that administrators, staff, coaches, volunteers, all adults in schools who intimidate, demean, humiliate and otherwise treat children and adult peers negatively and harshly be confronted, helped to change their behavior, or be gotten away from this critical setting, filled as it is with children. There is nothing more corrosive to an anti-bullying effort than the presence in the school of one or more staff who behave inappropriately, and are left in place to do so year after. Everyone knows who they are and that they're there. It's completely unacceptable. *5 minutes 24 seconds*

8-It used to be believed that bullying had its origin not only in children inherently bad, but in bad families and bad communities and then made its way over into the pristine confines of schools. Now we know that bullying primarily arises in schools. In fact, bullying which arises in school often then makes its way over into the community. Law enforcement authorities know this well and it is a reason why bullying in school is of such interest to knowledgeable police and attorneys general: Because in a school in which bullying is inadequately prevented and addressed, bullying and the atmosphere of fear it creates is a major conduit for gang activity, a major means of gang recruitment and retention. *6 minutes*

9-Among the most important of our modern understandings is that bullying is a systemic problem (the term used by the field's founder, Prof. Dan Olweus) – that it exists as a function of - in the term we more commonly use today – the ‘ecology’ of schools. Therefore addressing bullying requires altering the ecology, the way in which a school functions overall. We refer to this ecology as the ‘culture’ of the school. Culture is “the way we do things here,” the rules, the norms, the usual practices, the expectations. And school culture generates school ‘climate’. Climate is the way the school ‘feels’ to those inside it or those who visit it, the atmosphere, how warm, how friendly, how welcoming. *6 minutes 38 seconds*

10-So what does it mean to strengthen a culture, and warm up a climate? I only have time to give an example or two, while noting there are many areas in which school culture can be strengthened in a way that prevents and helps address bullying: *6 minutes 49 seconds*

11-First of all, schools must be welcoming places, and literally so, as the great program responsive classroom prescribes. Staff should be out front every morning, welcoming students to school, in a friendly, positive manner. The staff must be positive toward each other, and student-staff relations must also be positive. This takes work, every day, and is well worth it. As every parent knows, children must be noticed doing good. *7 minutes 12 seconds*

12-Second, schools must ensure support for diverse and vulnerable populations. Adequate support for diverse gender identity and expression requires that school staff are understanding and supportive of children who identify as lesbian, gay and transgender or don't fit gender stereotypes, that the school participates in community-based lgbt organizations and activities, such as no name-calling week or day of silence, that the school has a Gay Straight Alliance club or similar. For every minority in a school, there must be affirmation and support. In its absence, in that gap in the school culture, such children are made vulnerable and commonly harmed. And the more societal attitudes toward such minorities are hateful, the more the school – every school – must be a safe and actively supportive haven. Children of Muslim communities are being terribly harmed in

exactly this way, and schools have a responsibility to stand up and affirm, support and protect those children. *8 minutes 8 seconds*

13-Strong law should recognize that bullying is almost always a pattern rather than a single incident. One incident may be so humiliating and demeaning and harmful that it creates a lasting hostile environment. Nonetheless, if it is bullying a pattern of harm must be assumed. And a pattern of harm always implies a weakness in school culture and systems of care. How was it that a child was repeatedly hurt for months or years with no one on staff knowing or being able to get it to stop? Friendlessness – the major source of vulnerability (as well as an outcome of being targeted) must be a school's concern, whether or not bullying has occurred. *8 minutes 43 seconds*

14- When bullying does occur, there must be an active, intensive effort to understand the social situation of the children involved, and then – based on that increased understanding – to intervene. There must be consequences for acts of violence, which are almost always patterns, not single incidents, and students who hurt peers must be helped to reflect on what they've done, and develop options to violent behavior. But the consequences must be reasonable – withdrawal of privileges, for example, and reasonably escalate when negative behavior continues or reoccurs. This is not a call for 'zero tolerance', a discredited and problematic approach, always especially applied to populations of color, and so unjust. *9 minutes 22 seconds*

15-Strong law must have a timeline, so that school actions on bullying reflect the urgency with which children and parents experience it. In NJ, we've set a few days for this requirement, and some organizations fought us a lot on this issue. So be prepared. *9 minutes 36 seconds*

16-Strong law must require that schools address bullying off the campus, including cyberbullying. Cyberbullying almost always occurs between students who know each other from the same school buildings and communities. And cyberbullying almost almost always precedes or follows - and usually both - in person targeting of students in school. *9 minutes 52 seconds*

17-Strong law must provide parents with support, including from resources outside the school itself - a hotline to call, a website, such as ours. It's shameful in NJ that so many calls from parents come to me, on a line in a doctor's office, to a volunteer with no official Department of Education role or relationship. And school staff – who also call our line and use our website - must be provided with such support as well. *10 minutes 18 seconds*

17-And as much as we honor Olweus for his seminal work, and appreciate all those who go on to develop packaged anti-bullying programs, good law should not recommend any specific packaged program or indeed require that a packaged program be purchased by the school. Although most packaged programs contain many of the critical elements for addressing bullying, none contain all of those elements – notably some of the most famous ones leave out a sufficient enumerated emphasis on vulnerable populations. And most of all, packaged programs will only work when there is sustained commitment from the top to addressing these issues, when there is almost universal staff buy-in, and when the anti-bullying program is fully integrated with all of the other initiatives in the school. Buying a program will supply none of those critical variables. In fact, often when a packaged program is bought, staff takes it to mean that this is the flavor of the year, until the money runs out. With no local ownership and buy-in, there is no success. That's why the evidence is so equivocal on the efficacy of such programs. *11 minutes 19 seconds*

18-A school must be a place in which there is persistent commitment to engage all of the children, to ensure that every child is in positive relation with at least one staff member who knows the child as a person and whom the child knows cares about them. That job must be on at least one specific staff member's performance evaluation and job expectations for one child. Lack of engagement is the number one factor in everything about school performance, including high school graduation rates, learning, social status, everything. Without it, school becomes a place in which children – especially those most vulnerable, because of minority status, for instance, or because of special health or learning needs, or because they are for whatever reason lacking in friends – are truly left behind. *11 minutes 47 seconds*

19-So preventing and addressing bullying is primarily a matter of attitude, of administrators and staff and all of us 'getting it', as the women's movement says. And that attitude must be 'not on our watch'. We – administrators, staff, all adults in the school community – will not allow a child to sit alone at a lunchroom table day after day, never allow a child to be repeatedly stigmatized, isolated, harmed. Not on our watch! *12 minutes 12 seconds*

NOT INCLUDED IN TESTIMONY ('OUTAKES'):

-The most important and widely applicable concept in all anti-bullying work is the concept of 'engagement'. How 'engaged' or 'connected' children are to their school is absolutely key. A good, and easy, way to assess a child's engagement with school is to ask the child if there is an adult (at least one) in the school who knows the child as a person, and cares about them. And you must ask the child to name the adult, because all children will say 'yes' if asked it as a general question. But giving a name or not being able to is more likely the truth. There are huge percentages of children in this country who cannot give such a name. And such a child is not engaged with or connected to the school. And that is a child who is extremely vulnerable to isolation, to poor performance, to becoming the target of a pattern of violence.

- More than half a century's worth of research, by the famous psychologist Eliot Aronson and his students and colleagues have clearly shown that when students learn collaboratively, in small groups, there is no drop-off in learning or academic achievement, as compared to individual learning models, and yet there is a huge uptick in peer relations, especially in acceptance and involvement of isolated youth. Every educator knows about collaborative models – 'jigsaw' and similar – but the percentage of use of such models is unacceptably low. Even the National Science Foundation has decried the low rate of use of such models, encouraging more because that's the work – especially science – is done in the real world outside of school – collaboratively. This is a prime example of the way in which doing the things which promote relationship and social and emotional intelligence

and learning not only helps prevent bullying and other violence, but concurrently promotes learning and academic performance, and the relation between school and the world outside it.

-It is not sufficient to blame parents for non-participation – there must be staff – at least one – in every school who has it as part of their performance evaluation, their job expectation, to nurture and grow such processes, to find a way to involve more parents, rather than accept the status quo.

-Before Olweus, it was not understood that bullying is almost never a single incident, but a pattern of negative acts, whether physical or psychological or – most commonly – both, whether direct (anything ‘in the face’ of the targeted child) or indirect (spreading rumors, isolating, sending a humiliating photo around for others to see), whether in person or via electronic means. Cyberbullying is simply bullying – almost always occurring between children who know each other from the same school buildings and communities, and almost always either preceding or following, or both, bullying which occurs in person in school.

-Another recent Coalition project is a higher-education-based expert advisory group, to issue and widely distribute free guidance documents for schools and community

-We refer to the most central of these inaccurate ideas as the ‘Lord of the Flies’ model, after the novel by Golding in which children, the only survivors of a plane which crashes on a desert island, inflict terrible harm on each other – the mistaken idea that bullying is inherent in the nature of childhood – of people – and that when children are free of the benign influence of adults – of us – children will inevitably and terribly harm the vulnerable among them. And in fact, as I’ve stated already, bullying arises in children because of the behavior and attitudes of the adults around them.

- Schools must involve parents. There are huge numbers of schools, including in NJ, in which there is no or no robust and active support group for parents of children receiving special education, with special health or learning needs. It is impossible for parents of such children to cope well with the challenges of such

parenting and care without the support of peers. But many schools take no responsibility for ensuring that such supportive structures exist. For similar reasons, PTA/PTC participation is typically very low, as few as 30 or 40 parents at such meetings in a 400 or 500 child school. ensuring that such support exists. This must change. Parents must feel welcome in schools. After 4th grade or so in every school, parents tend to disappear. Parents are the most important allies for these efforts there are, they should be flooding the school, involved in every area, helping supervise, helping educate, helping with everything. They are not there not because they do not want to be or don't have the time, though these are issues for some. They are not there because schools don't make sufficient efforts to make them welcome, and affirm and honor the roles they can play.

-This principle applies to all minority and therefore vulnerable populations. Every school has children with Tourette Syndrome and associated disorders. Schools must proactively educate all children and parents about such conditions, so that no child or staff or teacher mistakes as voluntary the tic-ing of a child with TS, and (therefore) blames and stigmatizes them for the behavioral expression.

-So in that regard – unwillingness to accept the status quo – I'd say that the most important Coalition activity has been the daily phone calls we've gotten for the past twelve years – three on a bad day, one a day on average – from parents of mistreated children. Their pain and plight fuels all necessary work on this issue. And the most important thing that happens on those calls is that at some point in the call I or others say to the parent that we/re very sorry they and their child is being hurt, that it's not deserved or right, and that we'd like to help. And regularly when one of us says that, the parent begins to cry and then says it's the first time anyone's said anything supportive to them, hasn't treated them suspiciously or antagonistically or defensively. And remember, parents only call us after they've talked to multiple administrators and staff at schools. So we have a problem, still, and it's not about what particular anti-bullying intervention to use. It's about attitude and understanding.

-Those in the field now know this so well that we refer to it as the 'Willie Sutton rule'. He said he robbed banks because that's where the money is. And school is where the kids are, most of their time with each other, in all their formative years.

-Zero tolerance is not an approach to anything – it's an unwise, un-nuanced, unsophisticated and completely not evidence-based scheme which features inappropriately harsh and inflexible punishments unrelated to the offense, and – as many studies have clearly shown – imposed primarily on minorities, especially populations of color. No school should ever have a 'zero tolerance' policy – it's a mindless, simplistic, inappropriate approach.