

March 28, 2010

Dear Senator/Representative:

As organizations committed to ensuring that *all* students have access to an education unhindered by discrimination, including harassment and physical aggression, we are writing to urge you to support and cosponsor the **Student Non-Discrimination Act (S. 555/H.R. 998)**. This important legislation would establish a comprehensive federal prohibition against discrimination, including harassment, in K-12 public schools based on a student's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, providing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students with long overdue and much needed explicit federal protections. The legislation also protects students who associate with LGBT people, including students with LGBT parents and friends.

Discrimination, harassment, and even physical abuse, are often part of LGBT students' daily lives at school. A 2009 study of more than 7,000 LGBT middle and high school students across the country found that nine out of ten reported experiencing harassment at their school within the past year based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, and two-thirds said they felt unsafe at school because of who they are.¹ Nearly one-third skipped at least one day of school within the previous month because of concerns for their safety. Sadly, LGBT youth are also at a significantly increased risk for suicide related to mental health issues that often arise from poor treatment and discrimination in our nation's schools²

Ensuring the Student Non-Discrimination Act becomes law is critical to the overall psychological well-being of LGBT youth, who have the same right to an education in our nation as all other students. The heightened media coverage on LGBT youth suicides across the nation this past fall shed light on an ongoing health issue for many of these young people. The Student Non-Discrimination Act is a crucial step for Congress to take to address the far-too-often hostile school environments that fuel mental health issues and for some, an increased risk for suicide.

The month of September 2010 alone was marked by one needless tragedy after another. In Greensburg, Indiana, 15-year-old Billy Lucas was found by his mother in the family's barn after he had taken his own life. 13-year-old Asher Brown, of Houston, Texas, died after shooting himself. Seth Walsh, also 13, of Tehachapi, California, died after spending nine days on life support after he hanged himself from a tree in his backyard. Billy, Asher and Seth all took their own lives following unrelenting verbal and physical abuse at their schools because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation. The tragically short lives of these young people underscore the fact that LGBT students are a particularly vulnerable population in our nation's schools.

While federal laws currently protect students on the basis of their race, color, sex, religion, disability or national origin, no federal statute explicitly protects students on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. The Student Non-Discrimination Act would do just that. In addition,

¹ GLSEN National School Climate Survey 2009

² Massachusetts Youth Risk Survey 2007; Grossman, A.H., D'Augelli, A.R. (2007). "Transgender youth and life threatening behaviors." *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior*, 37(5): 527-537.

nearly fifty years of civil rights history clearly demonstrate that laws similar to the proposed Student Non-Discrimination Act are effective in preventing discrimination, including harassment, from occurring in the first place by prompting schools to take proactive steps to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for all students who are in their care.

It is with the spirit of being proactive that we the undersigned urge you to support and cosponsor the Student Non-Discrimination Act (S. 555/H.R. 998). Congress has a historic opportunity to offer critical protections to current and future generations of LGBT youth and their student allies by passing this legislation, which ensures that discrimination, including harassment and physical aggression, of students on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity will have no place in our country's public elementary and secondary schools.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Youth

American Association of University Women (AAUW)

American Civil Liberties Union

American Counseling Association

American Federation of Teachers

American Humanist Association

American Psychological Association (APA)

Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, AFL-CIO

Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law

Center for American Progress Action Fund

CenterLink: The Community of LGBT Centers

Communications Workers of America (CWA)

CREDO Action

Disciples Justice Action Network

Episcopal Church

Family Equality Council

Friends Committee on National Legislation

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network

Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders (GLAD)

Gay-Straight Alliance Network

Human Rights Campaign

Human Rights Watch

Immigration Equality Action Fund

Interfaith Alliance

Lambda Legal

NAACP

National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum

National Association of Human Rights Workers

National Association of School Psychologists
National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Council of Jewish Women
National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC)
National Center for Transgender Equality
National Education Association
National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Action Fund
National Women's Law Center
Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) National
People For the American Way
Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS)
Southern Poverty Law Center
The Trevor Project
Transgender Law Center
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
Woodhull Freedom Foundation