

Testimony of Anti-Defamation League
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
House Committee on Education
October 10, 2012

Chairman Clymer, Chairman Roebuck, and members of the Pennsylvania Education Committee, my name is Nancy Baron-Baer. I serve as Associate Regional Director of the Anti-Defamation League's Eastern Pennsylvania/Southern New Jersey/Delaware Regional Office. I am here to express ADL's support for House Bill 2464.

For nearly 100 years, the Anti-Defamation League has fought anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry and prejudice. ADL has long been at the forefront of national, state, and local efforts to deter and counteract intolerance and hate. ADL's diversity and anti-bias education initiatives have reached over 56 million youths and adults around the world and we have seen, first-hand, the extent and impact of bullying across the country and within Pennsylvania.

The passage of anti-bullying legislation is critical to securing safe learning environments for Pennsylvania's children. Forty-nine (49) states, plus the District of Columbia, have anti-bullying laws. While Pennsylvania has a bullying law on its books, we lag behind the rest of the country in providing strong and effective protection from cyberbullying and bullying for our children. ADL has developed curricula and programming for teachers, students and the community on how to recognize and respond to bullying and cyber-bullying, and has developed a model bullying prevention law for states to adopt and implement. House Bill 2464 is patterned after our model statute which requires school districts to adopt a comprehensive and practical anti-bullying policy. We believe a comprehensive anti-bullying law should:

- Incorporate a strong definition of bullying, including cyber-bullying;
- Include notice requirements for students and parents, setting out clear reporting procedures; and

- Require training for teachers and school employees who interact with students about how to recognize and respond to bullying and cyber-bullying.
- Develop age-appropriate curriculum to teach students about bullying and cyberbullying.

House Bill 2464 would require the Pennsylvania Department of Education to develop a model policy, as well as training materials on components that should be included in any school district policy in the Commonwealth. It would require each district to adopt a policy tailored to its particular community. This bill will require districts to work with parents, teachers, students, law enforcement and other community stakeholders to create and implement the anti-bullying policy.

Children readily have access to the Internet at almost any time of the day and Pennsylvania must deal with the issue of off-campus bullying when there is a connection to the school environment. This bill addresses the issue of off-campus cyber-bullying. School officials will be able to respond to cyber-bullying

when there is a nexus between off-campus actions and in – school learning. For example, the bill establishes a mechanism for a school to address situations where students are unable to learn at school because they are being intimidated off-campus through Facebook.

House Bill 2464 encourages schools to create bullying prevention task forces and programs where schools, parents, and community members can work together. School policies will also include strategies for providing counseling or referral services not only to the victim, but also to the perpetrator and family members. This bill does not provide for criminal penalties for any offense committed pursuant to the bill, but does require a procedure for reporting incidents to law enforcement that may constitute criminal activity.

Bullying can produce devastating consequences and is often a precursor to more destructive and criminal behavior. According to an Associated Press 2009 survey, 60% of young people who

have been bullied report destructive behavior such as smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, using illegal drugs or shoplifting.

Children who are bullied are also more likely to suffer from depression, loneliness, anxiety, low self-esteem, and thoughts of suicide. The Associated Press survey indicated that targets of digital abuse are twice as likely to report having received treatment from mental health professionals. That same survey found that bullied students were three (3) times more likely to consider dropping out of school than non-bullied students . In addition, a 2009 study from the Cyberbullying Research Center found that bullied students were 1.5-2 times more likely to have attempted suicide. Children who "do the bullying" are also more likely than their peers to engage in physical violence, vandalism, smoking, drinking alcohol and school absenteeism. Increases in youth violence, school harassment, and bullying pose significant threats to student safety and academic achievement.

Pennsylvania has not been immune from the tragedies of violence and suicide due to bullying. Unfortunately, there are

many examples of students who were the victims of violent assaults. For instance, Nadin Khoury, a 13 year old Upper Darby boy, was kidnapped and hung from a fence post by his assailants. He said the students picked on him because he was smaller than they were. He also believed he was targeted because his family is from Liberia. South Philadelphia High School – there were years of harassment and bullying against Asian students. The Asian students were attacked – kicked and beaten.

Then, there are the suicides. Brandon Bitner was a 14 year old high school freshman in Snyder County. Brandon stepped in front of a tractor-trailor in Perry County to end his life. His suicide note explained he could not endure another 4 years of hurtful bullying. Or, consider Tiffani Maxwell, a 16 year old Junior at Slippery Rock High School, who shot herself in the head. Her family maintains she was the victim of reckless bullying. And, I could go on....

Teachers and school administrators cannot be expected to tackle these complex issues alone, without guidance or training.

Therefore, House Bill 2464 provides for annual training of those individuals who have significant contact with students. We believe training is critical if we want to make real progress protecting our children from bullying and cyberbullying. In addition, many students and their parents remain ill-informed about how to prevent, identify and respond to incidents of bullying. Therefore, House Bill 2464 provides for school policies to include provisions for educational programs for parents and students.

Young people today consider e-mailing, text messaging instant messaging, and blogging a vital means of self-expression and a central part of their social lives. While the Internet brings substantial value to young people, both socially and educationally, it can also bring trouble. An increasing number of young people are misusing online technology to bully, harass, and even incite violence against others. As opposed to what many parents, including me, experienced on the playground, today's bullies use modern technology to target and harass their victims. Cyber-

bullying is ubiquitous, home is not a refuge, electronic bullying is only a cell phone away. It is often anonymous and can rapidly swell as countless and unknown others join in on "the fun".

Students, parents, teachers and administrators must be prepared to handle bullying in this new age of technology. Despite the prevalence and impact of cyber-bullying, many adults remain unaware of the problem. They are not trained in new technologies. They frequently have limited involvement in and oversight of online activity because young people generally decline to discuss their online behavior.

One constant is that schools are still the focal point for bullying and/or cyber-bullying. Schools are where the targets and "bullies" convene. House Bill 2464 requires schools to develop strong anti-bullying policies and includes electronic communications in its definition of bullying. Any anti-bullying legislation that excludes electronic communications would be ineffective in today's world.

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, recently published provisions of state laws throughout the country which represent best practices. Among them was New York's Dignity For All Students Act which contains strong provisions for monitoring and transparency. Iowa and Ohio have adopted a similar approach. We believe that accountability is an important component in any effective anti-bullying laws. Data collection and the reporting of information is critical to ensure compliance with the law and its effectiveness. House Bill 2464 requires that the Department of Education establish and maintain a central repository for the collection and analysis of information on bullying. In addition, all acts of harassment and bullying covered under this Bill must be reported to the State Board of Education semi- annually.

House Bill 2464 will play a critical role in providing Pennsylvania's children with access to safe schools, free of all forms of bullying and harassment. We urge you to support House Bill 2464, so that Pennsylvania can join the vast majority of states

with comprehensive laws protecting students from bullying and cyber-bullying. This bill, and protecting our students, our leaders of the future, should be a priority for all of us.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important issue.