



**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

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Good morning, Chairman Clymer, Chairman Roebuck, and members of the Committee. I am Mike Crossey, a teacher in the Keystone Oaks School District with more than 34 years of classroom experience. I am currently on leave from the district while serving as the president of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). On behalf of our 187,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about the critically important issue of preventing bullying and, in particular, the provisions of House Bill 2464.

PSEA appreciates the Committee's efforts to review current law and determine whether it provides the necessary protections for students to prevent bullying. This hearing certainly is timely given that October is National Bullying Prevention Month. But bullying prevention must occur each and every day - any type of bullying is unacceptable and any incident must be taken seriously by students, educators, staff, administrators, parents, and members of the community. Ideally, we must all work together not only to intervene when incidences of bullying occur, but to create safe and caring school environments that prevent such incidences in the first place.

The nature of bullying has changed over time, and its prevalence has increased. Bullying can involve direct physical contact such as hitting, but can also include verbal aggression in the form of threats, name calling, or spreading rumors intended to cause emotional harm. And in recent years, students face cyber bullying which elevates bullying to a new level of intensity. Using interactive technologies such as text messages or social media, cyber bullying can occur around the clock, and the text or images can be widely disseminated well beyond school grounds.

Students who have been bullied report feeling depressed, anxious, and isolated. Many will experience academic, interpersonal, physical, and mental health problems as a consequence of their being victims of bullying. And in some cases, as the nation and Pennsylvania has seen recently, some students are so tormented that they take their own lives or the lives of their tormentors. This clearly demonstrates a need for quality, consistent bullying prevention efforts in schools across the nation.

PSEA has a long history of supporting efforts to reduce bullying. We do this through education and through advocacy. PSEA shares resources with our members and with the public about bullying to increase awareness and its detrimental impacts on students and their ability to learn and what we can all do to help reduce and prevent incidences of bullying. For example, we recently shared a bullying prevention toolkit with the thousands of interested parents and community members who have joined with PSEA as Partners for Public Education (www.partnersforpubliceducation.org) in recognition of October as Bullying Prevention Month. In addition to our communications efforts, PSEA also offers trainings to our members. The trainings are often in conjunction with partners such as Pennsylvania's Parent Education Network and PACER (**P**arent **A**dvocacy **C**oalition for **E**ducational **R**ights) focused on best practices for preventing and reducing bullying in our schools.

But we recognize that awareness and education alone is not enough. PSEA believes it is important that our state policies assert positions that will help reduce the incidences of bullying in Pennsylvania. Because of that belief, we were one of the primary stakeholders in 2008 seeking improvements to Pennsylvania's bullying statute, including: 1) establishment of a more comprehensive definition of bullying that includes "electronic" communications; 2) requiring school districts to enact policies providing for bullying prevention, intervention, and awareness of the problem; and 3) requiring districts to delineate discipline for bullying. Yet while these changes have been helpful in increasing awareness and most likely reducing incidences of bullying in Pennsylvania, we can and should do more to address this critical issue.

As discussed before, bullying is disruptive to learning and harmful to the development of our students into confident, respectful adults. These behaviors can be addressed and modified by helping our school communities implement common-sense policies and strategies proven to be effective. PSEA's *Solutions that Work* (www.solutionsthatworkpa.org) proposal released in June 2011 includes a number of these strategies – several of which are also incorporated in House Bill 2464 sponsored by Representative Quigley. While PSEA does not yet have a formal position on the bill, we support many of its provisions – particularly those that mesh with our research-based approaches contained in *Solutions that Work*. These include:

- **Additional training for school employees.** In order to better identify, respond to, report, and prevent bullying, school staff training is essential. According to a national survey of thousands of school employees conducted by the National Education Association (NEA), 98 percent of educators believe it's their job to intervene when they see bullying happening in their school, but many do not feel equipped to do so.

Any training that occurs should include all school personnel, including school bus drivers and food service workers. Locations in schools like the cafeteria are often not monitored by teachers but by food service workers, paraprofessionals, volunteers, or parents. These individuals also need to learn the tools for recognizing and intervening in student-to-student bullying situations – not just educators. According to the NEA survey referenced above, more than two-thirds of food services workers reported that they need additional training on how to address different forms of bullying – physical, verbal, and relational – and in situations involving children being bullied because of sexual orientation, race, gender, and religion.

As the Committee considers House Bill 2464, you may want to include parameters for training such as requiring school districts to use high-quality training such as national models like the trainings offered by NEA, the Anti-Defamation League, PACER and others. This way schools are not duplicating effort and will help to ensure that the individuals receiving the training are being provided the tools necessary to implement a successful bullying prevention program in their school community.

- **Anonymous tips regarding bullying.** House Bill 2464 and PSEA's *Solutions that Work* proposal call for school districts to establish a procedure to allow for anonymous tips about bullying. This can be accomplished in a number of ways such as a hotline or suggestion box. Some schools have even created a "cyberbully" box as part of the school web site for reporting incidents of bullying making it easier for parents as well as children to make a report. PSEA also agrees with the bill that no formal disciplinary action should be taken solely on the basis of an anonymous report. We would suggest that students and parents be encouraged to use the anonymous "hotline" or "suggestion

box” not only to report possible incidences of bullying but to provide ideas and strategies that could be used to create a more positive school climate.

- **School safety committees or bullying prevention task forces.** PSEA’s *Solutions that Work* calls for the creation of school safety committees and House Bill 2464 calls for prevention task forces. It doesn’t really matter what the groups are ultimately titled, but the concept of involving a diverse group from the school community – parents, teachers, support professionals, administrators, law enforcement, volunteers, and others – in an ongoing effort to identify ways to improve the school climate is an important one to establish. We would recommend the bill be updated to add students as members of the taskforce given how important it is for peers to identify, report, and help prevent bullying.

House Bill 2464 references “school staff” as part of any taskforce created, and we wholeheartedly support that inclusion. According to NEA’s national survey on bullying, school bus drivers, food service workers, and other education support professionals often see incidences of bullying or have students report incidences to them, but they do not feel that they have been adequately trained – if at all – to appropriately respond or prevent bullying. A number of them also reported that they are not invited to participate in any formal bullying prevention efforts in their schools – whether it is a task force, committee, or other prevention program. It is important that these staff that live in the community and have daily and direct contact with students be included in bullying prevention efforts.

As you consider this legislation, the Committee may also want to include specific suggestions for the roles and responsibilities for the task forces in House Bill 2464. These could include, but not be limited to: 1) conducting an initial survey and seeking ongoing feedback in order to gather data to evaluate which strategies are working for a positive school climate and which may need to be revised or improved; and 2) promptly reviewing suggestions for improving school climate as provided through the anonymous “hotline” or “suggestion box” and developing plans for implementation as appropriate.

- **Greater awareness and involvement among students and parents.** House Bill 2464 requires that school districts establish an educational program for students and parents in preventing, identifying, responding to, and reporting bullying. PSEA fully supports such an initiative. In fact, the NEA has developed an excellent program that seeks to engage adults, including parents, more directly since research tells us that one caring adult can make all the difference in a bullied student’s life. The **“Bully-Free: It Starts With Me”** Campaign identifies caring adults in our schools and communities who are willing to stand up as someone pledged to help bullied students. These caring adults agree to listen carefully to the bullied student who comes to them. They also agree to take action to stop the bullying. NEA, in turn, provides those caring adults with the resources they need to provide solace and support to the bullied student and to take the appropriate actions needed to stop the bullying.

In addition to the strategies already contained within House Bill 2464, PSEA would encourage the Committee to consider one more – the implementation of a School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) program in our schools. Research continues to reinforce the idea that teaching behaviors, reinforcement of appropriate behaviors, and using data to inform actions actually reduces bullying and time away from academic instruction. PBS is a research-based, highly effective approach to creating, teaching, and reinforcing students’ social, emotional, and academic learning skills that improves and sustains academic achievement and mental and emotional wellbeing of all students. PBS works with all school partners to serve as effective change agents to implement a uniform and positive approach in all school settings so that there is a predictable, consistent, and positive school culture for all students and staff. PBS schools focus on prevention and consistently and frequently reward students who do the right thing.

PSEA is part of the statewide Alliance for Pennsylvania Positive Behavior Support and would be happy to provide the Committee more in-depth information on the program if you are interested in further exploring its potential to increase student achievement and create safer schools.

PSEA supports the strategies contained within House Bill 2464 and additional ones such as PBS. But, we would be remiss if we did not note our serious concern about whether or not our school districts have the resources they need to move forward and implement these strategies on a consistent and ongoing basis. Our districts continue to suffer from the \$860 million loss in funding with 20,000 positions eliminated and dramatic cuts to student programs. House Bill 2464 references the possible distribution of “safe schools funds” to school districts whose plans are approved by the State Board of Education and reporting is in compliance with the required procedures. We agree with these qualifications to be eligible for funding targeted at bullying prevention but question whether these funds even exist? The question of resources and capacity in our schools is an important one to consider as the Committee continues to deliberate and debate about best methods for providing our students with positive and safe school climates.

In closing, PSEA supports the Committee’s efforts to protect the students of Pennsylvania from the detrimental impacts of bullying. As a Commonwealth, we know the problem, and we have the research to show us the solutions. Now, it takes all of us working together to support safe and supportive learning environments for our students and prevent bullying. PSEA stands ready to work as a partner with you to achieve this laudable goal.