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Testimony for Public Oversight Hearing on Education Agencies

Delivered before the Committee of the Whole
February 8, 2012

Good day. I am Rick Rosendall, Vice President for Political Affairs of the Gay and Lesbian Activists Alliance of Washington. I am here to urge the D.C. Council to pass Bill 19-11, the Bullying and Intimidation Prevention Act, without further delay. GLAA first addressed educational issues in 1972 when we persuaded the Board of Education to prohibit discrimination in the school system on the basis of sexual orientation.

This legislation has been pending for two years. We testified in November 2010 on its precursor bills, B18-770 and B18-1057.¹ Our views were summarized in our election-year policy brief, *Agenda: 2010*,² which has been overtaken by our *Agenda: 2012*.³ Mayor Gray and a majority of the Council support the bill. They recognize the need to protect our youth with concrete measures and not just fine rhetoric. Care was taken to prepare a bill that respects free speech rights while protecting marginalized students from the harassment and violence that rob them of educational opportunities. Yet the bill has remained stalled. It is past time to act.

GLAA's past efforts included persuading then Superintendent Arlene Ackerman to issue a directive on harassment and sexual harassment on March 29, 2000.⁴ Hearings were held in February 2002 on a proposed rulemaking to fulfill the directive's promise, at which then GLAA President Bob Summersgill testified.⁵ In March 2001, Mr. Summersgill alerted then Board of Education President Peggy Cooper Cafritz to the omission of several protected categories from the D.C. Human Rights Act (DCHRA) in a "Notice of Final Rulemaking" on D.C. Public Charter Schools.⁶ The Board subsequently corrected the omission.⁷ Also in 2001, Summersgill

¹ Testimony on Bill 18-770 and Bill 18-1057, Rick Rosendall/GLAA, November 29, 2010, <http://www.glaa.org/archive/2010/bullyingrjr1129.shtml>

² *Agenda: 2010*, Section 6.4, GLAA, July 8, 2010, http://www.glaa.org/archive/2010/agenda2010.htm#_Toc266257936

³ *Agenda: 2012*, Section 6.4, GLAA, January 5, 2012, http://www.glaa.org/archive/2012/agenda2012.htm#_Toc185265891

⁴ DCPS Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, Directive on Harassment and Sexual Harassment, March 29, 2000, <http://www.glaa.org/archive/2000/dcpsharassment0329.shtml>

⁵ Testimony on proposed rulemaking on harassment, Bob Summersgill/GLAA, February 6, 2002, <http://www.glaa.org/archive/2002/dcpstestimony0206.shtml>

⁶ GLAA alerts Cafritz to omission in Public Charter School policies, March 7, 2001, <http://www.glaa.org/archive/2001/glaacharterschools0307.shtml>

⁷ School Board responds to GLAA on public charter school policies, May 18, 2001, <http://www.glaa.org/archive/2001/mikutacharterschools0518.shtml>

supported rewriting the definition of “Unlawful discriminatory practice” in DCHRA to explicitly include harassment as a form of discrimination.⁸ The Council did so.

More recent efforts within DCPS include the August 2011 Plan to Create an Inclusive School Community,⁹ developed by their LGBTQ Steering Committee, which has won praise for the Office of Youth Engagement from the Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League and others. Bill 19-11 would complement and reinforce those efforts.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has documented the problem. GLSEN reports in *The 2009 National School Climate Survey* that “nearly 9 out of 10 LGBT students experienced harassment at school in the past year and nearly two-thirds felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation. Nearly a third of LGBT students skipped at least one day of school in the past month because of safety concerns.”¹⁰

This brings us to the present legislation. I will not repeat the details from my November 2010 testimony. Suffice it to say that many people have collaborated to help craft a bill to provide DCPS and other youth-serving agencies with tools to combat bullying and harassment.

Recently, as it happens, I have been sharing my expertise with students at a public charter high school who chose gay-related thesis topics from marriage to military service to cyber-bullying. Working with these young Washingtonians has been an inspiration to me. The atmosphere of that particular school appears, from what I have seen, to be extremely upbeat. But safety must not be a prize reserved for the lucky few.

One of the saddest things shown by the research is that nearly 60 percent of students say they don’t report bullying because they don’t expect anyone to help them. Those made to feel unsafe by bullying are more likely to drop out, become homeless, become addicted, and take their own lives. This affects not only them and their families and friends, but costs the District both in the loss of their talents and in potential court judgments. We can prevent this by making sure that all of our schools are safe environments for learning.

Please pass Bill 19-11 so that it can be implemented before another year passes.

⁸ GLAA calls for clarification of Human Rights Act to include harassment, December 3, 2001, <http://www.glaa.org/archive/2001/glaaantiharassmenttestimony1203.shtml>

⁹ A Plan to Create an Inclusive School Community, D.C. Public Schools, August 2011, <http://dc.gov/DCPS/Parents+and+Community/LGBTQ+Engagement>

¹⁰ *The 2009 National School Climate Survey*, GLSEN, September 14, 2010, <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/news/record/2624.html>