

Testimony from Liz Hamor, GLSEN Greater Wichita Chair
In Support of HB 2578
House Committee on Education
February 8, 2018

My name is Liz Hamor. I grew up in Great Bend, Ks, met my husband at college, and taught elementary students for a few years before we started a family. We now live in the Wichita area with our two children and our new puppy. A few years ago, I followed my calling to start a GLSEN Chapter in Wichita, and have been advocating for and with students ever since. I now work with K-12 schools across Kansas (though mostly in the Greater Wichita area) helping them ensure that ALL of their students feel safe, valued, and respected in school.

A year and a half ago I sat across from a principal in a rural district with a student and his parents. They felt all of their attempts to get the principal to acknowledge bullying in the school were being ignored, so they called me in to help advocate. The student told the principal that he and his friends had been the targets of repeated bullying and harassment, and that they didn't feel safe in the school. The principal then *told the student* that there wasn't a problem with bullying or harassment in the school. When I asked what the reporting procedures were, and what the consequences would be for the students who were bullying others, the principal could not answer those questions other than to say that if incidences were reported to him, he would handle it. (He did say that student privacy law prevented him from being able to disclose how he handled it, though.) I pointed out that the students and parents had repeatedly called and emailed trying to report the bullying to no avail, and that a student was sitting in front of him reporting bullying to him and his response to the student had just been that it didn't actually happen.

It is both my professional and personal belief that Kansas parents and students need to have easier access to bullying prevention policies, especially the process, procedures and actions that districts will take when bullying occurs. I know from working with several districts, that some don't have any of these policies or procedures in place, and sometimes even those that do have them don't follow them.

Bullying within schools is on the rise. This is documented both statistically and anecdotally through administrators and educators with whom I work.

USD259 and Wichita

Recently in Wichita there have been many suicide attempts by middle schoolers, and one completed suicide by an 11 year old. Bullying and suicide seem to be reaching epidemic proportions, leaving many educators, support staff, and people in organizations like mine asking ourselves what more do we need to do to ensure that students feel safe, valued, and respected.

I want to share with you some statistics to help you better understand the scope of the problem we're facing right here in Kansas:

In Wichita USD259, the largest district in Kansas with 50,000 students, educators must implement suicide protocols anytime a student says anything about wanting to harm themselves. This means that parents are called in and notified, and counseling, in-patient, or out-patient treatment are recommended depending on the situation.

Data will not be ready for this school year until this summer, but there was an almost 40% increase in suicide protocols implemented between the previous two school years.

In the 2016-2017 school year, there were 1,020 suicide protocols forms submitted.

- 445 Elementary
- 251 Middle
- 45 K-8
- 151 High
- 126 Special / Alternative Schools

2015-2016 (770 protocols submitted)

- 341 Elementary
- 207 Middle
- 222 High

Please note, the majority of suicide protocols happen in *elementary schools*. The social workers who provided these numbers believe that numbers are higher in elementary because by middle and high school, students are confiding more in their peers and less in educators. This means these numbers *do not mean* that suicidal ideations are lessening the older students get.

Student Advocacy

This is not just a big city problem, though. In fact, I believe that bullying may actually be worse for students in suburban and rural areas, where there isn't as much diversity and anyone who stands out for any reason

Less than two months ago I sat with a parent and student as they met with administrators in a suburban district to reintegrate the student into high school. She had been bullied so badly, so relentlessly in middle school that she attempted suicide and had to be checked in to an in-patient facility for a month. Her mom pulled her out of school at that time and she did online schooling for a year.

The mother was understandably incredibly frustrated with the district, because her attempts to report the bullying went unaddressed and she felt that the district should have taken their concerns more seriously. The mother, terrified for her daughter's safety in high school, was appreciative of my advocacy, because she finally felt like the district would listen to her since she had called in an expert to ensure the district took her concerns seriously this time.

She is ready to legally hold the district responsible for her daughter’s safety if necessary this time around, and there is already legal precedent to support them. In 2005, USD464, Tonganoxie, settled for \$440,000 after being sued by a family. School officials had ignored a student’s complaints about being verbally harassed for four years, and the student was eventually forced to leave school.

If schools don’t figure out how to implement better bullying prevention policies, I predict we’ll be seeing many more cases like Tonganoxie. As bullying and suicide is on the rise, more parents are not holding back when it comes to advocating for and protecting their children.

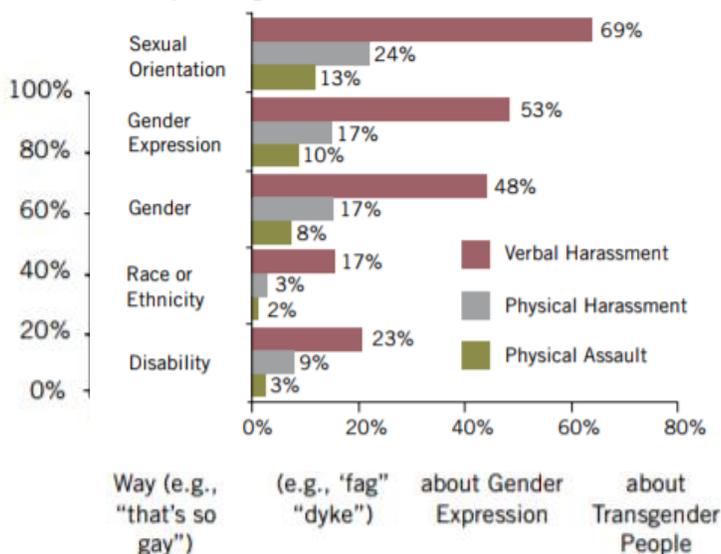
GLSEN Research

GLSEN National does a large research study every two years, surveying LGBTQ students, one of the student populations most at risk for bullying.

According to our Kansas Snapshot:

- The majority (90%) of LGBTQ students in Kansas regularly heard anti-LGBT remarks (Fig. 1). Many also regularly heard **school staff** make homophobic remarks (21%) and negative remarks about someone’s gender expression (38%).
- Most LGBTQ students in Kansas had been victimized at school (Fig. 2). Of those, **most never reported the incident to school staff (61%). Only 19% of those students who reported incidents said it resulted in effective staff intervention.**

Figure 2. Identity-based Harassment & Assault in Kansas Schools
(percentage of LGBTQ students harassed or assaulted)



staff did nothing in response or told the student to ignore it.

Similarly, our National statistics show:

- 57.6% of LGBTQ students who were harassed or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff, most commonly because they doubted that effective intervention would occur or the situation could become worse if reported.
- 63.5% of the students who did report an incident said that school

LGBTQ students need our **support.**

Anti-LGBTQ harassment and discrimination negatively affect educational outcomes and mental health.



GLSEN research also shows that comprehensive bullying prevention policies (along with other interventions) make schools safer for **ALL** students. The following are some of the research-proven benefits:

- Incidences of bullying and harassment go down.
- Attendance rates go up.
- GPAs go up.
- Graduation rates go up.
- Students' self-esteem goes up.
- Students are more likely to attend college.

See www.glsen.org/nscs for the complete report or Executive Summary

Summary

I believe that requiring schools to publish their bullying prevention policies, reporting process, and consequences of bullying on their websites and in student handbooks would help in situations like these, that are all too common in schools across our great state. It would require many districts to actually *create* bullying prevention policies that work for their district, and it would allow students and parents like the ones I regularly support have a clear understanding of how to address and report instances of bullying. It would empower students and parents to advocate for themselves, and let school administrators know when bullying was a problem in their schools so that it could be properly addressed.