



January 17, 2012

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

We hope that you will take the opportunity at the beginning of this New Year to address what has become a pervasive national problem¹. On behalf of the hundreds of progressive faith leaders across the country who are members of African American Ministers in Action (AAMIA), we write urging your support and cosponsorship of the Student Non-Discrimination Act (SNDA) (S. 555).

Following the increased media attention paid to bullying-related suicides in 2010, AAMIA joined with other faith, civil, and human rights groups to stand on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students as well as those who are perceived to be LGBT. AAMIA is not only a body of clerics but also a body of concerned parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, sisters and brothers of school children and youth.

As you have no doubt read, according to the 2009 National School Climate Survey:² 84.6% of LGBT students suffered verbal harassment; 40.1% were subject to physical harassment; and 18.8% experienced physical assault based on sexual orientation. For gender identity harassment, it's 63.7% verbal and 27.2% physical, with 12.5% reporting physical assault. Not surprising is how this makes these vulnerable students feel unsafe: 61.1% reported feeling unsafe based on sexual orientation; 39.9% based on gender identity.

A student who does not feel safe due to bullying and harassment may choose avoidance and social isolation that will only add to their loss of learning and increase the harm they are already enduring. This is problematic because according to the 2009 National School Climate Survey,³ "29.1% of LGBT students missed a class at least once and 30.0% missed at least one day of school in the past month alone because of safety concerns, compared to only 8.0% and 6.7%, respectively, of a national sample of secondary school students." And even when they remain in class, targeted students lose as much as half a grade point.

This is about education yes, but it is also a matter of life, quality of life, and death. You are needed in partnership to continue working to reverse this trend. S. 555 protects students from

¹ On December 8, 2010, USA Network published its 2nd annual "United or Divided" poll. 58% of respondents gave America a C or D grade for its efforts to stop bullying by kids. 89% believed it was a serious problem, and nearly as many, 85%, supported congressional action to resolve the problem. 70% were concerned that it's a growing trend. See USA Network, Hart Research Associates, and Public Opinion Strategies at <http://www.nbcumv.com/mediavillage/networks/usanetwork/pressreleases?pr=contents/press-releases/2010/12/08/usanetworksnewu1291853077900.xml>.

² 2009 National School Climate Survey, Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, September 2010. <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/news/record/2624.html>

³ *Ibid.*

school-based sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination, much like Title IX does for gender discrimination, and much like other areas of law do for various protected classes. It recognizes bullying and harassment as discrimination, and it provides both for remedies against discrimination and incentives for schools to prevent it from happening in the first place.

Ultimately, this is about stopping abhorrent behavior that prevents victimized students from accessing quality education. All children deserve far better than that. Can we count on your support and cosponsorship? Your consideration of S. 555, including as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), is necessary and appreciated.

Sincerely,



Reverend Timothy McDonald, III
Chairman



Reverend Dr. Robert P. Shine
Vice-Chair



Minister Leslie Watson Malachi
Director