

March 7, 2012

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama:

We are 70 national and state organizations who are committed to ensuring that *all* students are able to pursue an education unhindered by discrimination and harassment. We write to request that your administration publicly support and endorse the Student Non-Discrimination Act (S. 555/H.R. 998).

The Student Non-Discrimination Act (“SNDA”) would establish a comprehensive federal prohibition against discrimination and harassment in public elementary and secondary schools across the country based on a student’s actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. SNDA would provide lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (“LGBT”) students with long overdue and much needed explicit federal protections against discrimination and harassment. The legislation also protects students who associate with LGBT people, including students with LGBT parents and friends.

The Student Non-Discrimination Act is sponsored by Senator Al Franken and Representative Jared Polis. To date, the legislation has garnered bipartisan support, including the support of 34 senators and 147 representatives.

We recognize and appreciate the leadership that your administration, particularly the Departments of Education and Justice, has demonstrated in efforts to protect students from harassment in schools. The White House Conference on Bullying Prevention in March and the first-ever Federal LGBT Youth Summit in June helped bring critically important attention to the devastating discrimination and harassment that LGBT students often experience in our nation’s public schools. We view an endorsement of the Student Non-Discrimination Act as the next important step the administration should take in the ongoing federal effort to ensure that all students have access to an education unhindered by discrimination and harassment.

There is overwhelming evidence establishing a compelling need for action at the federal level to protect LGBT students from discrimination and harassment in schools. A 2009 study of more than 7,000 LGBT middle and high school students across the U.S. found that nine out of ten reported experiencing harassment at their school within the past year based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, and two-thirds said they felt unsafe at school because of who they

are.¹ Nearly one-third skipped at least one day of school within the previous month because of concerns for their safety. Most tragically, LGBT youth face significantly increased risks for suicide related to mental health issues that often arise from poor treatment and discrimination in schools.² It is critical that the federal government and schools act to address this very serious problem facing LGBT youth.

Further, while federal laws currently protect students on the basis of their race, color, sex, religion, disability or national origin, no federal statute explicitly protects students on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. The Student Non-Discrimination Act would do just that. In addition, nearly fifty years of civil rights history clearly demonstrate that laws similar to the proposed Student Non-Discrimination Act are effective in preventing discrimination and harassment from occurring in the first place by prompting schools to take proactive steps to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for all students who are in their care.

Your administration's endorsements of both the Employment Non-Discrimination Act and the Respect for Marriage Act provided those bills with critical momentum. An endorsement of the Student Non-Discrimination Act would likewise be a clarion call for equality in our schools and better protections for vulnerable children. And more importantly, it would make clear to all Members of Congress what the administration views as a necessary federal legislative solution to the serious problem of anti-LGBT discrimination and harassment in our nation's public schools.

The Student Non-Discrimination Act presents us with a historic opportunity to offer critical protections to current and future generations of LGBT youth and their student allies by ensuring that discrimination and harassment of students on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity will have no place in our country's public elementary and secondary schools.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Youth
African American Ministers in Action
American Association of University Women
American Civil Liberties Union
American Counseling Association
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO
American Psychological Association

¹ GLSEN National School Climate Survey 2009.

² See, e.g., Massachusetts Youth Risk Survey 2007; Grossman, A.H., D'Augelli, A.R. (2007). "Transgender youth and life threatening behaviors." *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior*, 37(5): 527-537.

American School Counselor Association
Asian American Justice Center, a member of Asian American Center for Advancing Justice
Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance
Association of Flight Attendants - CWA
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
Center for America Progress Action Fund
CenterLink: The Community of LGBT Centers
Child Welfare League of America
Communications Workers of America
Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders
Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund
Education Law Center
Family Equality Council
Feminist Majority
Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders
Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network
Gay-Straight Alliance Network
Healthy Teen Network
Human Rights Campaign
Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health
Immigration Equality Action Fund
Interfaith Alliance
Lambda Legal
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
League of United Latin American Citizens
Learning Disabilities Association of America
Maryland Multicultural Coalition/State Chapter of NAME (National Association for Multicultural Education)
NAACP
NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund, Inc.
National Association for Multicultural Education
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Black Justice Coalition
National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Center for Transgender Equality
National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of La Raza

National Council of Women's Organizations
National Crittenton Foundation
National Education Association
National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Action Fund
National Network for Youth
National Women's Law Center
Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
People For the American Way
Poverty & Race Research Action Council
Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law
School Social Work Association of America
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)
Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS)
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center
Southern Poverty Law Center
The Emily Program
The Episcopal Church
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
The Trevor Project
Transgender Law Center
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
Wider Opportunities for Women
Women's Law Project
Youth Activism Project

Cc: Secretary Arne Duncan, Department of Education
Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr., Department of Justice