



March 18, 2014

Dear Member of Congress:

In honor of next month's Day of Silence highlighting anti-LGBT bullying and harassment in schools,¹ and on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of People For the American Way (PFAW) members, we write in strong support of the Safe Schools Improvement Act (SSIA, H.R. 1199 & S. 403) and the Student Non-Discrimination Act (SNDA, H.R. 1652 & S. 1088). We thank the sponsors and cosponsors therein for addressing what has become a pervasive national problem,² and we urge all members of Congress to join them.

Following the increased media attention paid to bullying-related suicides in 2010, we took a strong stand on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students and those who are perceived to be LGBT. According to the 2011 National School Climate Survey:³ 81.9 percent of LGBT students suffer verbal harassment, 38.3 percent physical harassment, and 18.3 percent physical assault because of their sexual orientation. 63.9 percent suffer verbal harassment, 27.1 percent physical harassment, and 12.4 percent physical assault because of their gender expression. In many cases, not surprisingly, this makes students feel unsafe; 63.5 percent reported feeling unsafe based on sexual orientation, and 43.9 percent felt so based on gender expression.

A student who feels unsafe due to bullying and harassment might choose to avoid the situation altogether, adding a loss of learning to the harms they already suffer. According to the 2011 National School Climate Survey,⁴ “Nearly one third of LGBT students (29.8%) reported skipping a class at least once and 31.8% missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because of safety concerns.” Even when they remain in class, targeted students lose nearly half a grade point (average 2.9 vs. 3.2). But as we know all too well, this isn't just a question of education. It's a matter of life and death.

Through SSIA and SNDA, and their inclusion in the Strengthening America's Schools Act (S. 1094), Congress has recognized the need to reverse this trend. SSIA supports the creation of comprehensive anti-bullying policies that enumerate specific categories of targeted students – including those targeted based on sexual orientation and gender identity – as well as data collection, public education, and grievance procedures. SNDA protects students from school-based sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination, much like Title IX does for gender

¹ <http://www.dayofsilence.org/>

² On December 8, 2010, USA Network published its 2nd annual “United or Divided” poll. 58 percent of respondents gave America a C or D grade for its efforts to stop bullying by kids. 89 percent believed it was a serious problem, and nearly as many (85 percent) supported congressional action to resolve the problem. 70 percent were concerned that it was a growing trend. See USA Network, Hart Research Associates, and Public Opinion Strategies at <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/usa-networks-new-united-or-divided-poll-shows-americans-believe-racial-ethnic-political-divisions-are-worse-than-just-a-year-ago-111547664.html>.

³ 2011 National School Climate Survey, Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, September 2012.

⁴ <http://glsen.org/nscs>

⁴ *Ibid.*

discrimination, and much like other areas of law do for various protected classes. SNDA 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.

We urge you to contact Representative Linda Sánchez (5-6676) and Senator Robert Casey (4-6324) to cosponsor SSIA and Representative Jared Polis (5-2161) and Senator Al Franken (4-5641) to cosponsor SNDA. Thank you again to the members of Congress who have already registered their support.

Ultimately, this is about stopping abhorrent behavior that gets in the way of quality education. All students deserve far better than that.

Sincerely,



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