



April 3, 2014

Dear Member of Congress:

We continue to be amazed at missed opportunities to give critical attention to and address what has become a pervasive national problem. 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 you to be part of the solution by supporting and cosponsoring the Safe Schools Improvement Act (SSIA) (H.R. 1199 & S. 403) and the Student Non-Discrimination Act (SNDA) (H.R. 1652 and S. 1088), and we thank you if you are already on board.

AAMIA is a body of clerics who also are concerned parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, sisters and brothers, caregivers of school age children and youth. Since 2010, with the increase in media attention paid to bullying-related suicides, we have joined with other faith, civil, and human rights groups to stand on behalf and for protection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students as well as those 20.1% who, according to the CDC 2011 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, “are perceived as different from their peers” and therefore “at risk of being bullied”. Why? Because it’s the right thing to do!

In 2011 over 20% of high school youth were bullied and the National School Climate Center Survey reported “over 50% of students do not feel safe in school.” As you know bullying can be verbal, social and physical. According to a survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN): 81.9% of LGBT students suffered verbal harassment; 38.3% were subject to physical harassment; and 18.8% experienced physical assault based on sexual orientation. While some have noted gender identity as “a new territory” for school boards, as well as for some faith leaders, 13 states and Washington, DC have laws prohibiting discrimination in schools based on gender identity and expression.

Your support of SSIA and SNDA would provide an important confirmation that we are on the right track to end student misconduct. A 2010 “Dear Colleague” letter from the Assistant Secretary of the Office for Civil Rights at the Department of Education noted that this type of behavior results in “*a climate of fear and disrespect that can seriously impair the physical and psychological health of its victims and create conditions that negatively affect learning, thereby undermining the ability of students to achieve their full potential.*”

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. According to the GLSEN survey, 29.8% of LGBT students skipped class at least once and 31.8% missed at least one entire day of school in the past month alone because of safety concerns. Even when they remain in class, targeted students lose as much as half a grade point. This has to change, and we can be part of that change.

Your partnership is needed to continue the necessary work to reverse this trend of disrespect, harassment, and victimization. SSIA and SNDA really are matters of life, the quality of life, and death. 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 all students but especially those who are subject to 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. Furthermore, 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.

As clergy we will continue to learn and grow in our work for civil and human rights for all because of critical needs that have risen with the increase of cyberbullying and being bullied on school property. When young people come to our places of worship, they walk into a sanctuary, a safe place. This is what we should cooperatively be striving for in our schools.

We encourage you to be a partner in 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 SSIA and SNDA, including as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), is necessary and appreciated.

Please 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.

We thank you if you have already joined our cause.

Sincerely,



Reverend Timothy McDonald, III
Chairman



Reverend Dr. Robert P. Shine
Vice-Chair



Minister Leslie Watson Malachi
Director