



February 18, 2020

RE: Testimony in Support of SB410

To Senate Committee on Education:

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 school-aged children and our puppy. Six 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 helping them ensure that ALL of their students feel safe, valued, and respected in school.

A few years 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 several 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 the bullying didn't actually happen.

Student Advocacy

The above story was one of the first in a long line of advocacy interventions. As an advocate for students, I am regularly called on by students and parents to help ensure that schools take their reports of bullying seriously. Several times a school year, we receive reports from around the state where students/parents have repeatedly reported incidents of bullying and harassment and are not taken seriously. In many of these cases, parents are desperate to protect their children and be heard by administrators by the time they contact me.

There is something very wrong with the reporting process of many schools/districts when parents/students feel like they must call in an expert in order to be heard and taken seriously.

M's Story

Even outside the scope of my work, I hear many heart-breaking stories where ultimately, the schools failed the students. These students and their parents often felt like pulling them out of public school to homeschool them was the only option left to protect their children from harm, including suicide. Also, because these students endured such severe mental trauma due to their bullying, they are not willing to publicly tell their stories and relive the trauma they've tried to leave behind. However, one student, who I will call M, gave me permission to share her story.

Just before 8th grade, M was sexually assaulted by another student. Word got out and instead of support, she began enduring relentless bullying and shaming by her peers. She was regularly called a "slut" and endured comments about her "promiscuity". She reported this to the school

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counselor, who even called in her mom to ensure she was receiving support outside of school. It was only after months of repeated trips/reports to the counselor and a declining state of mental health (which only increased the bullying) that M's mom went to the principal to pull her out of school. The principal said that was the first he was hearing of any bullying toward M. The mother knew this was inaccurate, as she had reported an incident to the principal herself after M reported to a teacher that she found comments written on a bathroom stall about her and the teacher made her go clean the stall herself. The really sad part about this story is that M reported to many educators in her school, and none took her concerns seriously. There were seemingly no intervention procedures for the educators or administrators to follow, and no one ever followed back up with M or her mom to let them know that *something* was being done. (Due to FERPA, admins cannot disclose WHAT is being done, but a check in with the bullied students/parents to let them know that interventions are taking place would be helpful.)

Additional Evidence of Need for Improved Bullying Prevention Policies/Procedures:

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 2017 Kansas Snapshot:

- The vast majority of LGBTQ students in Kansas regularly (sometimes, often, or frequently) heard anti-LGBTQ remarks (Fig. 1). ***Some also regularly heard school staff make homophobic remarks (20%) and negative remarks about someone's gender expression (36%).***
- Most LGBTQ students in Kansas experienced anti-LGBTQ victimization at school (Fig. 2). They also experienced victimization at school based on religion (31%), disability (25%), and race/ethnicity (21%). ***Many never reported the incident to school staff (45%). Only 29% of students who reported incidents said it resulted in effective staff intervention.***

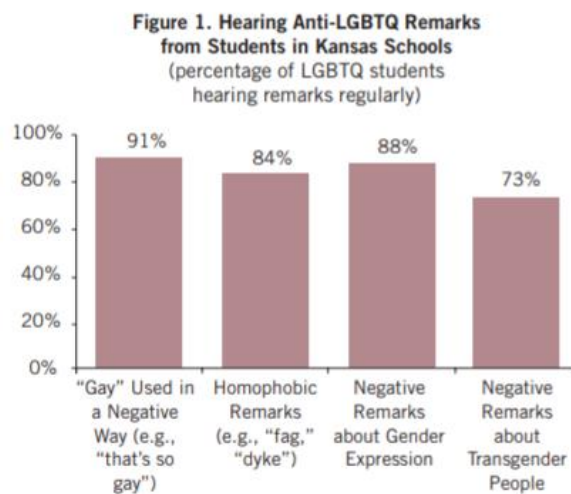
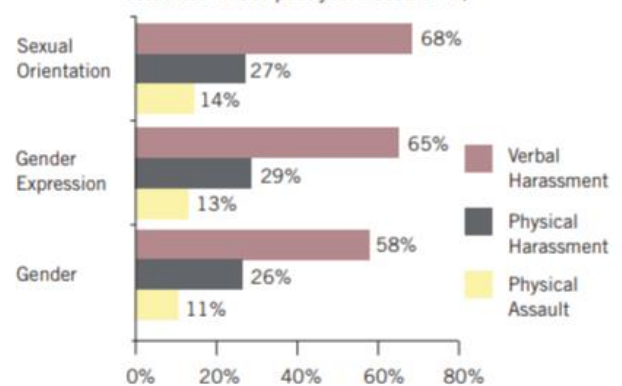


Figure 2. Anti-LGBTQ Harassment & Assault in Kansas Schools
(percentage of LGBTQ students harassed or assaulted in the past year based on...)





Similarly, our National statistics show:

- 55.3% of LGBTQ students who were victimized in school did not report the incident to school staff, most commonly because they doubted that effective intervention would occur or feared the situation could become worse if reported.
- 60.4% of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response or told the student to ignore it.

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/nsocs for the complete report or Executive Summary

Conclusion

It is both my professional and personal belief that many Kansas schools are failing children when it comes to putting a stop to bullying. Parents and students need to know that schools will intervene to protect their children when bullying occurs. I know from working with several districts, that some don't have any bullying policies or procedures in place despite the 2009 statute, and sometimes even those that do have them don't follow them.

Schools need better bullying prevention policies, procedures, and training on bullying prevention. *Students and parents need to know how to report bullying and to whom to report it.* Students deserve to feel safe, valued, and respected in schools, and CANNOT learn if they don't feel safe. If we want our Kansas children to learn and thrive, we MUST create safer learning environments for them.

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions, I'm happy to discuss this matter further.

Sincerely,
Liz Hamor, She/Her
Chapter Director
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