

Testimony in Support of Kansas SB410

Jennifer Pearson

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My name is Dr. Jennifer Pearson and I am an Associate Professor and Graduate Coordinator of Sociology at Wichita State University. I live in Wichita and my 12-year-old daughter attends a public middle school in USD 259. My research focuses on the importance of school and family contexts for adolescent development, educational success, and well-being. My partner is a therapist who works with young people of diverse sexual and gender identities, and I serve both as advisor for the LGBTQ student group on campus and as Research Coordinator for GLSEN Kansas. Our family is committed to doing what we can to make sure all young people have the safety and support they need to be successful, which is why I am providing testimony in support of changes to our state anti-bullying law.

According to data from the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data from Kansas¹, a representative sample of Kansas public school students completed every two years, 1 in 5 Kansas students (19.7%) report that they were bullied on school property during the past year². Another 16% reported they had been electronically bullied. Perhaps most concerning, 15.5% of Kansas students surveyed said that they had been threatened or injured at school with a weapon. **Clearly the existing anti-bullying law is not effective, as large numbers of students continue to report that they are not safe in school.**

According to the national YRBS data, collected by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), certain groups of students are at much greater risk of bullying and harassment at school, so effective laws are even more important for protecting those students most vulnerable to victimization. Students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or are unsure of their sexual identity are almost twice as likely (31.5% vs. 17%) to report being bullied at school or to be bullied electronically (26.5% vs. 13.4%). Research suggests that having comprehensive anti-bullying policies helps reduce this disparity.³

Bullying and harassment have long-term harmful consequences for students: students who are bullied and victimized in schools have higher rates of emotional distress and are more likely to consider and attempt suicide. The 2017 YRBS data indicates that students who are bullied at school are almost 3 times as likely to consider suicide (36.9% vs. 12.8%) and 4 times more likely to attempt suicide (17.7% vs. 4.2%). Suicide rates in Kansas continue to rise, and suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24.⁴

Bullying and harassment in schools is killing our children, and it is a preventable problem. Schools need clear policies and procedures in place in order to reduce bullying and protect vulnerable groups of students. The existing law does not provide schools with enough clarity and lacks a system of accountability. Please vote yes on SB 410 in order to better protect the health, well-being, and educational success of Kansas students.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/index.htm>

² Preceding the question, students were given a definition of bullying that read “Bullying is when 1 or more students tease, threaten, spread rumors about, hit, shove, or hurt another student over and over again. It is not bullying when 2 students of about the same strength or power argue or fight or tease each other in a friendly way.”

³ Greytak, E. A., Kosciw, J. G., Boesen, M. J. (2013). Educating the educator: Creating supportive school personnel through professional development. *Journal of School Violence*, 12(1), 80-97.

Greytak, E. A., Kosciw, J. G., Boesen, M. J. (2013). Putting the “T” in “resource”: The benefits of LGBT-related school resources for transgender youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 10(1-2), 45-63.

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Giga, N. M., Villenas, C. Danischewski, D. J. (2016). *The 2015 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation’s schools*. New York: GLSEN.

⁴ Kansas Suicide Prevention Resource Center (<http://www.kansasuicideprevention.org/data/>)