

Testimony to the Help Committee Senate Field Hearing
Dr. Paul R. Gausman, Superintendent, Sioux City Community School District
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East High School, Des Moines, Iowa

My name is Dr. Paul Gausman, and I am honored to be the superintendent of schools for the Sioux City Community School District. The Sioux City Community School District is the fourth largest district in Iowa with 14,000 students in about 30 school facilities. We are honored to have the opportunity to teach our student population that is made up of a fairly high percentage of students of poverty and growing racial and ethnic diversity.

The Sioux City Community School District has enjoyed a twelve-year partnership with the Waitt Institute for Violence Prevention. The Waitt Institute was created by the founder of Gateway computers, Ted Waitt, who, with other members of his family, are graduates of our fine schools. The Waitt Foundation has partnered with our district providing funding, curriculum, and training for staff and students over our dozen year relationship.

The Sioux City Community School District was approached by our partners at the Waitt Institute to participate in a national documentary on bullying in the American schools. Originally, our participation was to highlight some of the progressive programs and significant successes of our work to prevent bullying in our schools. We became visible on a national stage, because we were the first district in the nation to create and implement a thorough workplace bully prevention program for our staff members. We firmly believe that in order to expect the best in behavior from our students, we must make certain that we have policies and procedures in place to assure that our adults are modeling the most positive behavior possible.

The documentary filmmakers of this national film now titled *"Bully"* were quite honest with us, however, that they would also like to spend some time looking for a specific student or a specific situation where they could see the reality of bullying from the perspective of an individual who was bullied. While we are not particularly proud of all that is presented in that documentary, we do celebrate that our district has arguably some of the most progressive bully prevention programs available today. Yet, we acknowledge that the work of art shows you some of our "dirty laundry" related to the challenges of bullying in American schools. I believe the end result is a documentary that is compelling, emotional, and challenging.

When we gave the filmmakers permission to film in our schools, our School Board members stepped forward and gave their consent as well. I am proud of our Board for having the courage to engage the national discourse on the most important topic of the day. Students must absolutely feel safe to have a chance to be successful in school, and at times, we as an entire culture fail those students on this basic need and right.

We continue to believe in the importance of community and national dialogue on the challenges of bullying in American society. Our participation in this documentary has created some of the richest and most meaningful discussion in our community about what the entirety of the community can do to assist and support schools in our efforts to prevent bullying. You see, that is our perspective, that bullying is best defeated by prevention, not by reaction. Many of the programmatic solutions; and believe me I have heard, by participating in this documentary, from just about every company selling any anti-bullying product in this great nation; many of those products deal with how to react, how to respond when bullying occurs. Our District, our Board of Education and our community continue to work toward the prevention of bullying-like circumstances. We have consistently said that we are not unique because we have bullying in our schools, but we want to become unique by becoming the school district that has made a significant difference. You see, bullying is not simply specific to schools, bullying is all around us. It is visible in our shopping malls, our places of worship, our sporting events, community events; it is simply magnified in our schools because we are a people-centered organization.

Research tells us that only about 25% to 50% of children who are bullied, actually ever tell an adult about the incidents, and we have certainly witnessed that low level of reporting in our schools. We have an ongoing challenge of finding ways to have students feel safe and comfortable reporting incidents to a school employee in a timely manner. In addition and at times, the victim does not want to contribute information during the investigation for fear of retaliation. Again, this is an area where we can improve.

While we are recognized as a district that is progressive in making a difference in the challenges of bullying in our schools, and we were the 2011 recipient of the “*Lighting the Way*” award from the Waitt Institute for positive differences dealing with bullying and violence in our culture; we recognize that we cannot stop learning. As an example, it became apparent that we needed high quality audio and video recording systems on each and every bus in our District. We implemented brand new audio and video systems in our buses last year, and we now have staff members who not only drive buses, but they spend time during the day watching sample footage from each of those systems, looking for challenges.

We have now created stronger relationships between our transportation department and our building principals, so that we try to find challenges before they are even reported to us.

We have now fully implemented some of the most progressive curriculum in the area of bully prevention education as a result of our continued partnership with the Waitt Institute. We have a curriculum titled “*Second Step*” for all students in grades K-8 that teaches students to recognize, refuse, and report bullying. We also have components with this curriculum that connect to parents so that they know what their students are learning in school and they can support those items at home. We have a program in our high schools titled “*Mentors in Violence Prevention*” or “*MVP*”. This program allows older students, typically high school juniors and seniors, to partner with incoming freshmen students. The older students facilitate conversations with the younger students around a series of social scenarios depicting bullying and abusive peer culture in their school and community. During these discussions, students talk about how they might keep challenges from rising to a level that is significant and how they could prevent those challenges from ever occurring at all.

We also have an after school curriculum titled "*Coaching Boys Into Men*". This is a violence prevention program designed to allow high school athletic coaches to discuss with male athletes about the importance of respect for themselves and others with a noted focus on the women and girls in their lives. We believe we need to work with students to understand why they may be asked to be assertive or aggressive on the field of play yet, that same level of aggressive or assertive behavior might not be welcome in other aspects of their lives.

We have also made changes to our School Board policies regarding bullying, hazing, and harassment. Those policies are not just documents to us, they actually guide our actions, and they give us the opportunity to behave in different ways to prevent those challenges. And of course, we have a very thorough staff development process regarding these very important topics.

Finally, I would like to point out that our biggest challenge of the day very likely deals with cyber-bullying. The use of electronic devices and gadgets, the internet, to bully one another, as a result of the anonymity offered by the lack of face time that gives bullies the opportunity to thrive.

I encourage you to consider the many examples that are presented today; but do not stop at the compelling nature of the immediate examples. Consider this as it truly is, an epidemic. It is bigger than a single person; it is bigger than a single staff member, a single school building, or a single school district. It is our culture and our culture must change. I do regret that any student in any district has a less than positive experience as a part of their education. We, in the Sioux City Community School District, are, like many, a district of continuous improvement. We must study the data, we must listen to our customers and constituents, and we must and we will create meaningful change for our future.

Thank you for your time.