House Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities

"Ensuring Student Cyber Safety"

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Written Testimony of Barbara-Jane "BJ" Paris
Board of Directors, National Association of Secondary School Principals
Reston, VA

Chairwoman McCarthy, Ranking Member Platts, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to speak on the issue of cyberbullying and its effect on student achievement. My name is BJ Paris, and I am the principal of Canyon Vista Middle School in Austin, TX, where I have served for 3 years. Of my 30 years in education in three countries, I have spent the last 10 in administration.

Our school serves more than 1,100 students, representing more than 20 countries, in grades 6–8. A small percentage of our students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, but more than 10% are considered at risk. Thirty-five percent of our students are Asian/Pacific Islander, 6% are Hispanic, and 1.7% are Black. Our scores for the 2008–09 school year were excellent in reading, math, social studies, and science, and Canyon Vista has received an exemplary rating by the Texas Education Agency.

The Round Rock School District, where my school is located, covers approximately 110 square miles that encompass high-tech manufacturing and urban retail centers, suburban neighborhoods, and farms and ranches. Our district consists of 30 elementary schools, 9 middle schools, 4 high schools, a ninth-grade center, and 2 alternative learning centers.

Today, I am also appearing on behalf of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, where I will begin a four-year term on the board of directors in July. In existence since 1916, NASSP is the preeminent organization of and national voice for middle level and high school principals, assistant principals, and aspiring school leaders from across the United States and more than 45 countries around the world. Our mission is to promote excellence in middle level and high school leadership.

NASSP
NASSP has a long history of supporting the personalization of the school environment as a condition for student engagement and achievement. In 1996, we published *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution* in which we called for sweeping change in schools. Recommendations from that and later *Breaking Ranks* publications focus on areas that the school principal can influence directly. NASSP believes that ensuring student safety is the highest priority in schools because no learning can take place without it. Because of these foundational beliefs, we have been a strong and ongoing advocate of all efforts to promote a safe and orderly learning environment.

In 2000, as a direct result of these beliefs, NASSP hired Bill Bond to be the NASSP Specialist for School Safety. Before coming to NASSP, Mr. Bond served as principal of Heath High School in West Paducah, KY, where on December 1, 1997, incidents of bullying led to a tragic school shooting at the school. This shooting, along with others across the nation, has precipitated Bond's involvement in safe school awareness, and since joining NASSP, Bond has been a resource for schools and principals' organizations across the nation. As you well know, however, bullying no longer requires face-to-face interaction—the Internet and the ever-expanding use of electronic communications and social networking Web sites have taken bullying to another level. For the past five years, Mr. Bond and I have traveled the country working with school officials and other stakeholders to minimize the impact of cyberbullying. The school leader's persistent

challenge is to protect students against online predators and prevent cyberbullying while safeguarding students' First Amendment rights and encouraging the use of the Internet as a legitimate educational tool. Sadly this need to protect students has too often resulted in avoiding the same high-tech tools with which students must be familiar to be competitive in the workplace or to succeed in postsecondary education after graduating from high school.

To help meet this challenge, in 2007 the NASSP Board of Directors adopted a [position statement on Internet safety](#) that states that "Internet service providers and social networking Web sites have an obligation to offer their clients safeguards against predators and other cyber criminals." But this in itself is not enough; the position statement also encourages schools to "formulate clear guidelines to protect students and teachers against cyber bullying and other criminal activities."

Personal Testimony
As a high school principal five years ago in east Texas, I had a student who became suicidal after a cyberbullying incident, and I had no idea what my responsibilities, options, limitations were to deal with it. I knew I could not take the easy way out and pretend it was not my problem because the bullying hadn't taken place on school property or during school hours. I vowed to find out everything I could about cyberbullying so that I could limit its impact on other students in the future. Among other things that dragged me into the technological world, I learned to block certain Web sites at the school and began looking at best practices around the country. This was how I first learned of the work of Parry Aftab, my fellow panelist here today and Bully Police USA, a watchdog organization that advocates on behalf of bullied children and reports on state antibullying laws. [Bully Police USA](#) was instrumental in providing me with strategies for navigating the inherent problems of cyberspace in our schools. I began working with the Texas affiliate as a volunteer and also became friends with the organization's founder, Brenda High. A year later, my first as a middle school principal, my campus was locked down by police because of threats made in an off-campus e-mail. Once again, I vowed to learn more and share my experience with other principals so that they would not find themselves feeling powerless at a critical time. More importantly, I hoped that by sharing what I knew were the pitfalls and outcomes of cyberbullying, I could educate school personnel about how to develop preventative systems so that they might never be faced with similar situations.

I regularly speak to principals across the country about cyberbullying and offer recommendations for those schools and districts that do not currently have policies in place. I have also become an advocate at the state level, testifying in Austin before the state legislature with my students in support of legislation that would empower campus leaders to develop systems for dealing with cyberbullying in their communities and to provide professional development for all educators.

Research
Cyberbullying has gained national attention with a number of high-profile incidents in Massachusetts and Missouri. In 2006, more than 13 million children and adolescents ages 6-17 were estimated to be victims of cyberbullying, with a majority of these incidents occurring at the middle school level. In a [September 2008 column in the NASSP publication *Principal Leadership,*](#) Ted Feinburg, the assistant executive director of the National Association of School Psychologists, and Nicole Robey, a school psychology intern, wrote that victims of

cyberbullying "suffer equal if not greater psychological harm because the hurtful information can be transmitted broadly and instantaneously and can be difficult to eliminate. Aggressors can remain anonymous and are hard to stop. Not knowing who an aggressor is can cause adolescents to be hypervigilant in terms of surveying their social environment, both cyber and real, to avoid harmful encounters. Cyberbullying also may be worse than face-to-face bullying because people feel shielded from the consequences of their actions and often do or say things online that they would not in person. In some cases, cyberbullying can lead to severe dysfunction, externalized violence, and suicide."

In 2008, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), in collaboration with NASSP, published *The Principal's Perspective: School Safety, Bullying and Harassment*. The survey explored the perspectives of elementary and secondary public school principals on student bullying and harassment and on the policies, programs, and training that principals have instituted in their schools to address these issues. Some pertinent findings of the report include that:

- Half of public school principals (49%) report that bullying, name calling, or harassment of students is a serious problem at their school
- Bullying or harassment is a particularly prominent problem at the junior high or middle school level
- Most principals speak to the perpetrator and the victim when incidents of harassment are reported to them, but few believe that the majority of bullying or harassment incidents come to their attention.

One question specifically asked principals how often their students engage in cyberbullying or harassment—that is, bullying or harassing others using text messaging, e-mail, instant messaging, Web sites, blogs, social networking sites, and so forth. The report explains that "technological advances have opened up new frontiers for harassment. Both teachers and principals are at a disadvantage in being able to observe many types of cyberbullying.... When asked about the extent of this type of activity, most principals (72%) report that students at their school engage in cyberbullying to some extent. However few (8%) believe that students frequently engage in this behavior." Incidents of cyberbullying increased as students aged: "20% of secondary school principals reported that their students frequently engage in cyberbullying compared with only 1% of elementary school principals. Younger principals (under 45) were also more likely to report that cyberbullying frequently occurs at their school (12% vs. 6% of those 45 years or older). Also, principals of suburban schools are more likely to report that cyberbullying ever occurs at their schools (81%) than principals of urban (66%) or rural (68%) schools."

The report also speaks to the need for additional professional development to prevent bullying and harassment from occurring: "Bullying and harassment intervention and prevention is an area in which a majority of principals indicate their school currently provides professional development. Yet, despite this fact, principals are most likely to indicate that this is the non-academic area in which the staff at their school needs support or training, as 62% believe that their staff needs the most support or training in this area."

Recommendations

On the basis of my personal philosophy and experiences with cyberbullying, I offer the following recommendations to guide schools in developing their policies on cyberbullying to create a positive, supportive environment that promotes the academic growth and personal development of every student at the school.

School leaders must:

- Understand that cyberbullying is an aggressive and prevalent threat to the learning environment and that even if it did not happen at school or on a school computer, it can directly affect the educational process and the school environment and must be taken seriously

- Familiarize themselves and their staff members about all aspects of technology, including cell phones, computers, the Internet, blogs, instant messaging, and social networking Web sites as well as the legal and liability issues associated with the use of these technologies

- Create a team composed of staff members, parents, and students to establish guiding principles for the acceptable use of technology at school, when completing assignments and related activities, and during events taking place off-campus

- Provide staff members with professional development on how to ensure student safety while using technology as an educational tool, including recognizing the signs and possible effects of cyberbullying

- Formulate clear policies that protect students and teachers from cyberbullying and other criminal activities that are related to technology; ensure that students and parents are aware of these policies and the penalties for abusing them

- Instruct all students on the safe use of technology and the impact of cyberbullying and how to recognize and report it when it occurs

- Create user-friendly procedures to encourage students to report cyberbullying when it happens to them or to others

- Conduct orientation sessions for parents about cyberbullying and include information on how they can reinforce safety guidelines and monitor technology use at home and set the expectation that no derogatory statements will be sent or posted about other students or staff members.

A recurring theme in these recommendations is the need for both students and educators to recognize and act to limit cyberbullying. Recognizing students' reluctance to report on classmates, our school acquired an anonymous messaging system--supported with Safe and Drug-Free Schools funding--that allows students to report incidences of bullying without having to identify themselves. This system has contributed greatly to a 70% reduction in students' belief that bullying is a problem at Canyon Vista Middle School.

Fundamentally, school policies must acknowledge the disparity between students' *knowledge* of technology and their *wisdom* to manage it effectively. Students, many of whom have remarkable technology knowledge, are so desperate to belong to something that they'll post naked photographs of themselves to a trusted few on the Internet. Education for today's world must help students develop that wisdom so they can recognize and navigate around the dangers of electronic media while also using it for its maximum benefit.

As a member of the National Safe Schools Partnership, NASSP has endorsed federal policy recommendations to prevent bullying and harassment in our nation's schools, which will have a dramatic impact in improving school safety and, correspondingly, student achievement for all students. Specifically, our coalition of national education, health care, civil rights, law enforcement, youth development, and other organizations call on Congress to ensure that:

1. Schools and districts have comprehensive and effective student conduct policies that include clear prohibitions regarding bullying and harassment
2. Schools and districts focus on effective prevention strategies and professional development designed to help school personnel meaningfully address issues associated with bullying and harassment
3. States and districts maintain and report data regarding incidents of bullying and harassment to inform the development of effective federal, state, and local policies that address these issues.

Our recommendations are embodied in the Safe Schools Improvement Act (H.R. 2262), which would amend the Safe and Drug-Free Schools program so that antibullying and harassment programs are eligible for federal grants. The legislation is championed by many members of the subcommittee, and NASSP hopes that it will be enacted into law as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

We also understand, Madame Chairwoman, that you will soon be reintroducing the Schools Against Violence in Education (SAVE) Act. NASSP was very supportive of a provision in the SAVE Act that would have expanded the Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant program to allow schools to administer a schoolwide climate survey of students, parents, and school personnel. The climate survey would have measured the degree to which collaborative leadership and a professional learning community exist; the personalization of the school environment; and the strength of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment—factors that we believe will lead to student achievement, as outlined in our *Breaking Ranks* publications.

Conclusion
Our students are using ever-changing technology more than ever, and for most of them, the Internet is not simply an after-school activity or a quick and convenient way to research a school assignment—it is a major part of their social life. Texts, instant messages, e-mail, and social networking are as common to them as using the telephone is to most adults. And in this cyberworld, just as in the face-to-face world, bullying and harassment does happen.

Children in the United States do not have a choice about whether they come to school. It is the law, and if we are going to require them to be there, then we have the moral imperative to ensure

that they are in a safe, secure, and productive environment that protects them against all forms of bullying and harassment. If we, the responsible adults, do not purposefully define the culture of our schools, our students will do it for us. How we interact and communicate with one another—whether by oral, written, or electronic means—help define the school culture. As school leaders, we must ensure that every student entrusted in our care is in an environment that promotes safety and security; therefore, we must do everything possible to eliminate all forms of cyberbullying and harassment and to minimize their impact on student achievement should they occur.

Madam Chairwoman, this concludes my prepared testimony, but I would be happy to answer any questions you or the other committee members may have.

Thank you again for this opportunity.