

PACER Center Testimony-Paula Goldberg, Executive Director

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Thank you for the invitation to testify today.

My name is Paula Goldberg, and I am the Executive Director and founder of PACER Center, a national parent center in Minnesota that provides information and resources to parents of children with all disabilities. PACER began its National Bullying Prevention Center project six years ago after receiving numerous calls from parents about their children with disabilities being bullied. PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center has since expanded to serve all children (with and without disabilities), and PACER is also the founder of National Bullying Prevention Month which will be celebrated for the 6th time this October.

I would like to thank members of the Commission for inviting me today, and I would also like to recognize Commissioner Dina Titus for being an advocate for people with disabilities throughout her career in Nevada. The Nevada PEP parent center has partnered with PACER on many bullying prevention issues.

I want to begin by sharing two stories that illustrate some of the dynamics between bullying and children and youth with disabilities.

Story #1 – Horrific Story from a Family

A month ago, I received a call from a mother who has two sons with Asperger's Syndrome. She shared a horrific story of three years of bullying and harassment against her sons and their family by 15 to 20 teenagers.

The teenagers damaged the family's home on many occasions, including one incident when five dozen eggs were thrown against the house the night before the funeral of the sons' grandmother, greatly upsetting them. The teens also left feces on the steps of the house with a threatening note. When one of the sons went on his first date, the teens hung bloody tampons all over his car (the son has not dated since). The bullying

also occurred at school where one son was urinated on in the locker room, and the teenagers also cyberbullied the sons. The bullying was so pervasive that the son went into a long-term depression. The parent said that her family's life has been changed forever because of the teenagers who made it a "project" to terrorize her sons. She said, "They took something from our family that we can't get back."

The parent talked to a school administrator who said that if her family didn't like the bullying that was occurring, the sons **could leave the school**. **Unfortunately**, the administrators expressed the view that bullying is a normal part of society and that learning how to deal with it is an expected part of growing up. The son did decide to attend another school, but the bullying still continued. The family eventually installed a security camera and did catch some of the teenagers. The legal system was unresponsive, however. There is more to this story, but those are the main points that demonstrate how severe bullying can become.

Story #2 – Middle School Girl with Epilepsy

The second story involves a 12-year-old girl who attended a small, rural school where everyone had grown up with each other. She was diagnosed with epilepsy two years before the bullying incident but hadn't told anyone, per her parents' request. When she finally did have a seizure at school, the girl was ostracized by her entire school, **even the staff**. She was ordered to sit alone during class and lunch. When she would walk into the bathroom, the girls in would all fall down and imitate her seizures (which they called "fry like bacon"). The girl's classmates would steal her books and homework, lock her in closets and in the dark, and draw pictures of her having a seizure and post them around the school. After months and months of begging, her grandma finally agreed to home school her. Since this incident, the girl has had no friends and is ashamed to have seizures and of her disability.

These are just two examples of the hundreds of stories PACER has heard regarding the bullying of children on the basis of their disability. Research demonstrates that children with disabilities are bullied more frequently than their peers without disabilities. In one study, 60 percent of students with disabilities reported being bullied compared to only

25 percent of the overall student population (British Journal of Learning Support). Another report found that children with disabilities were ten times more likely to be bullied than a typical student (Journal of Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology). In a study of 411 children with Asperger's, 94% of their parents reported that their children had been bullied (Carter 2009).

In response to these alarming statistics, PACER has developed **innovative** and creative resources to educate, engage and inspire students – with and without disabilities – with information on how to effectively respond to bullying. The elementary website – KidsAgainstBullying.org – was designed first and was so successful that in 2009 PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center went on to create a second site for older students called TeensAgainstBullying.org. The websites focus on engaging bystanders to make a difference and have evolved to include classroom toolkits, which educators and other professionals can download for free to use in educating students. PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center website PACER.org/bullying includes links to all these resources for parents, students, and teachers. PACER's resources are sought after by thousands. In the last fiscal year, the websites recorded over 800,000 visitors, an 80% increase from the previous year. Demand for bullying prevention information has continued to rise.

PACER views bullying of children with disabilities and all bullying as a **civil rights issue**. Many students with disabilities who look or act different (including those students whose disabilities are not visibly recognizable, such as mental health issues, autism, ADHD, learning disabilities) don't always understand social cues and norms. Therefore students with disabilities may have an especially hard time responding to bullying behavior, making it even more devastating.

PACER recommends the following:

1. **Enact a federal bullying prevention law** that enumerates the protected classes of disability, race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, and sexual orientation/gender expression. (PACER recognizes that bullying knows no boundaries of class, race, age or gender – but that **specific groups of**

- students, especially students with disabilities, are more often targeted than their peers and there needs to be prevention strategies to address their protected civil rights.) **This law should be incorporated into the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)** and should include the following provisions:
- a. **Require training on bullying prevention for school administrators, educators, parents and students.** The two stories that I shared clearly demonstrate the need for increased training for professionals so they are able to respond appropriately when a bullying incident occurs. PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center program has also demonstrated the power of **engaging bystanders, or other students who witness bullying behavior**, to help prevent it. Training needs to include the entire school community.
 - b. **Establish a nonprofit center in every state** that can provide technical assistance and resources to parents, professionals and students to prevent and respond to bullying. A national technical assistance center should also be established to support the work of the centers.
 - c. **Collect data** on bullying incidents and effectiveness of bullying prevention efforts
2. **Incorporate bullying prevention language into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** and state special education laws that bullying must be addressed in a student's **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**. IEPs are the documents that define goals and supports for students with disabilities.
 3. Urge states to **require bullying prevention training** to be included in **teacher preparation** courses, especially for elementary and secondary teachers and coaches.
 4. **Teach peer advocacy and support skills to students in all schools.** PACER has some excellent examples of the success of these types of programs.
 5. **Implement schoolwide initiatives such as PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports)** to prevent bullying by working together to create a **school culture** that is **safe and respectful** and encourages positive behaviors. George Sugai is an excellent PBIS researcher, and there are currently more

than 416,000 schools in the country using the PBIS research-based model. ESEA should require the use of PBIS in every school to teach **respect** and help **reduce** bullying behavior.

We recognize that bullying is a complex societal problem and that there are no simple solutions. However, we believe we **can prevent bullying** by systematically engaging and educating students, parents, school professionals, and the community. **We believe that we can and must prevent bullying behavior.** The end of bullying begins with all of us in this room.

Thank you!

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