

**Planned Parenthood of New York City  
Bullying, Harassment, and Discrimination in NYC Schools  
Int. 1538  
October 30, 2017**

Good morning, I am Elizabeth Adams, Director of Government Relations at Planned Parenthood of New York City (PPNYC). Thank you to Education Chair Honorable Councilmember Daniel Dromm, the Committee on Education, and to Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, for the opportunity to speak on this important issue. Bullying and harassment of lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) and transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) students is a nationwide issue and requires a comprehensive and holistic approach to improve school culture.

The need to address current rates of assault and harassment of marginalized students in schools is urgent. According to the CDC, LGB high school students are significantly more likely to experience dating violence, bullying, and sexual assault than their heterosexual peers and are at substantial risk for suicide, depression, and absenteeism because they do not feel safe for being who they are.<sup>1</sup> Findings from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS) also revealed that 78% of TGNC students have reported being harassed. To achieve large-scale change that addresses the concerning rates of assault and discrimination, schools need to see inclusion and safety as core values for all staff to commit to.

As a leading sexual health education provider, PPNYC recognizes the importance of cultivating a supportive and inclusive school environment for all students to thrive. Our educators provide comprehensive sexual health education workshops on a range of topics, including puberty and anatomy, body image, gender identity and sexuality, healthy relationships and consent, and navigating media and minors rights. Our peer-to-peer program in particular, the Youth Health Promoters, reaches over 5,000 young people each year through outreach and education, workshops and events, and through social media and online engagement.

In preparation for this hearing, PPNYC education staff asked the Youth Health Promoters about challenges they see firsthand in their schools when it comes to bullying of LGB and TGNC students and ways the Respect for All (RFA) program could better address these needs. Conversations revealed the extent to which ongoing teacher training and resources are needed for Respect for All liaisons as well as the importance of involving all school staff in combatting bullying and harassment of marginalized students. As such, PPNYC proposes the following recommendations for improving school culture around bullying and harassment.

First, we are pleased to support Intro. 1538 and its call to post each school's designated Respect for All (RFA) liaison contact information on the Department of Education's website. Students may not know or

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention, August 2016, "First National Study of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students' Health Finds Higher Levels of Physical/Sexual Violence and Bullying Than Peers," retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/newsroom/2016/lgb-youth-report-press-release.html>

remember who their RFA liaison is and having the ability to look them up online and contact them privately over email could help increase communication and reporting. We encourage additional online opportunities for students to report harassment and bullying in their schools.

*“I think the implementation of this would be effective for a lot of students in my school especially for students who don’t have a voice or are scared to come out and express themselves in person. Students who are scared of coming to the designated liaison in person would find the emailing alternative useful.” Mariama, YHP*

*“Online might be a little better because it would probably give the kid a little more confidence to speak up because they might feel less embarrassed.” Mannix, YHP*

We also recognize that students may be hesitant to trust a staff member or reach out for support and so it is important that RFA liaisons are provided with regular trauma-informed trainings and resources to bring back to staff and students. Being seen a trusted resource is an ongoing process and requires a continued commitment to learning and understanding.

*“This can be effective if the designated person receives proper training and if they already have a good relationship with the students.” Kurtis, YHP*

*“A liaison should be able to provide students with counseling that they may not receive from parents.” Mariama, YHP*

Lastly, in addition to ongoing training and support for RFA liaisons, we recommend the DOE also provide resources and learning opportunities for all school staff. If a student doesn’t know or trust the appointed RFA liaison, it is critical that another staff member is equipped with tools to respond if a student reaches out to them for support or reports an incident.

*“I know about many bullying situations and when reported I don’t see something being done about it. There’s many teachers and staff that disregard the issues or don’t stress the situation enough.” Ashley, YHP*

*“If someone is bullied and they talk to someone, they will speak to a teacher who they are comfortable with not a teacher who is assigned the position. What if that staff member and the student getting bullied didn’t get along with one another?” Alex, YHP*

We applaud the City Council and the Department of Education’s commitment to supporting all students regardless of their gender, identity, or sexuality, and addressing current rates of bullying and harassment of LGB and TGNC students in NYC schools. We urge the passage of Int. 1538 and look forward to continuing to work with the administration in their efforts to foster safe and supportive school environments.