

Testimony of Austin Shively
In Support of HB 2578
House Committee on Education
February 8, 2018

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Austin Shively, and I am currently a senior at Olathe Northwest High School.

While in high school, I have immersed myself in several activities. From being the Student Body President, to acting in the school's musicals, to being on the speech and debate team, to being a representative on Senior Committee, I pursue opportunities that allow me to stand at the crossroads of humanity and experience the multiplicity of the world.

With this diverse range of extracurricular activities, I have been a member of many different social groups. Unfortunately, I have also been a first-hand witness to just as many acts of identity exploitation, or as the legislation states it, "bullying."

I tend to evaluate "bullying" as identity exploitation because it is a more appropriate term to coincide with the effects that the mistreatment has on the victim.

This exploitation can be best illustrated in one incident that has been ingrained into my memory. It occurred during my junior year.

As a witness, I was not the target, but it was very clear who was. There was a girl in my English class who, for purposes of privacy, I will refer to as Anna. Anna was a near straight-A student and one of the friendliest faces in the school. However, because of her height, weight, and religion she was constantly berated by another one of her peers. From only the incidents that I witnessed, Anna was taunted with several dehumanizing body image remarks as well as numerous references to World War II that targeted her Jewish identity. Jonathan, (name changed) the said bully in this encounter, was reported to administration by one of Anna's friends and he was "talked to."

Other than being pulled into the office for a short duration of time, from an outsider's perspective, no action was taken to discipline the utterly inappropriate behavior of Jonathan. Upon exiting the admin's office, Jonathan returned to his normal life. He returned to his after-school sports practices, remained a member of all of his extracurricular clubs, and still remained in school with no form of suspension.

Anna also remained in school, however her life to this day has not yet returned to the way it was prior to junior year. Fortunately, she still remains at Olathe Northwest, unlike the others who have transferred due to unaddressed bullying issues. She has become a more reserved individual who always second guesses herself before speaking up in our Senior Committee meetings. Her booming laughs in the hallway have now turned to soft smiles and shorts glances, because she feels like she is being looked at differently because of the statements made by Jonathan. Anna. Same name, same face, and same victim. Jonathan, to this day, still taunts and teases Anna at every given opportunity. Anna has just learned to ignore it, much like the hundreds of others who have instinctively turned the other cheek because nothing else is being done.

The worst consequence of the actions being discussed today is the feelings of insecurity brought on to the victims.

It saddens me to see my peers afraid to express themselves in what is supposed to be a safe place to be educated, a safe place to learn your future path in life. Even when my peers are subject to the exploitation of their own identity, they are afraid to speak up because they are unsure of what will become of the situation.

Too many times little to no action is taken when a student does not feel safe, and part of the reason is because students don't have their parents in their corner fighting for them. Many adults in the community, my parents included, are oblivious to any form of policy that takes action when a student is "bullied."

Students feel in the dark when it comes to the victimization of themselves.

I've seen administration brush over incidents of "bullying" because it's not physical. However, verbal, social, cyber, and sexual bullying are just as prominent in modern culture and in my opinion the results are much more devastating. Bruises can go away, but what I've seen with my friend Anna is that emotional scarring cannot.

Anna has turned her past into something that has strengthened her and she has now committed to a highly selective university.

However, when you look to the nearly one dozen teenage suicides in my local area in the past four years, three of which were from Olathe Northwest, you can see that not everyone has Anna's strength.

That is why I stand here before the council and advocate for HB2578 to be passed into law.

Transparency advocates for change. And change is what advocates for a healthy future for students not only in my school, but in the state.

In all of my educational and extracurricular endeavors, I have seen people struggle with identity, and I have been in that seat before myself. But until such policies are put into effect, students, parental units and even teachers are going to remain in that vast field of darkness, not knowing how to effectively address bullying issues. That darkness is also going to prevent individuals from initiating other policy reforms to protect their friend, their child, or their student from that identity exploitation that everyone is susceptible to.

Change is necessary. And I firmly testify that this legislation is how we introduce that change.

Sincerely,

Austin Shively
Senior at Olathe Northwest High School