TESTIMONY BY PAMELA MANELA,
MICHIGAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS,
IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILLS 4091 AND 4162, 03-13-2007

Hello – My name is Pam Manela. I am a licensed professional social worker, and for the last 19 years I have been employed as a school social worker in Southfield Public Schools. Today, I am here representing the Michigan Association of School Social Workers (MASSW). I wish to thank this committee for allowing me to testify in favor of passage of House Bills 4091 and 4162.

As professional social workers based in our state's public schools, we witness the daily toll that bullying takes on our students from early elementary school through high school and beyond. My colleagues and I work directly with the victims of bullying and with the bystanders who also suffer from the terror bullying produces and from the stress of witnessing the impact of bullying on their fellow students. All of these victims have had their educations disrupted and sometimes completely derailed by bullying. The serious emotional and social consequences of bullying are not easily repaired and can last for years. Emotional violence in school crates a threatening environment in which the education of all students suffers.

Time and again I have seen how bullying creates an atmosphere of intimidation that provides fertile ground for the seeds of gang violence. Students who are terrorized and intimidated often withdraw, feel rejected by their peers, suffer loneliness, are thwarted in their social development, and can develop serious and long-term depression and other mental health problems. It is all too easy for the victims of bullying to be labeled as "different" or "too sensitive" or "gay" by others who themselves also fear being victimized and bullied. It is all too easy in the atmosphere of terror that bullying encourages for some students to begin to discriminate against others for the "clothes they wear" the "way they walk or talk" or for "the injuries they have suffered at the hands of a bully". Rather than the safe supportive learning environment schools should be, bullying can turn a school into a frightening and unbearable place for many students, a place where distrust displaces camaraderie and scapegoating replaces support.

Too often, I have had to deal with devastating character assassination among students that takes place either in person, over the internet through text messaging, or as a result of hazing as an initiation ceremony. This kind of bullying promotes the entrenchment of cliques and encourages "pranks" played by members of the 'popular crowd' designed to injure and isolate those they choose to victimize. Such bullying can become especially rampant among teens in relation to dating and forming relationships with members of the opposite sex. It is often characterized by rumors, posting of notes in the school's halls or bathrooms, and by threats and intimidation tied to demands that students stop being friends with other students of their choice or otherwise alter their behavior at the command of the bully. The growth of this kind of tyranny among students not only undermines the focus on learning and academic excellence which should be dominant factors in school, it also stunts and deforms the social development of perpetrator and victim alike. Learning and healthy social development can only take place in schools where students feel safe, are not overly distracted from their studies by concerns about social acceptance, are not intimidated by their peers, and do not skip school because they are afraid of the emotional and perhaps physical damage they might suffer at school.

House Bills 4091 and 4162 will create a uniform state-wide set of policies about bullying, so that students in all school districts and their families can be assured that school is mandated as a place where learning can take place and children can succeed academically in a safe respectful environment without fear of intimidation, discrimination, or attack.

Again, I wish to thank this committee on behalf of Michigan's school social workers. I am happy to answer any questions or elaborate on any issues you may want to discuss.