

Sirdeaner Walker Testimony
Strengthening School Safety through Prevention of Bullying
House Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee
and Healthy Families and Communities Subcommittee Hearing
10:00 AM, July 8, 2009

Good morning. I want to thank the distinguished members of Congress here today for inviting me to speak and for holding this important hearing.

My name is Sirdeaner Walker, and four months ago, I would not have dreamed that one day I would be testifying on Capitol Hill. I was an ordinary working mom, looking after my family and doing the best I could as a parent.

But my life changed forever on April 6, 2009.

That was the night I was cooking dinner when my son, Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, went to his room where I imagined he'd be doing his homework or playing his videogames. Instead, I found him hanging by an extension cord tied around his neck.

He was 11 years old.

Carl liked football and basketball and playing video games with his little brother. He loved the Lord and he loved his family. What could make a child his age despair so much that he would take his own life?

That question haunts me to this day, and I will probably never know the answer.

What we do know is that Carl was being bullied relentlessly at school. He had just started secondary school in September, and we had high hopes, but I knew something was wrong, almost from the start.

He didn't want to tell me what was bothering him, but I kept at him, and he finally told me that kids at school were pushing him around, calling him names, saying he acted "gay," and calling him "faggot."

Hearing that, my heart just broke for him. And I was furious. So I called the school right away and told them about the situation. I expected they would be just as upset as I was, but instead, they told me it was just ordinary social interaction that would work itself out.

I desperately wish they had been right. But it just got worse. By March, other kids were threatening to kill him.

I did everything that a parent is supposed to: I chose a "good" school; I joined the PTO; I went to every parent-teacher conference; I called the school regularly and brought the bullying problem to the staff's attention. And the school did not act. The teachers did not know how to respond.

After Carl died, I could have stayed at home and mourned him, but instead, I've chosen to get involved, to speak out about school bullying – and I have learned a lot in a short time.

And the most important thing I've learned is that bullying is not an inevitable part of growing up. It can be prevented. And there isn't a moment to lose.

Since my son died on April 6, I met the mother of another 11-year-old boy who was also being seriously bullied at school and killed himself. And I know there are others. This has got to stop.

School bullying is a national crisis, and we need a national solution to deal with it. That is why I am here today. Teachers, administrators and other school personnel need additional support and clear guidance

about how to ensure that all kids feel safe in school. Congress can make sure they have that guidance and support by making anti-bullying policies mandatory at all of our nation's schools.

Policies that make it clear exactly what kind of behavior will not be tolerated. Policies that include training teachers and other school personnel to recognize bullying and harassment and enforce the rules with immediate, appropriate discipline. Policies that recognize that to prevent bullying, we have to teach young people to treat each other with respect.

Studies show that schools that have these policies also have fewer reported incidents of bullying, and that students generally feel safer. Every school should have one, and we shouldn't rest until they do. And when I say every school, I mean public schools *and* charter schools – any school that gets federal funding.

The Safe Schools Improvement Act would help achieve the goals I have outlined today and I urge the subcommittees to move this legislation forward. The bill is supported by over 30 education, health, religious and other organizations that formed the National Safe Schools Partnership to address this terrible problem. We cannot afford to wait for another child to drop out of school, struggle academically or even worse, take his own life before we take this problem seriously.

Before I finish, I want to say one more thing, because I think it's important.

Very soon after Carl died, I heard from someone at an organization called GLSEN, which stands for Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. They were offering their sympathy and support and it meant a lot to me to learn that I wasn't alone, that other families had gone through this.

But I have to admit, I felt a little nervous. My son was only 11. He didn't identify as gay or as straight or anything like that. He was a child. Those kids at his school called him those names because they were probably the most hurtful things they could think of to say. And they hit their mark.

So, I didn't really know what to expect when my contact with GLSEN brought me together with a diverse group of students, some of whom had been the victims of bullying. It was the National Day of Silence, a day that gets young people involved in raising awareness about bullying. These were kids from a pretty wide range of backgrounds. And what amazed me the most was not how different we all were, but how much common ground we had. We shared our stories, and it gave me hope and the courage to speak out on behalf of my son, Carl.

I know now that bullying is not a gay issue, or a straight issue. It's a safety issue. It's about what kind of learning environments we want for our children and how far we're willing to go to protect and teach them.

That was the first day I started to believe we could do something about this problem. And believe it or not, that day would have been Carl's 12th birthday. I like to think he rested just a little easier, knowing that all these brave young people are out there fighting for him and all the children like him.

So in closing, I thank you once again for the honor of this opportunity, and I ask you to please do everything in your power to make sure that no other family has to go through what my family went through. Please help us to put a stop to school bullying.

Thank you.

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