

Statement of Dr. Paul R. Gausman  
Before the Federal Commission on School Safety  
“The Ecology of Schools: Fostering a Culture of Human Flourishing & Developing Character”  
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Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to address this Commission on this important topic. My name is Dr. Paul Gausman, and I am honored to be the Superintendent of Schools for the Sioux City Community School District, in Sioux City, Iowa. Our District has an enrollment of nearly 15,000 students. While this District is medium-sized by national standards, we are the fourth largest district in Iowa and we have urban characteristics. We are blessed to teach our student population; made of about 67% of students in poverty, 20% are English Language Learners, and we just exceed the national average of 13% of our population as students identified with special education needs. Of that group of English Language Learners, we have multiple home languages spoken in our district. I do not share any of these demographic items as insurmountable challenges, as a matter of fact, quite the opposite; I chose to work for this organization because of my passion to serve children from diverse backgrounds, and in a community that celebrates inclusion.

Sioux City is a blue-collar river-town, bordering Nebraska and South Dakota, with a metropolitan statistical area of just over 150,000 people. Sioux City has a long history of hard working people, of railroads, stockyards, food processing, and it is a regional service hub to many neighboring communities.

Members of the Sioux City School District and our community have worked to engage the national discourse on school-based bullying. In 2009 - 2011, we were intricately involved in the creation of the documentary, *Bully*. This important work follows the lives of five students

who faced bullying on a daily basis, and regrettably, one of those students was filmed in our schools, as our District was the only district in the nation to give these filmmakers access to create a transparent and real-time view of school-based bullying. Students must absolutely feel safe to have a chance to be successful in school, and at times, we as an entire culture fail those students on this basic need and right.

I have since participated in activities as a bully prevention advocate and speaker, such as when the film premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, I was a panelist here at the White House screening, and I participated in a Senate Field hearing on this topic. We, through our participation in this film, opened the door to criticism about our district and community, but I would not change that work, as the result of our participation includes positive change to our organization. Our participation in this documentary has created some of the richest and most meaningful discussion in our community about what the entirety of the community can do to assist and support schools in our efforts to prevent bullying.

Bullying is best defined as taking action to attempt to harm, intimidate or coerce someone perceived as vulnerable to such action. Bullying is about power and control, and bullying flourishes where vulnerability thrives. Bullying is not unique to schools. Bullying occurs just about anywhere multiple people gather; and now even online and in social media platforms.

In any community, the schools are mirrors of the community that they serve. If you find schools that have significant incidents of bullying, those challenges are a reflection of the community. In order to repair the challenges of bullying in schools, one must look to the greater community to consider ways to prevent bullying. This speaks further to my perspective, that bullying is best defeated by prevention. In our case, our board, administration, community, and staff members align to work toward preventing bullying before it occurs, in addition to reacting

when it occurs. We have consistently said that we are not unique because we have bullying in our schools, but we want to become unique by becoming a school district that has made a difference in this area.

Today, I make remarks specific to the changing nature and growing challenges of cyberbullying, and the use of social media in bullying scenarios. Bullying that takes place on cell phones and other devices and through social media forums has presented those of us who lead schools with new challenges that simply cannot be mitigated with previous solutions. We must consider new solutions specific to social media and cyberbullying, and the impact on schools and communities.

Certainly, we can all think back to a time in our own lives when we were young and potentially more vulnerable to the challenges of bullying. Some popular wisdom shared at that time may have been that the victims just need to become more resilient and to remove oneself from the bully. With the growing use of digital devices and student focus on social media platforms, bullying is reaching children in more places, more negatively, and more often than at any time in history. Certainly even all of us in this room have been recipients of some version of cyberbullying, and while many of us have grown the “thick skin” necessary to continue to work through negative statements, students rarely have experience or training, and have never before had this much contact with their bullies. Bullying now follows students to where they once felt safe.

We also have seen the challenge that people will often be far more aggressive and negative with their language on social media or through cyber means than they would in a face-to-face scenario. More often now, we deal with the challenges of a bullying situation that did not begin in school, it did not even occur on school equipment or at a school activity, yet when the

students get to the school for learning, a challenge that began outside of our supervision is clearly a challenge that needs resolution.

Our District policy enables staff members to investigate, provide discipline to bullies and create a safety plan for students who are bullied on social media outside of school hours/days. However, there are challenges that come with our review of social media in bullying situations, as the District can only enforce a safety plan while students are in school. Additionally, bullying that is not captured with a screenshot, and fake accounts used for bullying cannot be traced. While the District can petition social media organizations to remove accounts that are used for bullying, social media organizations do not assist the District in ascertaining information about the account creators, limiting our ability to take action.

The Legislature in the state of Iowa has considered but not passed legislation to provide us strength in the arena of following through on challenges born on social media. We need more ability to use social media in our investigations of school-based bullying scenarios, when applicable, and to take action against cyberbullies. Without the kind of support that legislation can provide, it can be challenging to take action to deliver consequences to a cyberbully who began the negative action outside of school and on their own device.

In Sioux City, our District is committed to providing an environment where all are treated with dignity and respect. Instances of bullying are always investigated and acted upon immediately when we are made aware of challenges. Anti-bullying education in Sioux City begins in preschool and continues through graduation. Every elementary school uses the evidence-based *Second Step Program*, a curriculum shown to decrease problem behaviors and promote success, self-regulation, and to develop a sense of safety and support. In recent years, our District has used *Film Clips for Character Education* in middle school, a program where

licensed clips from popular Hollywood movies teach age-appropriate lessons about mutual respect. Every high school in our District has a group of student leaders who serve as *Mentors in Violence Prevention* through the MVP program. The MVP student leaders use life-like scenarios to deliver programming to peers to curb gender violence, sexual harassment and bullying. We also collaborate with a company to scan public social media data to discover potential threats, and they provide us with actionable alerts as they discover negative posts. We recently added a new component to our required freshman Success Strategies class where students can earn recognition for appropriate digital citizenship. As a District, we ask parents and community members to be our partner in educating our youth and by reporting instances of concern through an online chat tool that we provide to our community.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address this Commission, know that I desire to continually improve my work to reduce the challenges of bullying in our schools and communities, and I welcome the opportunity to engage in further discourse, collaboration, and action.