

**Erin Davies, Executive Director, Juvenile Justice Coalition**  
**Testimony on HB 360**  
**House Education and Career Readiness Committee**  
**December 12, 2017**

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Slaby, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the House Education and Career Readiness Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on HB 360. The Juvenile Justice Coalition (JJC) is an organization that works to ensure that approaches to Ohio youth who are at-risk of involvement or involved in the juvenile court system are research-based and cost-effective. In addition, JJC engages youth leaders to get their perspective on what would be most effective for them and their colleagues.

In talking with youth leaders on bullying, youth in the group had been both on the bullying and bullied sides. For youth who had been bullied, they felt they had been picked on for different reasons, including their ethnicity, what they're wearing, and the level of respect they receive. For those youth who have bullied, they cited peer pressure, hanging out with the wrong crowd, and wanting to get even. They also expressed that they bully because they have been hurt in the past and still felt hurt, which created a cycle between being bullied and bullying other students. Finally, the students noted that out-of-school suspensions and expulsions create a hostile environment in the school and set students up for failure by sending them home without a plan or support to be safe and stay on task with school requirements.

Youth also cited tensions between the adults and the students in the school as a contributing factor for bullying continuing at a school. A common thread in the conversation was that students felt like school staff do not get to know them personally. This lack of personal relationship resulted in school staff not knowing the student's situation at home, which led to misunderstandings and created expectations or assumptions that certain students come in labeled with an automatic attitude. The students also noticed that school staff seem to have favorites and are quicker to write up some students, which led to a feeling of unfairness. Some students also mentioned adults saying disrespectful things to them, like it's not my job to help you out or threatening to mace them as they tried to walk away from a situation, that made them feel disconnected from school. Finally, students expressed not having the space to resolve issues where an adult had said something to hurt their feelings or make them mad.

When asked how to deal most effectively with bullying in schools, the youth leaders made the following suggestions to create a more supportive school culture and reduce bullying:

- Focusing on preventing bullying by offering students in-school counseling and support, including having more counselors and safe spaces to talk in the school or having a space to vent if they're having a bad day.
- For adults in the school to slow down and take more time to understand the situation and develop solutions to resolve conflict, listen to how students are feeling instead of telling them how they feel, and figure out what's going on before making any quick discipline decisions.
- Developing and empowering student leaders to help change the culture of the school, including having resources to help change their peers and improve communications, with students receiving awards for their work.
- Having more objective guidelines for consequences and accountability when incidents happen so that responses are more consistent and fair for all students.
- Identifying and resolving issues between students and students and staff early before it gets to a boiling point.
- Forming more personal relationships between the students and adults in the school so students know that people care and training teachers and staff on how to work with students who are having a bad day.
- Giving students a chance to hear the impacts of bullying and how it can affect other students, including the individuals they bullied.

Both students and adults want to create a more positive environment in schools where bullying is not a part of the school culture. Unfortunately, HB 360 in its current form relies on more punitive measures – including out-of-school suspensions and expulsions and higher offense levels for hazing – that actually may raise tensions in schools and further a cycle of negative behaviors. Instead, we believe that any bill addressing bullying should focus on how to create a positive school climate that provides more support for students and builds leadership and relationships between students and adults – all of which align with adolescent development research on what works effectively to reduce bullying.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and I look forward to any questions you may have.