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Students, school officials work to end bullying Conference aids schools in creating a positive climate for all

FARMINGTON, CT -- One by one students took the microphone to share their personal stories of bullying, of suffering and cruelty that happened here, in Connecticut. There was absolute silence as the crowd of over 200 teachers, social workers, principals and other school leaders from 58 Connecticut towns heard these tales of pain. And, as the last student finished, there was an explosion of applause in recognition of how difficult it must have been for these six teenagers to tell such intimate details of events that caused them such hurt.

The student panel served as the personification of the bullying problem in Connecticut to the attendees at The Governor's Prevention Partnership's 2010 Best Practices Conference: Positive School Climate and Student Success. Tuesday's event, a collaboration of The Partnership with the Connecticut Commission on Children and the State Department of Education, drew a sold out crowd of concerned educators and school officials looking for help in implementing the state's 2008 anti-bullying law.

Conference attendees were able to participate in 12 workshops focusing on bullying and other critical issues that impact a safe and respectful environment in the classroom, foster positive relationships, prevent negative behavior like bullying and promote student success. In addition, attendees heard a keynote address from Dr. Jane Bluestein, nationally recognized and award-winning author of "Creating Emotionally Safe Schools," who believes that emotional safety is critical to students' learning and achievement.

"We are fortunate to live in a state that is committed to prevention. We have leaders with foresight to pass laws and advocate for programs that protect our children from bullying and other violence in our school buildings and communities", said The Governor's Prevention Partnership President/CEO Jill K. Spinetti in opening the conference. "We have heard about and mourned the loss of Phoebe Prince from Massachusetts and Jon Carmichael from Texas and other children who suffered terribly at the hands of children who teased and taunted them until they decided to take their own lives. These tragedies shake us up and, hopefully, motivate us to take action."

A recurring theme at the conference was that while some bullying cases are easier to identify, many require vigilance and clear intervention policies. Spinetti's remarks also addressed that topic.

"Most bullying incidents don't make it into the news, and there are thousands of children here in Connecticut and elsewhere who are too afraid to go to school and in many cases too afraid to speak up." Spinetti said. "They suffer and we have to reach them, even if it is one child at a time."

One of the key reasons the conference was held was to provide guidance and support for schools looking to implement formal anti-bullying programs to comply with Connecticut's 2008 law. Elaine Zimmerman, Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on Children, spoke during lunch and later conducted a standing-room-only workshop on that topic.

Zimmerman called for vigilance, explaining that it takes students, parents, teachers and school officials working together to protect children. “We had a student who put information on the Internet and another student went to her mother. It was the mother who reported it because she took her child seriously and took the Internet seriously.” Zimmerman said. “A gentleman had planned a ‘Columbine’ in our own state, planned it for April 20. When this was reported by the vigilant mother, they searched the suspect’s house and found weapons, explosives and a hit list with 30 names on it.”

Zimmerman also shared facts about bullying in Connecticut, explaining that three in ten Connecticut high students and 35% of ninth graders report having been bullied on school property.

“This is a time historically where we as school leaders, school teachers, parents and students need to have our eyes all the more open,” Zimmerman said.

ABOUT THE GOVERNOR’S PREVENTION PARTNERSHIP

Created in 1989, The Governor's Prevention Partnership is a not-for-profit alliance of state government and business leaders dedicated to youth mentoring and prevention of violence, underage drinking and substance abuse to build a strong, future workforce. Co-chaired by Governor M. Jodi Rell, The Partnership provides leadership and services to schools, communities, youth organizations and businesses. In 2009 Operation Respect – CT, an organization dedicated to prevention of bullying, merged with The Partnership.

The only non profit organization in Connecticut dedicated to prevention issues affecting youth, The Partnership:

- Creates and strengthens youth mentoring programs.
- Supports positive school climates through peer mediation, student assistance and bullying prevention programs.
- Creates and promotes public awareness media campaigns.
- Prevents underage drinking and youth substance abuse, working with local communities, youth groups and law enforcement.
- Facilitates prevention-focused trainings and events.
- Responds first to emerging threats and convene stakeholders to take action.
- Advocates for prevention resources and evaluate outcomes.

ABOUT THE CONNECTICUT COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

Created with bipartisan support in 1985 by the Connecticut legislature, the 25-member Commission on Children brings representatives of all three branches of government—legislative, executive, and judicial— together with representatives of the private sector to promote public policies in the best interests of children. The agency is mandated to:

- Provide information and conduct research regarding the status of children and children's programs in the state of Connecticut;
- Enlist the support of leaders in business, education, and state and local governments, along with the news media, to improve services and policies for children;
- Review coordination and assess all programs and practices in all state agencies as they affect children
- Serve as a liaison between government and private groups concerned with children
- Make recommendations for children annually to the legislature and the governor

INTERVIEW REQUESTS

Both Jill K. Spinetti and Elaine Zimmerman are available for interviews. Please contact Daniel Kline, The Governor’s Prevention Partnership, 917-523-3496, dan@notastep.com to arrange.