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MONTANA AAUW
Testimony in Favor of SB 198

Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Susan Near. I serve on the Board of the Montana American Association of University Women, a statewide organization with more than 500 members who support education and equity for women and girls. We are an affiliate of AAUW, who has over 100,000 members across the United States.

Passage of Senate Bill 198 is the number one priority for Montana AAUW for this session of the Montana Legislature. AAUW has long been interested in making our schools safe and nurturing places. In 1993 AAUW commissioned a national study of more than 2,000 8th to 11th graders to find out if students felt threatened at school. The report, "Hostile Hallways: Bullying, Teasing and Sexual Harassment in Schools" revealed a real problem. The study was repeated again in 2000. The 2000 results showed the largest increase of bullying incidents was related to anti-gay harassment. More than 60% of students knew someone who had faced anti-lesbian or anti-gay bullying - 36% had faced it themselves. You know that not all of these kids are gay or lesbian!

Of the kids who do self-identify as gay or lesbian, the journal "Pediatrics" reported that nearly ~~30%~~ 30% had been threatened with a weapon at school during the month prior to the survey - compared that to 7% of heterosexual students who were similarly threatened. More than 1/3 of the surveyed students also reported that no outside party EVER intervened when homophobic remarks were made in their school environment!

As adults we do not have to deal with that level of harassment. We can come to work knowing that we have little chance of someone shoving our head in a toilet. We can be reasonably certain that no one is going to call us horrendous names. If we face a hostile work environment, we are covered by anti-harassment policies. We can do something about it. We should offer the same for our children.

If we do not have a safe learning climate in our schools we - as responsible adults charged with our children's safety and their education - are not properly caring for our kids and their future. I urge your support for Senate Bill 198. Thank you.