Good morning. My name is Kari Lerum; I am a faculty member at the University of Washington, Bothell, and I am honored today to represent the Safe Schools Coalition. The Safe Schools Coalition is an international public-private partnership headquartered in Washington State that helps schools become safe for everyone regardless of their differences, including sexual orientation and gender expression.

This is a sad day, but also an important day, for Washington State. It is a sad day because bullying cases like Russell Dickerson’s are heartbreaking, and absolutely preventable. But this is also an important day because the case of Russell Dickerson will help us all – school administrators, teachers, parents, and policy makers – to move in the right direction. This case will help us make sure that all students are welcome, and none are subjected to cruelty, in Washington State Public schools.

The Safe Schools Coalition did not initiate this lawsuit, although we have helped families to find attorneys when they have asked. Our preference is to focus on prevention: helping teachers and administrators to ensure that harassment simply does not occur in their schools. We also focus on early intervention. In other words, when harassment does occur, our job it to respond swiftly with effective non-legal interventions.

This is important work. We know from The Washington State Healthy Youth Survey that more than a quarter of 8th graders in Washington State report having been bullied at least once in the past month.1 15% of those 8th grade students report that they have been harassed or intimidated because of their race (or what they perceived it to be). 14% of those students report being harassed for their sexual orientation (or what someone perceived it to be). And one out of 5 (20%) of students report being harassed for
their gender (including “sexual jokes, gestures, or comments” that make them “feel uncomfortable”). It gets a little better with age, dropping from more than 25% to 16% percent of overall harassment between 8th grade and senior year. Some of this reduction is undoubtedly due to kids maturing. But some is also due to the fact that bullied students sometimes just give up and drop out. Fortunately, Russell had the personal strength and the family support not to give up and drop out.

In Grays Harbor County, where Russell attended school, racial bullying is slightly less common than for the state as a whole. This may be due to the fact that there are fewer students of color in Grays Harbor County. At the same time, in Grays Harbor County we also see slightly higher rates of bullying based on sexual orientation and gender. We also know that bias-based harassment occurs across all counties of Washington State, including Rural, Urban, and Suburban schools. Rates in King County are nearly identical to statewide figures.

What the Safe Schools Coalition wants to emphasize today is that all of these statistics -- across all of counties in Washington State -- can change for the better. Bullying is actually preventable. There are proactive anti-bullying policies that school administrators and teachers can and must implement. Three separate studies published in 2003, 2004 and 2006 all found that students in schools with anti-bullying policies, programs and practices feel safer and are at much less risk than students in schools without such policies. Specifically, students are safer and healthier when their schools use the following four strategies:

1. The school has a well-publicized and enforced policy that explicitly prohibits bullying and discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender expression and sexual orientation.
2. The school trains and encourages teachers to intervene when harassment happens.
3. The school has support groups for kids, such as gay-straight alliances, and
4. The school makes available information about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people at school and in the curricula.

In closing: If you are a student – or a family member or friend of a student –who is experiencing bias-based harassment and intimidation at school, please contact the Safe Schools Coalition for help. Call 1-877-SAFE-SAFE. If you are a school employee or school board member, we invite you to contact the Safe Schools Coalition for guidance and support in making your school cruelty-free. Our web site is www.safeschoolscoalition.org. If this law suit accomplishes anything, let it be to both alleviate the damage inflicted upon Russell Dickenson, and to make Washington State schools safer for kids right now. Thank you Russell and thanks to the ACLU for holding all Washington schools accountable in our common quest to create learning environments that are welcoming and free of harassment.

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1. 2006 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey