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Will President Obama Back Passage of Antibullying Bill?

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The Advocate
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A bill intended to help stop antigay bullying in schools nationwide would move closer to passage if President Obama backed it, according to a letter sent to him by 70 organizations.

The Student Non-Discrimination Act was proposed by Sen. Al Franken and has about a third of the Senate signed up as cosponsors. But it often takes 60 votes to get anything through there these days. So groups including the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network and the Gay-Straight Alliance Network are calling on Obama to make clear his support for the bill.

"Your administration's endorsements of both the Employment Non-Discrimination Act and the Respect for Marriage Act provided those bills with critical momentum," states the letter, which was first reported by the Washington Blade. Neither of those pieces of legislation has passed Congress but activists are hopeful that ENDA, which prohibits antigay discrimination in the workplace, and the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act are moving closer to success. The president regularly cites the bills as items Congress should pass.

"An endorsement of the Student Non-Discrimination Act would likewise be a clarion call for equality in our schools and better protections for vulnerable children," the letter says. "And more importantly, it would make clear to all Members of Congress what the administration views as a necessary federal legislative solution to the serious problem of anti-LGBT discrimination and harassment in our nation's public schools."

A White House aide told the Blade that the president supports the goals behind the bill but did not go as far as it has on ENDA or the Respect for Marriage Act.

“Without speaking to the specifics of this letter, I would note that the president supports the goals of the Student Non-Discrimination Act,” Shin Inouye told the Blade. “As the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is being considered by Congress, we look forward to working with lawmakers to ensure that all students are safe and healthy and can learn in environments free from discrimination, bullying and harassment.”

Franken had once hoped to include the SNDA with reauthorization of the No Child Behind Act as that is debated this year. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and the rest of the administration have not shied away from the issue of bullying, even hosting a conference on it in Washington. And Duncan called harassment and bullying "serious, serious problems" in a video message delivered to gay-straight alliances, saying the president believes in "a collective obligation to ensure that all schools are safe for children."

In a response to The Advocate's candidate questionnaire this month, the president noted, "I hosted the first White House conference on bullying prevention and many in my Administration, including myself and Vice President Biden, participated in the It Gets Better Project that gives hope to young people who are victims of bullying or harassment because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity."

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