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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## Equality Illinois Calls for Stronger Anti-Bullying Efforts After Devastating Federal Report

WASHINGTON—With a devastating new federal study finding that about one child in four is subject to bullying in school, Equality Illinois, the state's oldest and largest LGBT advocacy organization, today called for stronger anti-bullying protections at the federal and state levels.

The report by the Government Accountability Office was requested by a bipartisan group of U.S. Senators, including Sen. Mark Kirk of Illinois, and released Friday.

"Millions of youth are subject to bullying in U.S. schools," the report said. Yet, it found, that "certain vulnerable groups are not covered and therefore have no recourse at the federal level. For example, federal agencies lack jurisdiction under civil rights statutes to pursue discrimination cases based solely on socioeconomic status or sexual orientation."

In response to the report, Bernard Cherkasov, CEO of Equality Illinois, said, "We are devastated by the findings but not surprised that so many of our youths face challenges to their safety in our schools. We have been trying to carry that message to our state and federal lawmakers and throughout the state. At the same time, we are heartened that the Senators requested the report and that the findings support our ongoing struggle in Illinois and in Washington for enhanced protections for all children."

As one remedy, another member of the bipartisan panel, Sen. Al Franken of Minnesota, has proposed the Student Non-Discrimination Act, which has the cosponsorship of Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois and the support of the White House. "My Student Non-Discrimination Act would protect LGBT children from bullying in the same way that kids are already protected from bullying because of their race, gender, disability, and religion," Franken said in a statement.

Sen. Kirk, however, is not one of the 37 Senate cosponsors.

"Equality Illinois appreciates Sen. Kirk's interest in the problem and his expressions of concern, but we cannot rely on the good will of all

states and all local school boards to have in place the right programs and protections for all vulnerable children," Cherkasov said. "Equality Illinois calls on Sen. Kirk to examine the findings of the report and the follow up hearings and get behind federal legislation to give officials the tools they need to stop bullying of our youth."

At the same time, Equality Illinois also calls on state legislators and schools boards to look at the report and see what more can be done at the state and local levels to ensure that our schools are a safe environment for learning.

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