

Gay, Muslim groups relieved by changes to bullying bill

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(RNS) Gay and Muslim groups say they are relieved after a Michigan lawmaker agreed to drop a provision in an anti-bullying bill that would have carved out an exemption for religious or moral beliefs.

State Sen. Rick Jones, a Republican, inserted a carve-out for a "sincerely held religious belief or moral conviction" in the Senate version of the bill. The state House of Representatives' version of the bill did not include the provision.

Jones on Monday (Nov. 14) said he would drop his amendment and vote for the House version after critics said the language could allow gay, Muslim or other minority students to face harassment.

"We are grateful that this legislation moves forward without the license to bully based on an outrageous religious exception, but that said, it won't be effective," said Michael Gregor, a spokesman for Equality Michigan, a gay rights group in Detroit that wants vulnerable groups enumerated in the anti-bullying bill.

Dawud Walid, executive director of the Michigan chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, agreed that enumerations would strengthen the bill but said Muslims were still "relieved" that the Senate bill is likely dead.

"It would have been a disaster," he said.

Michigan is one of three states that do not have an anti-bullying law. The Republican-controlled Senate passed the bill with the amendment on Nov. 2. Following a national firestorm of criticism, the state House passed its version on Nov. 10. Both chambers are on recess until Nov. 29.

Senate Republicans only wanted to protect free speech, Jones said, and never intended to create a religious exception for bullying. Had he foreseen the controversy, Jones said he would have removed the problematic language.

As chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Jones said he would scrap his bill and urge Senate Republicans to vote in favor of the House version when they return from recess.

"I believe we'll get a vote the first week back," Jones said.