

PH Testimony Date: 2/29/08
Bill # RHB-5591
Speaker: Heidi Voight

Good afternoon Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Heidi Voight, and I thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today regarding **HB 5591: An Act Concerning Healthy Teens.**

My perspective on this issue is informed by my experiences over the past five years as a state-certified sexual assault crisis counselor, victim advocate, and community educator. Last year, as Miss Connecticut 2006, I was afforded the rare opportunity to get my foot into the doors of Connecticut's public, private and alternative education schools to talk to students about healthy relationships, sexual violence awareness and prevention, and internet safety. In one year, I was able to directly connect to thousands of Connecticut kids and teens. I didn't "lecture" them- instead, I invited them to engage in a two-way conversation with me about the realities they face every day. I wanted to get my finger on the pulse of Connecticut's youth. What I learned from them often shocked and amazed me.

Here is my field report of unfortunate facts: young people are learning more about sex from Myspace, movies, advertising, and even the glorified and all-too-accessible pornography industry than they are in the classroom. And they are forming their attitudes and values about sexuality- and each other- from these media outlets. These young people are in desperate need of comprehensive sexuality education, and this bill would give schools incentive to provide just that.

Contrary to misguided belief, comprehensive sex ed is not a "free for all" release from responsibility. Quite the opposite. Unlike archaic fear-based abstinence-only education, comprehensive sex ed teaches the unbiased, real-life consequences and effects of every sexual decision. Young people can enjoy unfettered access to age-appropriate information and make informed decisions. Comprehensive sex ed would teach about sexual violence awareness and prevention and healthy relationships. It would empower young girls to appreciate and respect their bodies, leading them to discover a sense of worth that transcends the sexual- therefore reducing the likelihood they'll give in to pressure from peers and the media to have sex before they're ready.

I have lost count of the number of students who have approached me after a presentation to disclose that they, too, had suffered sexual abuse or assault. Many of them expressed that they didn't feel comfortable talking to their educators about it. In the same vein, during my time as a volunteer child life worker in the Yale New Haven Hospital Child Sex Abuse Clinic, I encountered many young children who were clearly suffering sexual abuse, but could not communicate this to us for two reasons: 1) they didn't know the names of their body parts to explain what had happened to them, and 2) some of them didn't even understand that what was happening was wrong. Clearly, these children were not receiving education at school *or* in their homes that could have saved them sooner.

Some children who had been abused were now abusing other children. We can reduce the chances of tragedies like this occurring if we support education that teaches our kids about healthy relationships. A comprehensive sex ed program would help create an environment in which students feel safe to discuss these sensitive issues, giving us more opportunities to break the cycle of sexual abuse.

Perhaps most importantly, comprehensive sex ed helps teenagers form the attitudes, beliefs and values that they will carry into society as adults. One of the main reasons for the perpetuation of sexual violence today lies in outdated education modes

which promote myth over fact. Oftentimes these myths support a victim-blaming culture which shames survivors into silence and self-blame. They imply that young men are powerless to control their sexuality, and that girls are responsible for both attracting unwanted sexual advances- and stopping them. These 3 short passages are taken directly from abstinence-only education materials currently being taught to students in various states:

“Girls need to be aware they may be able to tell when a kiss is leading to something else. The girl may need to put the brakes on first in order to help the boy.”
Reasonable Reasons to Wait, Student Workbook, p. 96¹

“A guy who wants to respect girls is distracted by sexy clothes and remembers her for one thing. Is it fair that guys are turned on by their senses and women by their hearts?”
Sex Respect, Student Workbook, p. 94²

“One thing that sex education and the media fail to communicate is the power of sex. Spies, who are trained not to give away government secrets, even lose their sensibilities and give in to the power of sex, often because of what a woman is wearing.”
WAIT Training, Workshop Manual, p. 86³

If there's one thing I learned from my experiences working in Connecticut's school system, it's that kids are *smart*. Let's not insult their intelligence with outdated, insufficient sex education. HB 5591 would support our educators as they strive to give young people the education to keep themselves healthy and safe. They deserve nothing less than your favorable consideration of this initiative. Thank you for your time.

¹ *Reasonable Reasons to Wait*, (revised 2002-03), written by Maureen Gallagher Duran, distributed by A Choice in Education, Chantilly, VA.

² *Sex Respect, The Option of True Sexual Freedom* (2001 edition), written by Coleen Kelly Mast, distributed by Respect, Inc., Homer Glen, IL.

³ *WAIT (Why AM I Tempted) Training (1998)*, produced by Friends First, Longmont, CO, distributed by Choosing the Best, Inc., Atlanta, GA and by WAIT Training, Smyrna, GA.