



Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, Inc.

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**Testimony of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services
In Support of HB 5489 AN ACT CONCERNING SECONDARY SCHOOL REFORM**
Anna Doroghazi, Director of Public Policy and Communication
Education Committee, March 15, 2010

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee, my name is Anna Doroghazi, and I am the Director of Public Policy and Communication for Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services (CONNSACS). CONNSACS is the statewide association of Connecticut's nine community-based rape crisis programs. We believe that health education could play a valuable role in both preventing sexual violence and helping victims heal, and we therefore strongly support the full credit of health education recommended in HB 5489 AN ACT CONCERNING SECONDARY SCHOOL REFORM.

When health education is missing from public schools, it is not the case that teens remain isolated from messages about their bodies, their health, and their relationships. There are a lot of places where high school students can turn to find inaccurate, misleading, and dangerous information about sex and dating. Teenagers see poor interpersonal behavior modeled on television, celebrated in song lyrics, and replicated amongst their peers. When responsible, caring adults are not forthcoming with the health-related information that teens are seeking, teens simply look to other sources. For some teens, this might mean that they adopt the violent, sexually aggressive attitudes that permeate popular culture. For the 12% of girls¹ and 5% of boys² who experience sexual violence before age eighteen, this might mean that rape and abuse remain their only frame of reference for sexual relations. Both of these scenarios are unacceptable.

HB 5489 would expand Connecticut's high school graduation requirements to include one credit of comprehensive health education. Health education that includes objective, age-appropriate information about sexual assault, dating violence, and interpersonal relationships would give students the opportunity to learn facts about the issues that they already confront on a daily basis. Teenagers between the ages of sixteen and nineteen are three and a half times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault.³ While some of this violence is at the hands of adults, many teens are the victims of their peers: 23% of all sex offenders are under the age of

¹ Schoen, Davis, Collins et al. The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls. New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1997.

² Schoen, Davis, DesRoches et al. The Health of Adolescent Boys: Commonwealth Fund Survey Findings. New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1998.

³ United States. Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics. National Crime Victimization Survey. Washington DC: GPO, 1996.

eighteen.⁴ When adults do not give young people accurate information about the issues that are important to them, they leave them to make highly consequential decisions based on knowledge gleaned from disreputable sources.

One of the goals of education is to prepare students for the demands of a competitive global economy, but this preparation is incomplete if we do not also teach them how to be decent people. Sexual assault can ruin lives, and preventing sexual violence is one of the most important things we as a society can do to ensure that children have a chance at an education and a career. CONNSACS is a proponent of primary prevention, a strategy which aims to prevent sexual assault by addressing oppressive ideas and beliefs before they become violence actions. Health education is an effective form of primary prevention because it gives young men and young women the opportunity to examine unhealthy and potentially dangerous attitudes before those attitudes turn into criminal behaviors.

In addition to preventing future violence, health education can also play an important role in the healing process of those who have already experienced sexual victimization. For teen survivors, health class might be the first place where they learn to identify their experience as abuse. It might be the first time they hear that what happened to them was not their fault. It might be the first time they realize that they are not alone and that help is available. These are lessons that could save lives.

Sexual violence is an unfortunate reality for far too many Connecticut teenagers. Comprehensive health education that includes information about sexual violence and healthy relationships produces two invaluable benefits to students: it gives teen survivors a chance to hear messages that could help them heal, and it could provide potential offenders with the perspective they need to not offend. CONNSACS believes strongly in education and hopes that you will join us in supporting HB 5489 AN ACT CONCERNING SECONDARY SCHOOL REFORM.

Thank you.

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⁴ United States. Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement: Victim, Incident, and Offender Characteristics. Washington DC: GPO, 2000.