

**Testimony for HB 5489:
An Act Concerning Secondary School Reform**

My name is Erin McLeod, and I am the Community Educator for the Rape Crisis Center of Milford, a member program of the Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services. Much of my time is spent working directly with students at the Elementary, Middle and High School levels, and last academic year I was able to do outreach work with over 8,000 students.

It has been my experience working with adolescent and teen populations that much of their information about sex and relationships is acquired through unreliable sources; sources such as friends, older siblings and the media. Young people often do not know what abusive behavior is, or how to stop it. It is my belief that much of this population is misinformed and unprepared to make healthy decisions about sex and relationships.

A mandatory, age appropriate and medically accurate health education program will allow youth to discuss sex in a positive, healthy and safe manner, and will give them the opportunity to receive correct information. It will empower them to know that their body is theirs, enable them to build greater communication skills, to assert themselves, and to identify the difference between healthy and unhealthy sexual interaction and relationships.

It is also my belief that comprehensive health education can help to prevent sexual violence. Last year the Rape Crisis Center of Milford provided victim services to 160 victims of sexual assault that were under the age of 18. In some cases, the perpetrators were teens themselves. Teens have a skewed perception of what behaviors are acceptable and appropriate. I have encountered many teens that are shocked to discover that putting your hands on an intimate part of someone's body without their consent is considered a form of sexual assault by Connecticut State Statute. This is viewed as an acceptable, harmless act by most youth. Comprehensive health education can teach teens about the importance of communication, the meaning of consent, and that it is their right to make decisions about their body, and what happens to their body. They have a right to say no to any unwanted contact.

Furthermore, knowledge and ongoing communication about sex and sexuality that can be provided through this comprehensive health education program has the potential to create an environment where children and teens can be comfortable coming forward and speaking to an adult if they have experienced a form of sexual abuse or violence, with the hope that further abuse can be prevented.

Moreover, there are many teens that may have experienced a form of sexual assault, but due to their lack of information about the laws, and what sexual assault is, have not been able to define their experience as assault. Discussions about sex, consent and boundaries in this type setting

may be the first time that a teen may identify that what happened to them was wrong, and open the door for disclosure. In my own experience, I have been approached by dozens of teens following presentations that I have given in my years providing community education through the Rape Crisis Center of Milford, and am shocked to hear their disclosures about events that prior to that discussion, they never realized classified as a sexual assault.

Knowledge is power, and that fact does not change because the topic is sex. A comprehensive health education program will give children and opportunity to ask questions, obtain accurate information, and better prepare them to build positive, healthy relationships.