

Center for Youth Leadership

Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

Human Services Committee Testimony, March 15, 2011

HB 6588: An Act Concerning Domestic Violence and Child Trauma

Good morning Senator Musto, Representative Tercyak and members of the committee. We have special greetings for Representative Morris, who is from Norwalk, and Representative Flexer, who we know from her work as chair of the Speaker's Task Force on Domestic Violence.

My name is Roberto Ceja and I am from the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk. I am joined by Mary McManus, who is also a member of the Center for Youth Leadership.

On behalf of the 226 student activists at the Center, as well as the 91 activists at our partner program at Stamford High School, we are here to urge you to support HB 6588, An Act Concerning Domestic Violence and Child Trauma. We are particularly interested in Section 3, 10-222d, which redefines bullying to include teen dating violence.

According to the research we have reviewed, as well as conversations we have had with friends and teachers and counselors at school, bullying behaviors tend to decline after middle school. However, that does not necessarily mean that the tendency towards bullying also decreases. Two possible explanations for the decline during the high school years are (1) victims stop reporting the bullying behaviors or (2) the bullying changes form, imitating more extreme behaviors, such as sexual bullying and/or dating violence. While we are concerned about both explanations, we are most concerned with the link between bullying and dating violence.

We started our campaign several years ago and continue with it to this day because dating violence is one of Connecticut's more stubborn public health issues, with demonstrated connections to bullying, school failure, birth control sabotage, drug use, suicide, and adult domestic violence. Our campaign continues because we have promises to keep to teens in Connecticut - the promise of healthy dating relationships; the promise that people my age are taught about bullying and dating violence as part of our health curriculum; the promise that our schools remain free from bullying and dating violence; and the promise that schools adopt a policy and a protocol that responds to incidents on campus, and keeps the general public aware of the incidents.

These promises take on added significance when statistics are cited. For example, people our age who are engaged in bullying behaviors are at greater risk for developing unhealthy romantic

relationships than those who have not bullied others. When compared to their peers, bullies experience more physical and social aggression with their boyfriends or girlfriends, and describe their dating relationships as less emotionally supportive and having less equality.

But here are the stats that spun our heads.. According to the Connecticut Department of Public Health, Connecticut high school students who report being bullied are more likely to miss school because they feel unsafe, carry a weapon to school, and experience dating violence. And of those Connecticut students who report verbal and physical dating violence last year, 30 percent considered suicide; 25 percent made a suicide plan; and 20 percent attempted suicide.

The link between bullying and more aggressive forms of interpersonal dating violence are too clear to ignore. When left unchecked, bullying behaviors may lead to more serious forms of bullying, such sexualized violence and/or dating violence. That's why we urge you to support HB 6588, with the understanding that you will consult HB 1138 before the language of a comprehensive bill is finalized.

We ask that you take in to account (1) the need for safety planning for students; (2) in-service training for all school personnel; (3) policies and protocols that direct school personnel how to respond to incidents on campus; (4) policies that protect any student who makes a report in good faith about a suspected case of bullying or dating violence from unfair discrimination or retaliatory action; and (5) monitoring of school districts' prevention, intervention and response strategies by the State Department of Education.

Thank you very much.

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