

Center for Youth Leadership

Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

Human Services Committee Testimony, March 22, 2011

HB 6053: An Act Concerning Domestic Violence and Child Trauma

Thank you Senator Musto, Representative Tercyak and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify. I have special greetings for Representative Morris, who is from Norwalk, and Representative Flexer, who I 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. Given the similarities in bullying and dating violence behaviors, as well as the strategies to prevent and address both issues, I urge you to support *HB 6053, An Act Concerning Domestic Violence and Child Trauma*. The 226 student activists at the Center for Youth Leadership and the 91 activists at our partner program at Stamford High School are particularly interested in Section 3, 10-222d, which redefines the state's definition of 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. There are two possible explanations for the decline in bullying behaviors during the high school years: (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 more concerned with the link between bullying and dating violence.

We started our public awareness and social change campaigns several years ago 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 campaigns continue 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 my age who are engaged in bullying behaviors are at greater risk for developing unhealthy dating 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, 25 percent of Connecticut high school students - including 35 percent of the state's 9th graders - reported having been bullied or harassed on school property in the past year. 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 is too clear to ignore. The same can be said for the types of prevention and intervention strategies used to address each issue. That's why I urge you to support HB 6053.

As you draft the final language for the bill I ask that you review HB 1138, and consider including the following elements:

- 1. Safety planning for all students;*
- 2. in-service training for all students and school personnel about the link between bullying and teen dating violence behaviors;*
- 3. policy and protocol that direct school personnel to respond to incidents on campus;*
- 4. policy that holds abusers accountable for their actions;*
- 5. policy that protects any student from unfair discrimination or retaliatory action after he/she has made a report in good faith about a suspected case of bullying or dating violence; and*
- 6. monitoring school districts' prevention, intervention and response strategies by the State Department of Education.*

I know schools are asked to do a lot to support our academic, physical and emotional health. Linking teen dating violence and bullying in schools' safety plans will help ensure that those students who experience or witness one or both will graduate with distinction and honor.

Thank you very much.

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