



Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, Inc.

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Testimony of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services
**Regarding SB 24, AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATIONAL
COMPETITIVENESS**

Laura Cordes, Executive Director
Education Committee, February 21, 2012

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and honorable members of the Education Committee, my name is Laura Cordes, and I am the Executive Director of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services (CONNSACS). CONNSACS is the statewide association of Connecticut's nine community-based rape crisis programs. Our mission is to end sexual violence and provide comprehensive, culturally-competent victim services; we believe that comprehensive health education would support us in that work. As the Committee assesses the education reforms outlined in SB 24, *An Act Concerning Educational Competitiveness*, we ask you to consider the value of health and safety education and develop incentive grants for districts that wish to offer such education to its students.

Sexual assault and dating violence have a significant impact on Connecticut students. Research indicates that 12% of girls¹ and 5% of boys² will experience sexual violence before the age of 18, and 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. Although much of this violence is at the hands of adults, many teens are victims of their peers: 23% of all sex offenders are under the age of eighteen,³ and juveniles perpetrate 20% of rapes and 50% of instances of child molestation.⁴ As for dating violence, the most recent Connecticut School Health Survey (2009) found that 22.6% of Connecticut high school seniors were verbally or emotionally abused by a boyfriend or girlfriend during the year leading up to the survey.⁵ The survey also found that during the same time period, 13.1% of high school seniors had been hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by a dating partner.⁶

Both sexual assault and dating violence are linked to negative academic outcomes for students. In addition to missing school as a direct result of abuse, victims are at a higher

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 U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement: Victim, Incident, and Offender Characteristics," (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2000).

⁴ University of Virginia, Institute of Law, Psychiatry, & Public Policy, "Understanding Juvenile Sex Offenders: Research Findings and Guidelines for Effective Management and Treatment," by J. A. Hunter, *Juvenile Justice Fact Sheet* (2000).

⁵ State of Connecticut, Department of Public Health, "2009 Connecticut School Health Survey Youth Behavior Component," (Hartford, 2011)

⁶ *ibid*

risk for substance abuse, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior, and suicide.⁷ All of these behaviors impact school attendance and achievement. Pregnancy, whether it results directly from a sexual assault or from associated coping behaviors, is a leading cause of school dropout among teen girls – in one study, 30% of teen girls cited pregnancy or parenting as a reason for dropping out of high school.⁸

By ensuring that all students receive age-appropriate, comprehensive health education, Connecticut has the opportunity to both prevent violence and improve outcomes for students who have already been exposed to it. Health education that includes objective, age-appropriate information about sexual assault, dating violence, and interpersonal relationships would give students an opportunity to learn facts about the issues that they already confront on a daily basis. For students who have already survived sexual or physical violence, health class could 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, they are not alone, and help is available. These are lessons that could save lives and dramatically improve school performance.

Health education can also provide students with information about how to be responsible, respectful citizens. When health education is absent in public schools, teens turn to disreputable sources for information about their bodies, their health, and their relationships. Teenagers see poor interpersonal behavior modeled on television, celebrated in song lyrics, and replicated amongst their peers. CONNSACS is a proponent of primary prevention, a strategy that aims to prevent sexual violence and other negative behaviors 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 women the opportunity to examine unhealthy and potentially dangerous attitudes about sex and relationships before those attitudes turn into actions.

In 2010, *An Act Concerning Education Reform in Connecticut* (PA 10-111) established new graduation requirements including a half-credit health and safety education requirement. In January of this year, the Connecticut Department of Education released the *Guidelines for the Sexual Health Education Component of Comprehensive Health Education* (CT Guidelines). Connecticut is moving in the right direction when it comes to health education, and it has excellent tools to ensure that students receive the information that they need to stay safe, healthy, and engaged in academic progress. We could, however, do more. Making health education incentive grants available to school districts could give teachers, parents, and other concerned adults an opportunity to receive the training and tools they need to provide students with health and safety education in an age-appropriate, comprehensive manner.

Sexual assault, dating violence, and their associated health implications have a significant impact on Connecticut students. Educational competitiveness goes beyond the classroom

⁷ Jay G. Silverman et al. "Dating Violence Against Adolescent Girls and Associated Substance Use, Unhealthy Weight Control, Sexual Risk Behavior, Pregnancy, and Suicidality." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 286, 572, 576-577, (Nov. 5, 2001).

⁸ Unpublished tabulations by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002/2004, The National Center for Educational Statistics: Washington: DC.

and includes the health, safety, and good citizenship of students. Comprehensive health and safety education will give students the information and tools they need to succeed both in and out of the classroom. As you assess SB 24, *An Act Concerning Educational Competitiveness*, we ask you to consider the creation of incentive grants that would allow districts to provide health and safety education.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me for additional information.

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