

**Center for Youth Leadership
Stamford Youth Services Bureau**

Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

**Connecticut Legislature: Higher Education
and Employment Advancement Committee**
*Testimony in Support of HB 5029:
An Act Concerning Sexual Assault and
Intimate Partner Violence on Campus*

February 11, 2013

Millie Cunningham and Kirsi Balazs

Hi Senator Cassano, Representative Willis and members of the committee. We have a special greeting for Senator Boucher, with whom we have worked on legislation in the past, and Representative Lavielle, who represents our hometown of Norwalk and who has hosted us on previous visits to the general assembly.

My name is Millie Cunningham from the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk and this is Kirsi Balazs from the Mayor's Youth Leadership Council at Stamford High School. On behalf of our 384 members, we are here to testify in support of *HB 5029: An Act Concerning Sexual Assault and Intimate Partner Violence on Campus*.

When we entered high school four years ago we had no idea it would prepare us for harassment and assaults on campus. For example, last year, while leading an activity about dating violence, two of our members - a boy and a girl - walked around school handcuffed to each other. A male teacher stopped them, looked at the girl, and said, "Can I borrow those later and do you come with them?"

We started a project two years ago called *Boots and Leggings* because one of our female members was harassed by a male teacher for her "...too tight leggings and boots that make you look like a whore." He even threatened to take away playing time from her team if she did not change - immediately. So now scores of our female members walk around school on a given day in boots and leggings and a sign that reads - *This outfit does not give you permission to harass me*. Unfortunately, we still have work to do. Two weeks ago a male security guard at one of our schools looked at two of our female members who were wearing the sign and said, "I beg to differ."

And just a couple of months ago a male student at one of our schools was arrested and charged with fourth-degree sexual assault for groping a female student between classes, asking her to perform oral sex on him and shoving his hands down her pants - all at one o'clock in the afternoon in a hallway that is used by hundreds of students during the day. (1)

Yes, these are extreme examples, but they are consistent with the gauntlet of verbal - and some physical - sexual harassment and abuse that many female students at our schools have to navigate on a regular basis. Don't get me wrong; it's not like our schools are out of control. They're not, but there is more than enough harassment to go around, which is why we are working with our boards of education on awareness, prevention and intervention programs similar to those outlined in The New York Times last week (3), and why HB 5029 is so important to us, our friends and our parents.

There are several components of HB 5029 that stand out:

1. We are encouraged by the reporting requirements in the bill. Such reporting is sorely lacking on the high school level. We understand the privacy rules under FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), but basic information about an incident and a school district's response is often missing. For example, parents were never notified about the sexual assault incident that Millie described earlier.

2. We agree with the requirement to provide victims of assault with a clear and concise description of their rights as soon as they report an incident. We are all too familiar with the degree to which high school students are left in the dark

about their rights. School administrators, falling victim to "...well, we first have to conduct an investigation," oftentimes fail to tell students their legal and school district rights in a timely fashion. Right from the start students are disempowered to report incidents of assault. "Sexual assault is a devastating crime that robs victims of their autonomy," said Laura Cordes of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services.⁽³⁾ Teens who have reported incidents told us that they felt re-victimized by their lack of control during the investigation phase; that they were left to wait as others - some of whom did not have their interests in mind - decided how (and if) to proceed with the complaints.

3. We also strongly agree with the option for victims to report an assault anonymously. We have found in our work on dating violence and sexual harassment that this option is critical to getting students to report incidents. Sure, we still have long way to go - to get past a culture of silence and shame and the fear of retribution - but the anonymous option has been a big plus.

4. Finally, as we successfully argued two years ago in support of the state's bullying law, we are in complete agreement with the requirement that universities must report incidents of sexual assault that occur on **and** off campus. We thought some high school parties got way out of hand. Apparently, they are nothing when compared to some of the off campus parties that take place at a lot of colleges. Graduates of our high schools who go off to college have told us countless stories of harassment and assault in on-campus dorms and off campus apartments. As we all know, incidents that occur off campus more often than not find their way into the lives of students on campus. To separate the two is to ignore the obvious, often with serious consequences.

Sexual assault and intimate partner violence on and off campus are important issues for our 384 members, especially those who will attend a college or university in Connecticut. We strongly recommend that you pass HB 5029. Thanks for the opportunity to testify.

NOTES:

1. John Nickerson, "Student Arrested for Sexual Assault," *The Advocate*, February 1, 2014.
2. Michael Winerip, "Stepping Up to Stop Sexual Assault," *New York Times*, February 7, 2014.
3. Kathleen Megan, "Stronger Law on Campus Sexual Assault Sought," *Hartford Courant*, January 30, 2014.

