

From: Faith Colson
Sent: Wed, 9 Jun 2021 15:01:17 -0500
To: T9PublicHearing
Subject: Written Comment: Title IX Public Hearing: Input from a Survivor of Educator Sexual Abuse

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My name is Faith Colson, and I am the survivor of sexual abuse perpetrated by (b)(6). (b)(6) I wanted to share my story to highlight what improvements need to be made to protect the millions of students attending schools in our country.

When I walked across the stage to get my high school diploma, I was ranked 5th in my class of 674. I had been a varsity athlete, had two parents at home, and had lots of friends. But I also was actively being abused by (b)(6). About halfway through the previous year, he had asked me to stay after school one day (b)(6). That turned into inviting me to church, and later, with him being a shoulder to cry on. I remember I went to talk to him during a passing period one day after a classmate called me a mean name. He listened and hugged me—in the supply closet. Later that day, he told me he could smell my deodorant on his shirt. One day after school, he kissed me on the lips. Within a couple of weeks, he had committed criminal sexual assault inside the school building. He told me he was afraid of going to jail. I was 17 years old. We kept the ongoing situation a secret for over a year.

When I was 21, during my junior year of college, I finally realized that I wanted to leave. He continued to call me and even showed up at my apartment one day with (b)(6). I eventually changed my phone number and email. I moved on with life and tried to forget, though I never could. Years later as a mother, I became more aware of the power differential. I realized that he abused me. I made a delayed outcry, pressed charges, and read a statement in court. When the police questioned my perpetrator, he still described the situation as us having been in love. After 13 years of no contact, he admitted to still looking up my family on Facebook occasionally.

It was after the court proceeding was over that I filed a FOIA request for the police case file and found out the details of what coworkers observed. Another coworker heard him say that he wished he could hook up with a student, and that was seven years before (b)(6). Five employees remember rumors of him being with a student, and that is after about 15 years had passed. Two coworkers remember that he repeatedly made lewd comments about female students' bodies. He only was caught and then resigned after he admitted having sex with me to his therapist after I turned 18. There were no criminal charges until I made the delayed outcry at age 34. I have since learned of other survivors by other perpetrators who began to be abused as teenagers and weren't able to walk away until they were in their 20s. Some never recover and are no longer here to tell their story because they have taken their own life.

It's estimated that 1 in 10 students will experience sexual misconduct by school personnel by the time they graduate high school. This ruins people's lives. It robs their innocence and steals their future. Coworkers worry about being wrong if they report on a colleague instead of the lives of students that will be forever tainted or ended if they don't report. I share my story on behalf of those survivors who are no longer here to tell theirs. I ask that in their honor and for the sake of countless children who could follow, that we prioritize the following initiatives:

1. Criminalize all sexual conduct/contact/penetration between teachers and students (up through high school). Students enter high school as minors, the school serves "in loco parentis", and turning 18 does not change the power dynamic. All other protections hinge on defining this sexual contact as unlawful.
2. Require codes of conduct that define and prohibit boundary-violating behaviors. My perpetrator displayed these for years, but no one reported them. Unfortunately, the behaviors they did see were indicative of the abuse they did not see, and this lack of defined prohibitions allowed a dangerous perpetrator to retain a classroom with unsupervised access to vulnerable youth.
3. Assure that training and policies within schools include descriptions and prohibitions of grooming behavior to adequately equip bystander educators to report and stop perpetrators. Title IX policies and training should coincide with mandated reporter training toward this end. Most teachers would never abuse a student, but the general ignorance about these grooming, unprofessional behaviors allows perpetrators to continue to groom and abuse children.
4. Strengthen laws to prohibit passing the trash, where a school allows a teacher to resign over misconduct but then does not share that information with future districts. New districts should be required to ask old districts about any misconduct (or empowered to find this information through a funded database), and old districts need to have immunity to share this information. Otherwise, repeat offenders continue to have unsuspecting prey. School administrators need to have all of the information about any potential dangers so they can assure a safe learning environment.

My life has been put back together, but many victims never recover because they are ignored, blamed, or not believed. I have been working with Illinois State Representative Michelle Mussman to pass HB 1975, Faith's Law. We passed the House unanimously but failed to get a hearing in the Senate. I will continue to raise awareness about this issue in the state where I was abused to assure that I have done what is in my power to prevent other students from suffering my fate. Illinois did successfully pass HB 3461, which updates and strengthens Erin's Law. Jenna Quinn is another survivor who has passed legislation in Texas (where I now live), and her federal law is another measure that could help.

Thank you for considering these measures in an effort to keep our children safe.

Sincerely,

Faith Colson, of Faith's Law

