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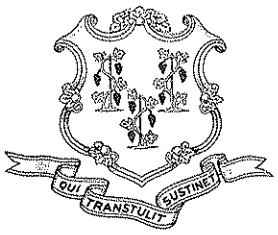

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Raised Bill 456: An Act Concerning Student Athletes and Concussions

Joint Committee on Education

March 17, 2010

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Raised Bill 456, ***AN ACT CONCERNING STUDENT ATHLETES AND CONCUSSIONS***. This bill will address a very serious issue affecting both the short and long term health of the more than one hundred thousand student athletes participating in scholastic youth sports each year here in Connecticut.

First, we need to recognize how often student athletes suffer concussions. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than 3.5 million sports-related concussions occur each year in the United States. Researchers at the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio (the "Center") estimate that high school student athletes suffered almost 400,000 concussions between 2005 and 2008. According to those researchers, concussions were the second most common injury among high school student athletes during the 2008-09 school year, behind only ankle strains and sprains.

It is also important to recognize that concussions for high school athletes are not confined to football. According to the Center, while the majority of those 400,000 concussions were in football, there is a very similar *incidence* of concussions in girls' soccer, boys' soccer, girls' basketball and wrestling. That is, when concussions are viewed as a percentage of injuries in each sport, those other sports pose a very similar danger of concussions to our student athletes.

It has been theorized that children, including those in high school, are at a higher risk of sustaining a concussion than adults. Perhaps, this is in part because their neck muscles are

less developed, giving them less control of their heads when sustaining a hit. Research has also shown that the young developing brains of a child are slower to heal from a concussion than an adult.

Moreover, it seems clear that repeat concussions are extremely dangerous, especially when there is less time between them. The following warning about repeat concussions comes from an issue of the University of Virginia School of Medicine's "Neurogram Newsletter":

> "there is no debate that repeat concussions significantly worsen long-term outcomes. After athletes sustain one concussion, they are three times more likely to sustain a second concussion compared to other players who have not been concussed. Repeat concussions, even when mild, can increase the risk of post-concussive symptoms (PCS) such as headaches, memory loss, difficulty concentrating, etc. Chances of PCS are even more increased if the second injury occurs too soon, before recovery from the first has taken place. The higher the rate of concussions, the higher the risk of long-term cognitive dysfunction."

Given this alarming information, logic would dictate that a student athlete who may have suffered a concussion be treated extremely conservatively. However, the researchers from Ohio also report some highly alarming national statistics: according to them, **40.5% of high school athletes who suffer concussions return to play before it is safe to do so.** Shockingly, this includes 16% of all football players who sustained a concussion severe enough to cause loss of consciousness and returned to play *the same day.*

These are not Connecticut-specific statistics, and it must be noted that our school coaches, and the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Association (the "CIAC"), have long been at the forefront of progressive national policy to ensure that our coaches are the best trained in the country and our athletes the best cared for. Years ago, the CIAC led the fight to institute a requirement of 45 hours of training for a Connecticut Coaching Permit, and an additional 15 hours of training every 5 years for renewal of that permit. The dedication to the safety of our student athletes by the CIAC, the Connecticut High School Coaches Association, the Connecticut Athletic Directors Association and others has never been more evident than throughout the process of crafting the proposed legislation before you today. All were profoundly helpful, and all are here to support the bill today.

In fact, the "when in doubt, sit them out" protections of Bill 456 actually mirror policies that have already recently been adopted by the CIAC, in their rules. This bill gives those rules and protections the force of law, and also extends them to grades below the high school level, to our even more vulnerable, younger student athletes.

Now, to the provisions of the bill. The bill mandates that all Connecticut school coaches:

- must undergo an intensive in person training on concussions before the start of their 2010-2011 school year seasons;
- must annually review information on concussions;
- must take an in-person refresher course on concussions every 5 years, in order to renew their permits;
- shall not allow a student athlete that exhibits either signs, symptoms, or behaviors consistent with a concussion to return to any exertional team activities until they receive written clearance to do so from a licensed health care professional; and
- shall not allow such student athlete to return to a full, unrestricted practice, game or competition until specific written clearance is given for that advanced level of activity.

Moreover, the bill pertains to students and coaches in every grade level, not just high school. Finally, it authorizes MDs, DOs, APRNs, PAs, and Certified Athletic Trainers to provide the required written clearances.

I urge you to support this critical piece of legislation. Thank you.