

To the Stonington High School Administrators, the Board of Education, and anyone else this may concern,

My name is Alexandra Kapell and I am a current senior at Stonington High School. I am writing to you as a concerned student, as Student Government President, and as an active member of our community on behalf of other affected students. I have spent the past year as the student member of the Board of Education and have worked first hand with administrators and board members involving the investigation into Timothy Chokas. The manner in which I have seen Stonington High School handle sexual assault and harrasment allegations, both in regard to Timothy Chokas and beyond, is quite frankly appalling. It would be irresponsible to graduate without making this clear; throughout my time at Stonington our school's problem with harassment and assault has gotten worse and our culture and responses must change.

Earlier this year I was asked to participate in a small group that worked directly with the administration to uncover problems within our school as a response to Mr. Chokas being let go. One of the recurring questions that was brought up was "Why do students feel uncomfortable coming forward with their complaints?" For a student, this answer is obvious. There is immense distrust in the administration.

Each year at the beginning of the school year every single student attends an assembly in which a police officer talks to the student body about child pornography. Each year that particular police officer makes comments that imply victim blaming. While not always overt, the commentary made at those assemblies made hundreds of young people feel uncomfortable. The comments always had the same message, if a girl does not send a photo, there will be no trouble. However, if she does then she will no longer be seen as a "Sweet little girl" and she is equally to blame as a boy who may then distribute that photo. This mindset and these repetitive assemblies

deeply damage young girls' trust in our school and deter them from coming forward. When friends and I complained to our guidance department that these assemblies made us feel uncomfortable and that we believed they sent the wrong message to our student body, we were told that this is just how it is and that the officer speaking was not wrong. Our school administration was perpetuating a culture that blames girls for harassment and assault while giving boys a free pass.

Now, this may sound like an oversimplification or an exaggeration. However, in my time at Stonington High School alone I watched young girls during my freshman year have their reputations destroyed because boys distributed their nude photos without repercussion. I watched them become traumatized as coming to school and dealing with the police was a nightmare, all while the boys walked away from the incident as if nothing happened. My junior year I watched boys in the grade below me distribute more nude photos of unsuspecting girls with, again, no known repercussions. Lastly, I watched my own classmate distribute photos of girls in my grade. If you still find yourself blaming the girls for sending these photos, please note that in the last instance the student falsely labeled nude photos he found on the internet as his fellow classmates and distributed them as such. The problem does not lie within what women choose to do with their body, it lies in how men choose to disrespect them. In the last instance, the boy in question was out of school for a few months and then allowed back as if nothing had happened. He participated in sports, was in all of his normal classes, and was able to resume life as normal. At what cost? The cost of every girl affected seeing him in the hallway on a daily basis and being re-traumatized. The cost of every girl, and boy, on the track team being made to feel extremely uncomfortable. Lastly, the cost of teaching both him, and other young boys in our school, that they were free to act this way with no repercussions, arguably the most dangerous consequence

of all. If this was not enough, this student along with another young man who had a police investigation into an assault case, were given awards on the Senior Awards Night. One was revoked, and one was not. Following the revocation of the first award, it was explained that coaches and teachers nominate students and that they meant no harm, perhaps simply forgetting about that student's past. Ultimately, the issue is that it is possible for the adults we trust to forget what these students have done while the young women affected will never have this luxury. The bottom line is these awards should have never been given to begin with.

Stonington High School has a massive problem with sexual assault and harassment. The culture here emboldens predators to act and often discourages young girls who report. To my knowledge, there are little to no resources readily available to students who may be victims of assault despite students asking the administration to provide said resources. Publishing and advertising resources would be the first step in creating a school environment where every student has a safe space to report something that happened to them, not only those who already have close relationships with administration or teachers. These resources could look like an assembly on what consent truly is or having a social worker available equipped to deal with these specific situations. As a community, and as a school, we have a responsibility to support survivors of harassment and assault. We must actively work to cultivate an environment where this is possible.

It cannot go without saying that Stonington High School has strong leaders and good individuals who may work to create safe spaces for students of their own. However, this must be the overwhelming truth for everywhere in Stonington High, not just certain teachers' classrooms.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Alexandra Kapell

