



Decriminalization of teacher/student sexual activity is not the answer.

Last Friday, the Washington Post ran a [controversial opinion piece](#) written by a former attorney named Betsy Karasik. In the piece, Ms. Karasik argued that some incidents of sexual activity should not be considered a criminal act. As a reaction to this column, MaleSurvivor Executive Director Christopher Anderson collaborated with the partners listed below to draft a response that was sent to the Washington Post in hopes that our response would be given equal space.

Today, the Post agreed to run a [part of this letter](#) under Chris' name. Below is the full text of the letter along with all the signers.

Please share this full version. It is important that the message be heard.

September 6, 2013

We, the undersigned, emphatically disagree with Betsy Karasik that student/teacher sex should be decriminalized. We also express in the strongest measure our disappointment with the Washington Post for giving her a national platform -- remarkably, just one day after issuing an editorial strongly rebuking a Montana judge for his unacceptable comments and inappropriately lenient sentencing of a then 49-year-old teacher convicted of raping a 14 year old student.

Sexual activity between teachers and students is a profound ethical violation. The authority placed in teachers, coaches, counselors, or other instructors creates an inescapable responsibility to maintain appropriate behavioral boundaries. When that line is crossed, the power differential between teacher and student creates an abusive betrayal of the trust placed in the teacher by the student and the community. A student's willingness to engage in a sexual liaison with a teacher cannot eradicate this truth. As Dr. Richard Gartner, a pioneer in the treatment of men sexually abused as boys, has written, "Even seemingly consensual situations may turn out to have long term negative effects.... There's no way for an adult to know whether a particular child -- even if he seems happy to participate -- will be affected negatively by taking part in sex acts. And the very last person we can expect to

be objective about the needs and best interests of a child is the adult who sexually desires that child."

The high levels of sexual abuse of children and teens in our society are further evidence for the need for stronger prohibitions, not weaker ones. Decades of research indicate that at least 10% and perhaps more than 20% of all persons under the age 18 are sexually abused. In addition, overwhelming evidence makes clear that many victims suffer significant long-term emotional harm in these cases. Suggesting that legal sanctions are unwarranted based upon a small sample of self-selected anecdotes is both intellectually irresponsible and a needlessly cruel insult to millions of people who were sexually abused as children.

Criminalizing sexual activity between age-appropriate, truly consenting people is not a good idea. Yet the prevalence of abuse and the significant risk to students' long-term health and well being necessitates that clear legal boundaries be drawn and enforced between teachers and students. Stronger enforcement of professional and legal sanctions against teachers who violate these boundaries is required. Importantly, better enforcement does not imply that draconian punishments are required for all offenders.

A great deal of evidence indicates that decriminalization would lead to more students being sexually exploited, abused and harmed. Decriminalization would wrongly signal to many, including potential abusive teachers and student victims, that teacher/student sexual encounters are not harmful. It would also effectively empower perpetrators of sexual abuse, and make it more difficult for many victims to get support. Ms. Karasik is right to be concerned about the stigma and pressures victims face in the legal system, but decriminalization is not a solution to those problems, and certainly would not provide the support that all victims of sexual exploitation and violence deserve.

Signed,

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