

Statement of Jonathan Costello to Westport Board of Education
January 16, 2025

Please bear with me as I have a stutter. My name is Jonathan Costello, and I am a Senior and three-year Varsity Soccer player at Staples. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak tonight.

On October 24th 2024—the day before my 18th birthday—someone anonymously tipped off the AD to an assault that I suffered at a team retreat in August by the coaches. On that day the AD asked me what happened at the retreat. I told the truth. It is my understanding that the truth was corroborated by another student witness. Ultimately, the school suspended the coaches for the season but did not tell the soccer community why.

I want to make this *very* clear: neither my parents nor I were the source of the anonymous tip. When asked about the retreat incident, I told the truth as did another player. The administration decided—*not us*—to suspend those coaches. After the coaches were suspended, rumor mills in the community started. As a result of vicious and false rumors, my parents and I have been accused of entitlement and overreach in the court of public opinion when the plain fact is that all we did was tell the truth.

The school left people guessing why the coaches were suspended and the rumors started. Weeks after the coaches were suspended, they were invited to the end-of-season soccer banquet. Knowing they were invited, I made the painful choice not to attend my senior banquet because I did not feel it was safe. The rumors increased due to my absence, and I have been met with suspicion, false accusations, and blame.

As a result of what occurred and is still occurring, my life here is destroyed. I'm not saying that to be dramatic. Since October, I have endured everything that every high schooler seeks to avoid. Bullying. Shunning. Isolation. Not only at school but in the public forum. Think about that. *Three months*. For three whole months, almost no one talks to me inside or outside of school. I am labeled selfish and entitled for the sin of telling the truth. Meanwhile, I just wanted to play soccer. And I have struggled to figure out how to play the game I love in the face of psycho-emotional torment from a head coach, as well as an incident of physical assault by an assistant coach. Many of my teammates have also endured a lot of pain and don't speak up out of fear of retaliation.

In the days following the anonymous tip to the AD, my parents were told that we would be contacted for a statement of facts, but we never were. So, one month later – on November 26th – my parents submitted a letter to the school administration memorializing what happened to me at the retreat, as well as other troubling experiences I had over three years on the varsity team. We are still—on January 16th—waiting for the administration to respond. No student should have to bear the daily humiliation I do. No student should be ignored by the school that is meant to teach and protect him. And for sure, no student should have to read online hurtful articles and endless comments from grownups in this community that mock me, my parents, and our integrity, despite not knowing the facts.

I have suffered socially. I have lost most of my friends. I suffer academically. My life here has been mostly taken from me right when I should be enjoying it most—my senior year—before heading off to college to play soccer at my dream school. Why? For telling the truth about the abuse to the administration when they called me into their office. I can't imagine that the reasonable people on this Board of Education are okay with this. What message is Staples sending to other students who are bullied, ostracized, shunned, and discounted for telling the truth when questioned about

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abuse? The district is aware of how I am being treated, and what is happening to my family, yet they allow the vicious rumors to continue hurting me and my family more and more every day.

This district says it cares about kids and their safety first, yet the silence on this matter has jeopardized *my* safety. The lack of transparency has caused otherwise reasonable people in our community to draw their own sordid, accusatory, self-serving conclusions, without knowing the facts. Our AD goes on social media to talk about the importance of our mental health, yet this administration is actively compromising mine. They've refused simply to clear my name by sharing the facts behind their decision to suspend the coaches.

On October 24th, I was not yet ready to report the abuse that happened to me. All I wanted to do was get through the season. What has happened to me since is exactly why I was afraid to come forward in the first place. I watched my friends and teammates face public ridicule and judgement the last time this head coach was investigated for wrongdoing against them in 2022. Someone else reported my abuse and because no information was released about the circumstances of the coaches' suspension, I have been blamed for their departure. For all I know, other teammates may have come forward with their stories, I was not the only player who was the object of misconduct on this team. The truth is that if the coaches are in fact no longer with the program it is because of *their* actions. The school's failure to make that abundantly clear has directly caused me and my family unending, meaningful harm. I need it to stop.

I am asking this Board of Education, Administration, Staples, and this community to do the right thing.

I have made copies of my statement and would like to give each member of the Board of Education one. Thank you again for your time.