



H.B. 377: Sexual Abuse Prevention in Schools
Testimony to the Ohio House Education and Career Readiness Committee

Submitted by Becky Perkins, Communications Director

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Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Slaby, Ranking Member Fedor, and Members of the Ohio House Education and Career Readiness Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of House Bill 377. My name is Becky Perkins and I am the Communications Director with the Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence, or OAESV. As Ohio's statewide coalition, OAESV advocates for comprehensive responses and rape crisis services for survivors and empowers communities to prevent sexual violence.

One in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before their 18th birthday. Each year in Ohio, over 5,000 reports of child sexual abuse are substantiated; however, this number represents only a small fraction of the actual incidents of sexual abuse in our state, as approximately 62% of children never tell anyone about the crimes against them.

While some children have obvious physical indications of sexual abuse, most do not. Further problematic for detection, the majority of child victims are abused by someone they know – an adult whom the child trusts, depends on for care, support, or guidance, or even someone the child loves. Child victims are typically groomed by their perpetrators and made to feel that the abuse is their fault and that they deserved it. Some children are made to feel that the abuse is not abuse at all – that it's normal, healthy behavior between an adult and child. As a result, child victims very often feel too confused or ashamed to tell anyone, they feel that no one will believe them, or they fear getting in trouble or causing turmoil by telling.

The impact of child sexual abuse is significant and far-reaching. When compared with children who do not suffer sexual abuse, those who do are more likely to develop depression and anxiety, experience academic difficulties, develop behavioral problems, engage in sexualized behavior, and abuse drugs as they progress through childhood and adolescence. Adults who were sexually abused as children are more likely to develop mental health issues, abuse drugs, experience chronic health conditions, and become involved in crime – both as a perpetrator and a victim.

Economically, the impact of child sexual abuse is staggering. The estimated lifetime cost is at least \$210,000 per victim – comparable to the per-person cost of stroke and diabetes.

Despite these sobering statistics, we know that sexual abuse is preventable. By mandating instruction in child sexual abuse prevention for all Ohio schoolchildren from Kindergarten through sixth grade, we as a state can have a tremendous impact on the epidemic of child sexual abuse. Additionally, by including sexual violence prevention in programming provided to students in grades seven through twelve, we will empower adolescent students to better recognize rape and sexual abuse whether the violence occurs within a dating relationship or not. Finally, requiring in-service training for teachers on child sexual abuse prevention will further empower Ohio's dedicated educators in helping to recognize and stop sexual abuse.

H.B. 377 is a step forward in preventing and better responding to the sexual abuse of Ohio's children, and I applaud the sponsors and co-sponsors of this bill for recognizing the need for it. I have the privilege of coordinating OAESV's Survivor Advisory Council, made up of 15 adult survivors of sexual assault and child sexual abuse, who have identified requiring sexual violence prevention education in K-12 schools as a priority for Ohio.

OAESV is pleased to see that H.B. 377 requires the Ohio Department of Education to provide links to free curricula addressing sexual violence prevention. It is critically important that the education provided to schoolchildren on sexual abuse prevention is not just age-appropriate, but also evidence-based. Our hope is that the Department of Education will collaborate with experts on sexual abuse prevention, such as rape crisis centers and child advocacy centers, in determining the best curricula for schools and the best methods for delivering it.

OAESV continues to work with Ohio's college campuses and the Ohio Department of Higher Education to improve the prevention of and response to campus sexual assault. We have heard repeatedly from Ohio's institutions of higher education that we as a state must invest resources in preventing sexual violence at a much younger age. We cannot wait until high school or college to empower students to recognize sexual assault and abuse.

Finally, OAESV recommends that parents and caregivers of Ohio's schoolchildren have the opportunity to receive education on preventing and responding to sexual abuse. While it's critically important that we empower children with information and tools to recognize abuse, children are not responsible for stopping sexual abuse – adults are. Teachers are often a lifeline for students and should have the knowledge to recognize abuse and intervene, but they are not the only adults in the child's life. As we all know, any type of instruction in school is more effective if it is reinforced by responsible adults who are involved in the child's life outside of school. If we are providing training to teachers and education to students about preventing sexual abuse, it makes sense to provide the opportunity for parents, guardians, and caregivers to receive education as well.

Schools throughout Ohio are now routinely holding active shooter drills to prepare students of all ages for the thankfully slim possibility of an armed intruder entering their classrooms. If we can prepare students for something so scary that they are unlikely to experience, surely we can

prepare these same students for how to recognize and respond to the much more likely possibility of experiencing sexual abuse. Through H.B. 377, we have the ability to better protect Ohio's schoolchildren from one of the greatest threats to their health, safety, and well-being.

The Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence is available for additional questions regarding H.B. 377.

Thank you.