

October 15, 2019
Ohio House Health Committee
Proponent Testimony HB 321
Age Appropriate Child Sexual Abuse Instruction
Submitted by: Becky Perkins

Chair Lipps, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Boyd, and Members of the Ohio House Health Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB 321, also known as “Erin’s Law.” Thank you to Chair Lipps for introducing this important and much-needed bill, along with co-sponsor, Representative Brigid Kelly. My name is Becky Perkins, and I have worked in various capacities within the rape crisis field over the past several years. During my time with the Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence’s Survivor Advisory Council, I became of Erin’s Law, identified the ways in which it could have stopped the sexual abuse perpetrated against so many of the survivors I ended up serving, and made it a priority to lend my support.

As the committee is aware, HB 321 would require K-12 schools in Ohio to provide age-appropriate sexual abuse education to children in grades K-6, and to add sexual violence to topics already covered in dating violence education in grades 7-12. The bill would further require schools to provide training to teachers on sexual abuse prevention, as part of their in-service training. The onus for this bill is the fact that as many as 1 in 4 girls, and 1 in 6 boys, experience sexual abuse prior to their 18th birthday. Additionally, it is estimated that as few as 38% of children disclose the abuse. What this means is that child sexual abuse is a significant, ongoing problem nationally and in Ohio, and it is a devastating crime that we as adults are responsible for addressing and preventing.

The impact of child sexual abuse is staggering. Children who are sexually abused are more likely than children who are not to experience anxiety, depression, behavioral problems, delinquency, academic problems, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide attempts, and hyper-sexualized behavior. Adults who were sexually abused as children are more likely than those who were not to experience mental health issues, substance abuse, chronic health conditions, eating disorders, reduced productivity, and diminished quality of life. The estimated lifetime burden of child sexual abuse is at least \$210,000 per victim, which is comparable to the per-patient cost of stroke or Type 2 Diabetes. This includes costs related to medical and mental health care, criminal justice response, and lost productivity that occurs as a result of experiencing sexual abuse.

I know the committee agrees that child sexual abuse is a horrendous crime that no child deserves to suffer, and that we as adults have a moral and ethical obligation to effectively prevent and respond to it as best we can. At least 37 other states agree as well and have enacted Erin’s Law. I would therefore like to address potential concerns committee members may have about the approach to child sexual abuse instruction proposed in HB 321, based on concerns that were voiced regarding prior iterations of the bill in past legislative sessions.

First, some have expressed concern that HB 321 would add another unfunded mandate to schools, forcing teachers to take even more time away from academic instruction. I appreciate this concern; however, the reality of child sexual abuse is that it prevents children and youth from reaching their full potential in the classroom and beyond. Traumatic experiences, especially chronic trauma, negatively affect a child's ability to concentrate and perform competently in school. Further, schools need not reinvent the wheel to meet the requirements of HB 321. The bill states that the Department of Education will provide access to free curricula on its website. There are also numerous organizations throughout Ohio – notably rape crisis centers and children's advocacy centers – that have the expertise to provide effective, accurate, and age-appropriate education to students and staff. Professionals from these organizations can provide the in-class education directly, alleviating this burden for teachers and school administrators.

Secondly, some legislators have expressed concern that a topic as sensitive as sexual abuse should be discussed at home, not in school. Unfortunately, sexual abuse is not discussed at all in most homes. And sadly, children are far more likely to be abused by someone they know, trust, and even love – including, often, a trusted adult or older child in the home. School is the only place that the majority of children always go outside of their home, and it may be the only place that they receive information that can protect them from abuse or that can help them to understand and verbalize abuse if they've been victimized. Schools have recently incorporated other topics into their classroom instruction that one could argue should ideally be taught to kids by their parents, such as how to create a budget. Child sexual abuse is not a new problem. It's not a partisan topic to be avoided. It's a crime that harms children and affects every one of our communities. Sexual abuse is a crime that thrives in silence and secrecy. We can't afford a "behind closed doors" approach to it any longer.

Lastly, some adults believe that discussing sexual violence with teens is unnecessary, and that discussing sexual abuse with children will frighten or confuse them. Regarding teens, trust me (as a mother of a teenager) that teens are regularly bombarded with images and messages about sex and violence from a variety of sources, most of which are inaccurate at best and dangerously misleading at worst. The current dating violence education that teens receive does not adequately address the very real occurrence of sexual violence, and it absolutely should, if for no other reason than sexual assault is very often part of dating violence. Regarding younger children, HB 321 proposes age-appropriate education, which means that it will be presented in a way that children are able to understand, and it will be focused on arming children with knowledge and skills that will empower them, not scare them. Children who are provided with age-appropriate, accurate information about their bodies, signs of abusive behavior, and skills and resources for vocalizing if or when they experience such behavior, are less likely to suffer ongoing abuse, or to suffer long-term from the trauma of past abuse.

HB 321 would allow parents to excuse their children from class when information about sexual abuse is presented, which I believe is a potentially harmful provision of the bill. Parents who are abusing their children, or know that abuse is happening in the home, would likely choose to excuse their children from school when this information is presented; yet, clearly these children need this information. I'd ask the committee to consider the reality that schools are now routinely conducting active shooter drills. Not only are some of these drills conducted without the knowledge of parents, but the drills themselves are frightening, confusing, and even traumatizing for some students. One school went so far as to use

real guns with blank shots being fired in order to closely simulate an authentic active shooting situation. In my daughter's school, a recent drill involved the principal posing as the shooter slamming together two blocks of wood to mimic the "pop pop" sound of gunfire and telling a child who did not respond appropriately that he "would be dead if this was real." At the same time, the students were told not to throw objects at the principal, even though that is what they are supposed to do if confronted with a shooter. Meanwhile, teachers in other parts of the building urged children to run down the hall and out the door as fast as they could – things that every other minute of every other day, they are instructed *not* to do. I can't imagine a method of any kind of prevention education being more frightening or confusing than this. Although shootings of all kinds have become much too common in our society, school shootings are still (thankfully) rare. Child sexual abuse, unfortunately, is not rare at all. Very few classrooms in Ohio contain students who have experienced a school shooting, but every single classroom in Ohio contains at least one child – and likely several – who have experienced sexual abuse. It's important that we work to prevent not just the rare tragedy that will hopefully never occur, but also the tragedy that's happening to far too many children from every school district right now.

In considering the merits of HB 321, I would ask the committee to be mindful of the way "prevention" is characterized when children are the victims or potential victims of sexual abuse. Children are not responsible for preventing or stopping sexual abuse. The blame for sexual abuse always lies with the abuser, and it is solely the responsibility of adults to stop abuse when we know about it and to reduce or eliminate the conditions that allow sexual abuse to occur in the first place. HB 321 seeks to empower children and teens with accurate information about sexual abuse and sexual violence – not to shift responsibility onto their shoulders, but to empower them with tools to recognize and verbalize abusive behavior when adults can't be their eyes and ears. Additionally, although not part of HB 321, I would encourage school districts, rape crisis centers, children's advocacy centers, and others to partner together to expand the discussion about child sexual abuse to the larger community. As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child, and it also takes a village to protect and heal children.

In closing, I would like to share with the committee that I was raped by a neighbor when I was a school-aged child. Sexual abuse was certainly not talked about in school at that time, and unfortunately it was not talked about in my home. I had loving parents and we lived in a quiet rural community that was considered safe and a great place for kids to grow up. But because I had no knowledge about abusive behavior, I had no way of understanding or describing what I had experienced. My abuser made me believe that it was my fault and that my life would be worse if I told anyone, so I remained quiet for the next 13 years. Had I received education about sexual abuse in school prior to the assault, I likely would have been able to recognize the "grooming" behavior of my attacker before any violence occurred. And had the rape still happened, I might have been more likely to understand that it was a crime that was not my fault and to tell someone – avoiding years of silent suffering. Although I am a strong, healthy woman today, it took many years and thousands of dollars in psychological counseling to get here. As the mother of a teenaged girl, I struggle with anxiety about her safety despite my efforts to empower her with knowledge I didn't have at her age. I am one of the lucky ones. So many survivors of rape and sexual abuse struggle with addiction or debilitating physical, mental, emotional, social, and economic problems that stem directly from the abuse they suffered.

We can do something about all of this. We can protect and empower children and youth, and we can stop sexual abuse. I urge the committee to pass HB 321 because it's effective and because Ohio's children are worth it. Thank you for your time and consideration.