

May 20, 2020
Ohio House Primary and Secondary Education Testimony
HB 321 Age Appropriate Child Sexual Abuse Instruction
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Good Afternoon,

I would like to start by thanking Representative Kelly and Lipps for sponsoring this bill and the committee for hearing my testimony today in support of the its passage. I would also like to thank my sister for helping me develop and edit my testimony. I will primarily be speaking to the 7-12th grade sexual violence prevention provision which, if passed, will be a step in the right direction in our efforts to protect Ohio's youth, and especially girls which are the primary targets of sexual harassment and violence as teens and young adults .

Harmful gender dynamics are formed in childhood when we see men and boys on tv and in the media portrayed as pursuers of women, the most audacious and persistent of which being the most successful. The more successful they are with women, the cooler they are amongst their peers. This leads many adolescent boys to feel comfortable, even compelled, to push the boundaries of the girls around them and to become deaf to the word "no". Girls are conversely led to believe that their boundaries only exist as hurdle for men to jump to prove their dedication and love. These beliefs lead to a common issue for adolescent girls that is rarely talked about or taken seriously, especially in a school setting.

I myself have been in a battle over my body since boys were old enough to take interest in me. I began learning how to protect myself from sexual assault by my early teens. Not in the safety of a classroom with the reliable instruction of a teacher, but in the school hallways between periods and on the streets of my neighborhood, and I was unprepared. My male classmates would grab at the girls by their lockers like it was some sort of game, and leaving school did not end the harassment. At the bus stop, neighborhood kids would touch my not yet hardly developed breasts without permission continuing as we walked home. Once they followed me all the way to my door. They innocently called this form of sexual harassment "bean dipping," and it was the only vocabulary I had to describe what was happening to me. I did not realize it was sexual harassment because of the lack of education surrounding sexual violence for young kids like me at the time. The solution was to always walk home with my bustier friend to divert the unwanted touching. I did not know how to talk about it or with who. I was alone, isolated by lack of understanding.

These advances did not stop in high school. They evolved, forcing us to fight, largely in silence, for control over our own bodies. Just after I graduated high school, I was raped by a peer at a social gathering. Again, I had no idea what to do or who to talk to, especially because drugs and alcohol were involved. I felt as if that detail would overshadow the rape if I talked to an adult, so instead, I reached out to friends who were at the gathering. My friends, who were all male, responded to me with statements like "you asked to play hide and seek with him. That is what hide and seek means" and uncomfortable dismissals. This is despite the fact that they made fun of me beforehand for being so impaired that I needing to be "wounded warriored" around by my assailant.

To date, I cannot even count the number of times that my body or the body of my friends and family members have been violated. The assaults that I have mentioned here today, have been some of the least graphic that I have gone through, but I will spare you all the details. This is an issue that is widespread, and it is not new. In fact, I was raped again in between the time that this bill was proposed last summer and this meeting today. While I am excited about the progress that this bill represents, I am disappointed that it is 2020, and these issues are just now being addressed.

To preserve my faith in humanity, I have to believe that if these perpetrators received comprehensive sexual violence prevention and consent education, most would have respected my right to bodily autonomy and witnesses would have stuck up for me when I needed it. If I had the education proposed in this bill, maybe I would have been able to respond more quickly and effectively, rather than trying to deal with the trauma on my own, completely without support. When we deal with sexual violence in this way, we risk developing unhealthy coping mechanisms and diminished self-worth, as well as internalizing that personal boundaries do not matter, which can worsen the impact these assaults have on our lives.

I want to be clear, I wish I had been more prepared to deal with the violence I faced, but I wish even more that the boys who violated my body had been educated about the harm they were doing. Becky Perkins cautioned in her testimony in an earlier hearing to be mindful of the way the term 'prevention' is characterized as children are not responsible for preventing abuse. I want to reiterate this point and add that the people who are best able to prevent sexual violence are the people perpetrating it, which are often our classmates. For these reasons, I would advise that language be included to cover consent education among the specific instructions for grades 7-12.

Looking back on all of these incidents from junior high to the present, it is apparent to me that most of the sexual violence experienced by my loved ones and me could have been prevented if the boys in our lives had understood their critical role in preventing sexual violence. Not enough of this education is taking place at home as it is, and when it is, it is most often directed at daughters. The changes this bill proposes are essential steps in preventing the next generation from going through regular sexual violence in silence like I had to.