



**H.B. 85:**

**Sexual Abuse Prevention in Schools**

**Testimony to the Ohio House Judiciary Committee**

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Chair Butler, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Stinziano and members of the Ohio House Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 85. As Ohio's statewide coalition, the Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence 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 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Each year in Ohio, over 5,000 reports of child sexual abuse are substantiated, but this represents only a small fraction of the actual incidents of sexual abuse in our state. Approximately 62% of children never tell anyone about the abuse they suffer.

While some children have obvious physical indications of sexual abuse, most do not. And 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 a 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, 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, there is good news: all of this is completely 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 change the fact that two-thirds of teachers currently receive no such training.

H.B. 85 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. In terms of providing the most effective education to children, I invite the committee to consider defining more specifically (or requiring the Ohio Department of Education to define) the type of instruction to be utilized, how it will be delivered, and by whom.

While H.B. 85 gives much-needed flexibility to individual school districts in the state, if too much flexibility is afforded, the type and quality of instruction will likely vary widely from one district to the next – both for instruction provided to children and youth and training provided to staff. For example, one district may choose to simply utilize a single 20-minute video with no evidence base to support its effectiveness, while another may choose to utilize multi-session interactive programming that focuses on primary prevention, which research tells us is far more effective. One district may choose to bring in a community organization, such as a rape crisis center, with expertise in sexual violence prevention, while another district may rely on individual teachers within the district who do not have such expertise. The bottom line is that the quality of instruction a child receives in any subject – but especially something as important as sexual abuse prevention – should not depend on the particular district in which the child lives.

There are experts in Ohio who can recommend or directly provide the instruction called for in this bill, specifically rape crisis centers (for sexual violence prevention) and child advocacy centers (for child sexual abuse prevention). The Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence, as well as the Ohio Network of Children's Advocacy Centers, can provide guidance to the Ohio Department of Education as to age-appropriate and evidence-based curricula to be used. We urge the committee to consider adding such language so as to ensure uniformity and effectiveness in the instruction called for in this bill. Additionally, an evaluation component should be included in any curriculum to measure its effectiveness at prevention.

Additionally, we recommend 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. We cannot place the burden of preventing sexual abuse squarely on the shoulders of children or their teachers. It's a responsibility we all bear. Again, there are experts in the state who can provide guidance and recommendations regarding curricula and programming to reach adults as well as children.

Finally, I am concerned that H.B. 85 does not currently address the resources needed to implement sexual violence prevention education statewide in all K-12 schools. Just last week the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights issued new guidance on Title IX to all school districts across the country. This guidance reminds districts of their obligations to respond to sexual violence and ensure students receive their education free from sexual violence.

Right now in Columbus and in towns all across Ohio, there are children who are suffering the devastating crime of sexual abuse. As caring, responsible adults, we have both the power and the obligation to stop this suffering and prevent it from happening to additional children. The Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence is available for additional questions regarding strengthening H.B. 85.

Thank you.