

Committees:

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Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Slaby and Ranking Member Fedor, thank you for the opportunity to bring before you House Bill 377, Erin's Law.

This issue was first brought to my attention in February of 2013 by a group of students at Lorain County Community College. Their work on this issue, both within Ohio and during out-of-state academic conferences, has acted as an inspiration to me as I have pursued a legislative solution to work to address this issue. Over the course of 2013, I worked with these students to draft legislation that would address the issue here in Ohio and incorporate best practices from similar proposals in other states. In the fall of 2013, I learned of my joint sponsor's interest in this legislation and was pleased to have the opportunity to work together on it. Last General Assembly, the bill made it to Senate Committee but not to the Senate Floor. I'm excited to bring it before you again today.

I firmly believe in the good that we can do when working together. Particularly, I believe we have an obligation to our communities and to our state's citizens to find common ground when working on issues that affect children and their education.

Few issues can affect the long-term mental health and success of a student as much as exposure to sexual abuse. Unfortunately, this problem is far too widespread in the United States. Every six minutes a child is sexually assaulted in the United States and as many as one in four girls, and one in six boys, are sexually assaulted before age 18. Despite widespread occurrence of these horrific acts, only one in ten children who are sexually abused tells someone.

As a state, and as a nation, we have failed to establish an environment that protects our children's innocence. Furthermore, we have failed to establish a safe forum to help children that have been abused identify those actions as abuse and get help in obtaining intervention, recovering and protecting themselves in the future.

The legislation before you today would establish age appropriate child sexual abuse and prevention education in schools. It would establish a means by which children who are abused can receive emotional and educational support so that they can be successful in school. Most importantly, it contains instruction for children on actions that they can take to obtain assistance and intervention if they are being sexually abused.

The bill is not prescriptive, and allows the Ohio Department of Education to work with local school districts to provide age-appropriate materials that they can implement in a manner they deem appropriate for the community they serve. As with so many other issues facing our state, home rule and local authority should not be undermined when it can be avoided by letting those local officials do the work they were elected to perform.

The title of this legislation comes from a woman named Erin Merryn. A sexual abuse survivor who later confronted her abuser, Erin has bravely led the charge for these bills across the nation. Her work has similar legislation passed in 31 states and is currently introduced or being introduced in 17 more. Among the states that have already taken action are California, Connecticut, Louisiana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Arkansas, Illinois, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada, Indiana, Maine, Missouri, Texas, and Vermont.

This legislation has received broad support from organizations representing a wide-range of political beliefs as our families realize the long-term psychological implications of sexual abuse committed against children. Often, those committing the abuse are from a trusted, inner-circle, within the family. Without proper education, both at home and at school, our children are at risk of becoming another statistic in this all-too silent epidemic.

When preparing this legislation in the 131st General Assembly, my joint sponsor and I met with interested parties to avoid language that would impose upon local community issues that they deemed inappropriate for their children. Already, I have heard from student organizations at Ohio University, Kent State University, and Lorain County Community College who have expressed their support for this bill and desire to provide testimony to the committee. It is not lost on me that these students supporting this legislation are often those most likely to have suffered from, or known someone who suffered from, sexual abuse as a child.

While we anticipate no opposition to this bill, we are happy to work with those serving on this committee to address any issues that may arise during its consideration. Furthermore, we would be happy to work with the Chair to bring forward the aforementioned proponents to testify, as well as others in support of this legislation, during future hearings.

Thank you, again, for allowing my joint sponsor and me the opportunity to bring H.B. 377 before the committee. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.