

12-9-2024

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

My name is Anna Baltes and I am an Ohio resident and parent. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today in opposition of House Bill 8.

When this bill was first introduced, it included a discretionary clause that stated in part, "the policy shall permit school district personnel to withhold such information from a parent if a reasonably prudent person would believe that disclosure would result in abuse, abandonment, or neglect". This discretion was removed from the bill in a House Primary and Secondary Education Committee hearing on April 18, 2023.

At the time, Representative Sean Brennan raised serious concerns about its removal, because it effectively prohibits a teacher or administrator from withholding information in order to protect a student from potential abuse.

In cases where a child has previously been abused, neglected or abandoned by a parent in response to a staff member's disclosure of information to the parent, and a student discloses this to the staff member, they are required by law to report that to children's services.

Suppose that, after a report and investigation, the student is returned to, or remains in the custody of the parent who previously abused them due to something told to them by a school staff member. Going forward, if a situation arises similar to that which previously resulted in abuse, then it would stand to reason that "a reasonably prudent person" would believe that disclosure of similar information would result in abuse, abandonment, or neglect.

Why, then, has this been removed from the bill, when it would clearly be in the best interest of vulnerable students to prevent further abuse in cases where there is a known history of it?

I think this is an egregious misstep and if this bill is passed without that discretion in place, it will result in more abuse, neglect and abandonment that would have otherwise been preventable. Reporting abuse after the fact is of course essential, but it unfortunately does not undo the abuse, nor the physical and psychological trauma a child incurs as a result.

As such, I believe that this bill is tantamount to the State, by way of inaction, turning a blind eye to abuse. In fact, the deliberate removal of the original discretionary language leads me to question whether there an actual motive within some of our lawmakers, to silently *encourage* abuse - specifically in certain demographics of children who are statistically more susceptible to it, such as LGBTQ+ or physically or developmentally disabled students.

Please do not allow the advancement of HB 8 today.

Thank you,

Anna Baltes