

Chair Manning and Members of the Committee,
My name is Faith Colson, and I am sharing written testimony in support of HB 322. I am representing myself and sharing support in light of my lived experience as the survivor of grooming, sexual abuse, and sexual assault.

When I entered my junior year of high school, I was a straight-A student with two parents at home. Halfway through the year, my teacher asked me to stay after school to discuss college and careers. I met with him that day, and it started what I thought was a mentor relationship. I saw him as a safe adult in whom I could confide. For example, one day I went to his room during a passing period because another student made me cry. Later that day during his class, he said he could smell my deodorant on his shirt.

Looking back now, as a woman in my 40s, it's clear something was wrong and that this was not innocent. It's clear he had intentions beyond being a supportive professional. But as a child, as a naïve 17-year-old, I had no idea that he was grooming me. I had no idea that he had in fact been making sexualized comments about female students for at least 7 years prior to this. I just thought he cared about me, that I was special, and that I could trust him.

Then one day he kissed me, and within weeks of that, he assaulted me. But by that time, he had blurred the boundaries so well that I didn't see these actions as violations. I was confused, but still convinced that he loved me and that I could trust him. I was trapped, and it took me four years to leave him. The months he took to slowly and methodically groom me resulted in that four-year haze. It took me another 13 years to realize that I had been sexually abused.

Grooming is effective because children naturally trust adults. Adults also have inherent power over children due to the disparity in authority as well as physical and psychological development. Most sexual abuse is committed by someone the child knows and trusts, and the reason abusers are so successful in initiating sexual contact is because they are so effective at grooming. What may start as innocent or ambiguous behavior like giving gifts or paying extra attention soon turns to isolation and secrecy. What may start as seemingly innocent becomes evident as harmful due to the pattern of luring and isolating behavior.

This blurring of boundaries is visible and indicates that something is not healthy. Those who sexually abuse children are smart enough to hide the sexual contact but often brazen enough to openly cross boundaries with children; these actions are missed if people don't know what to look for.

Adults in my school saw warning signs and dismissed them. They could have intervened and prevented or stopped my abuse, but they didn't. That's why, after I made a delayed outcry and pressed charges, I reached out to a lawmaker in my home state of Illinois. One change we made inside of Faith's Law was to amend the definition of grooming to include in-person behaviors and not be restricted to online solicitation alone. Luring a child into unlawful sexual behavior is wrong, regardless of how it is done.

Defining grooming in criminal law equips law enforcement and prosecutors with more tools to protect children and prevent the long-term destructive impact of child sexual abuse. HB 322 addresses the insidious practice of grooming by narrowly defining this pattern of behavior and tying the luring nature of it to existing Ohio statute.

Children are vulnerable members of society who don't have a voice in what laws are made. We have to be their voice and act on their behalf because doing nothing means accepting the current status quo, where brazen boundary violations and child endangerment are tolerated. Instead of waiting for contact abuse to occur, let's proactively prevent it with this bill that addresses criminal grooming. Please vote yes on HB 322. Thank you.