

**Proponent Testimony**  
**Ohio Primary and Secondary Education Committee**  
**May 12, 2021**  
**Erin's Law - HB 105**  
**Sophia Fifner**

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Bird, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the Ohio House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of H.B. 105. My name is Sophia Fifner, and I am a survivor of sexual violence. I am here today to share the importance of teaching age-appropriate sexual abuse prevention in schools with this committee.

Many of you are familiar with the statistics regarding child sexual abuse. I'm sure you've heard that each year in Ohio, over 30,000 children are involved in a substantiated case of child abuse or neglect; of these, 5,000 are related to sexual abuse specifically.

However, the stark reality is that there are far more children suffering sexual abuse in Ohio; only 38% of child victims of sexual abuse disclose **(at any point in their lifetime)** the sexual abuse they experience. This means over half of child sexual abuse cases go unaddressed.

As a Black woman, I'd be remised if I didn't address the challenges Black girls face concerning child sexual abuse. "One of the most prevailing issues with sexual assault in the African American community is the high frequency of sexual assault on young women of color." (*Black Women and Sexual Violence*, 2018) In fact, "one in four Black girls will be sexually abused before the age of 18." (Barlow, 2020)

I shared the above to provide context to my experience as a survivor of rape and abuse.

I was raped on a cold damp night during my senior year of high school. In the horrifying process of reporting my experience, one of the most challenging first steps I had to take was acknowledging and vocalizing an experience I wasn't even sure how to describe. Linguistically, the word rape did not exist in my vocabulary.

To be specific, I knew what happened to me was wrong. However, at the time, I didn't understand that another person penetrating my vagina without my consent was rape. More importantly, I didn't know how to report it.

By the grace of God, a strong-willed friend told me I was raped and drove me to the local hospital to be examined and report the assault.

Yet, my experience is all too common. Like many young girls across our state, I grew up in a loving home and lived in a small town. My family and I were part of a church community where attending services three times a week was the norm. My parents hosted missionaries, held bible study gatherings in our living room, and were regular subscribers to Focus on the Family. In fact,

I participated in abstinence programs like True Love Waits and gleefully wore a promise ring to display my commitment between me and God. As a child, we talked about school, we visited local parks, and my parents watched me cheer at numerous football games. However, we never talked about sex, and we never discussed appropriate boundaries.

I vividly recall one of my first experiences of abuse. I was at the Ohio State Fair walking through a funhouse. Brightly colored with yellow and orange, and mirrors hanging every which way, I remember an older man walked behind me and groped me. I was in elementary school. I knew it was wrong. However, I didn't know what to do, I was afraid to say anything, so I chose to stay silent for nearly 25 years.

In the conservative household of my youth, legislation like Erin's Law would have given me the awareness needed to report the abuse I experienced in elementary school. More importantly, it would have given me the words to recognize and define rape in high school.

Sexual abuse can happen to children of any race, socioeconomic group, religion, or culture and thrives in communities where silence and secrecy are the norm. However, if you, like many young Ohioans grow up in households like mine, you may never receive the important guidance and tools needed to protect yourself and report abuse when it happens.

Leveraging the safe space of school provides children the opportunity to learn critical and life-saving skills to understand how to protect themselves from sexual abuse, molestation, and rape. H.B. 105 offers a sound solution to give children a voice and the tools they need to report atrocities the moment they happen.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.B. 105. I am happy to answer any questions you may have today and can be reached at [sophia.fifner@gmail.org](mailto:sophia.fifner@gmail.org) or 614-266-9198.