



**Proponent testimony submitted to the
Ohio House Primary and Secondary Education Committee
House Bill 321
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Chair Jones, Vice Chair Manchester, Ranking Member Robinson, and Members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 321. As Ohio's statewide coalition, the Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence (OAESV) advocates for comprehensive responses and rape crisis services and empowers communities to prevent sexual violence.

Sexual violence is a pervasive problem – over 42 million Americans are sexual abuse survivors. Specifically, 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys is sexually abused before reaching the age of majority. Because most survivors are abused by someone they know and our society largely avoids discussions of sexual abuse, the crime remains hidden. This is demonstrated by the fact that only one-third of sexually abused children disclose, precluding intervention and treatment for millions.

As this committee knows, House Bill 321 (“Erin’s Law”) seeks to require age-appropriate sexual abuse education to children in grades K-6, and sexual violence instruction to grades 7-12. Erin’s law would additionally require schools to train teachers on sexual abuse prevention and the Ohio Department of Education to provide model curricula for schools on these topics.

This bill provides broad discretion in curriculum selection and instruction models. OAESV has engaged with preventionists and our coalition partners in states that have already passed Erin’s Law about their implementation strategy. Generally, after forming a committee, the state provides guidance on instruction frequency, eligible educators, and acceptable curricula. In every state we spoke to, prevention educators from rape crisis centers and anti-sexual violence programs were invited to provide instruction in classrooms, alleviating the burden of learning new content from teachers. Prevention educators are able to provide expertise, and provide a safe person to whom a child can disclose abuse if they are uncomfortable doing so to a teacher they see every day. Preventionists across Ohio and the United States are largely funded by the Rape Prevention Education Grant through the federal Office on Violence Against Women. Pursuant to federal regulations, these educators adhere

to scientifically-based programming standards issued by the Centers for Disease Control. These professionals thus employ data-based strategies to educate in an age-appropriate manner.

Since the first state passed Erin's Law in 2012, the Erin's Law resource center¹ has provided information and recommendations for approved curricula and model lesson plans. Many of these curriculums, including Second Step, are already in use in Ohio. Similarly, many rape crisis programs funded by the Rape Crisis Centers Line Item in the Ohio Budget, along with Child Advocacy Centers, engage in prevention partnerships with school districts and have provided the exact education required by Erin's Law for many years. Thus, some children in Ohio have the benefit of access to sexual abuse prevention education, while others are left susceptible to abuse.

In addition to those reasons, I support House Bill 321 as a former teacher who saw first-hand the devastation sexual abuse has on very young children. After college, I moved to Washington, D.C. as a Teach For America Corps Member assigned to a four-year-old classroom. My first public charter school provided a mere one hour of instruction on child abuse and mandatory reporting. This was completely insufficient, and I was woefully ill equipped to detect the symptoms of child sexual abuse or address trauma in my classroom. Though my students were only four and five-years-old, we still had academic benchmarks. Restrictions on addressing trauma through developmentally appropriate instruction models allowed continued disruptions that significantly reduced instruction time on more traditional topics.

After a full year of trying to persuade the administration to adopt Second Step, a social emotional curriculum, and sexual abuse response protocols beyond a CPS call, I left and went to a different school. On the very first day of teacher training, my new principal said something that still rings true – your classroom is every student's safe space. No matter what is going on at home, you can give them eight hours of calm, and hopefully happiness. As most teachers know, that safe, calm space requires skill and patience to achieve, especially when some students are enduring the trauma of abuse. However, it's what we owe every child – and it's what House Bill 321 can help us provide.

When I moved to Ohio, I was shocked to find pushback against Erin's Law. As I am aware, opponents argue that conversations about sexual abuse should take place at home. First, many victims are sexually abused by the very people who would have to facilitate those conversations. Second, anxiety, confusion, and discomfort would lead many parents to avoid this topic. Third, the State of Ohio cannot go into homes to make sure these conversations are taking place. Relying on families to implement sexual violence prevention and education leaves children vulnerable to further abuse.

¹ <http://www.erinslaw.org/resources/>

Prevention educators are experts in aligning sexual abuse prevention learning objectives with other academic standards in an age appropriate format. As the FBI², United States Department of Justice³, and other agencies report higher risks of sexual abuse and exploitation during the COVID-19 crisis, we must plan ahead to provide our children every possible protection from further harm. Erin's Law must pass. Our children are at stake, and we have no other choice.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. OAESV strongly encourages passage of House Bill 321. I am available to answer your questions today or by email at ccrary@oaesv.org.

² <https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/school-closings-due-to-covid-19-present-potential-for-increased-risk-of-child-exploitation>

³ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ut/pr/pandemic-shutdown-not-stopping-child-exploitation-cases-according-utah-federal>