

Faith Colson
Public Comments on HB 322
Civil Justice Committee
December 5, 2023

Chair Hillyer 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, abuse, and 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.

As a woman in my 30s now, it's clear something was wrong. It's clear 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 more than anyone else.

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 natural 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 effective at committing 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 is then identifiable as clearly harmful due to the pattern of luring and isolating behavior.

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. Luring a child into unlawful sexual behavior is dangerous, no matter how an adult lures them.

By defining grooming in criminal law, we equip law enforcement and prosecutors to pursue would-be abusers before the contact occurs. This can prevent a lifetime of suffering for the child. HB 322 addresses the insidious practice of grooming in a very effective way, narrowly defining this pattern of behavior, and tying the luring nature of it to existing Ohio statute—Section 2907.03, Ohio’s sexual battery law. This existing statute lays out various relationships that have power differentials precluding consent, and it’s so well-written that I have shared it with advocates in other states.

HB 322 narrowly and effectively defines grooming so that innocent children will be better protected from the luring behavior of would-be abusers. Please vote yes. Thank you.