

Support - House Bill 1072

Education – Child Sexual Abuse Prevention - Instruction & Training

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Testimony respectfully submitted by

Jennifer Alvaro

Licensed Certified Social Worker – Clinical, MD
Licensed Clinical Social Worker, VA
Certified Sex Offender Treatment Provider, VA
Clinical Member, ATSA

During the past 24 years, I have worked in the field of child sexual abuse; as a child protective services worker, sex offender therapist, conducting prevention and mandated reporter trainings. Most recently, advocating for changes in Maryland due to what I have learned in the past 6 years.

Somewhere in Montgomery County is a woman who knows her former music teacher, the man who sexually abused her in a MCPS classroom, sits in jail with her name tattooed on his arm.

- This woman, who was then a young girl in elementary school, was preyed upon by a man she was told to trust. Besides living every day with the knowledge this man has her name tattooed on his arm, she also wonders if people who meet her have seen her before, on line, in the images of child pornography her music teacher, Lawrence Joynes, distributed to the world of her and many other MCPS students.
- Numerous MCPS employees knew for years this man was preying on children, yet he was left in the classroom. According to court documents, school records showed prior to this woman being victimized, Joynes's principal in 2011 placed him under restrictions, saying that he could not touch or be alone with students and that he had to leave his classroom door open during instruction, stay off the playground during recess and refrain from sitting with students in the cafeteria. He was teacher at 11 schools over his lengthy county career; after his sentencing, the state's attorney commented, "This man is a predator; he's been a predator for decades...noting that Joynes victimized "at least 15 children that we're aware of. I think that's a disgrace."

This could have been prevented by the common sense measures proposed in HB 1072.

Somewhere in Montgomery county are numerous men who know they are one of many young boys who were knowingly left by county officials to be sexually abused by their elementary school teacher.

- For 17 years, elementary school teacher Daniel Picca was warned and reprimanded by Montgomery County Public Schools over his "inappropriate" conduct with male students. Time and again, Picca was told to stop touching boys, massaging their shoulders and feeling their biceps; to stop asking them to take off their shirts and flex their muscles and to sit on his lap; to stop meeting privately with students. Transferred from school to school, he continued this behavior, receiving no less than seven "clear and unequivocal written warnings" from principals of three schools and two superintendents over the years, according to the findings of the Maryland State Board of Education.
- In 2012, the state board described the events in the Picca case as "shocking." "From the first complaint in in October 1993, 17 years passed with patterns repeated and reprimands issued. Yet this teacher was transferred to different elementary schools and remained in the classroom. That should never have occurred."

This could have been prevented by the common sense measures proposed in HB 1072

Somewhere in Montgomery county is a teen girl who dreads going to high school. She has had her innocence stolen, her memories of youth forever tainted by abuse at the hands of a trusted adult.

- She did what generations of teen girls have done. She went to school. She made friends. She trusted the adults who were paid to protect her. She was sexually abused by the head of security in her high school, Mark Yantos.
- After his arrest, MCPS admitted their background checks missed a 1994 criminal case against Yantos. He never should have been hired.
- For those following this issue in Montgomery County, it was no surprise when it was revealed in court his improper interactions with the victim were known to school officials. Yantos received several write-ups for “inappropriate close contact that he had with the victim at the school leading up to these events.” He was left in the school with access to the victim and hundreds of other potential victims.

This could have been prevented by the common sense measures proposed in HB 1072

Somewhere in Montgomery county are numerous girls who know they should never have been abused. In 2014, Mr. Pineda assaulted a girl during class and she immediately told and was believed. She was his final MCPS victim.

- In his trial, it was revealed he had a lengthy history dating back over a decade in MCPS schools abusing children. During the sentencing, an Assistant State’s Attorney told the judge that Pineda had been put on a “do not use list” as recently as 2014 at one middle school, and had been barred from serving as a substitute in the 2005-2006 school year at one high school for “inappropriate conduct” of a sexual nature. One parent has come forward stating she reported him even earlier to school officials.

This could have been prevented by the common sense measures proposed in HB 1072

Somewhere in Montgomery county are many young girls who were sexually abused by a trusted teacher, a teacher who was left in the classroom for over 20 years. A teacher who was so beloved he was made teacher of the year, given a rocking chair by the PTA and left in the classroom for at least 14 years to abuse them.

- John Vigna was “investigated” by MCPS officials in 2008 for sexual abuse of children. MCPS did not call authorities. MCPS wrote him up and told him to stop “lap sitting” with children. In 2013, MCPS did another internal “investigation” for the exact same activities with children. Mr. Vigna told MCPS he would not and could not stop touching children as that was what he did and how he connected with them. They left him in a classroom, moving him to work with younger children. MCPS did not report to authorities. *In December 2014, after a public outcry and demands for change by parents, MCPS told all schools to search files and report any suspicious staff to authorities.* John Vigna stayed in the classroom. In 2015, MCPS piloted a “body safety” education class for students. They taught one part of a three-part curriculum to students. A brave, courageous, remarkable girl listened and told. She told what Mr. Vigna was doing to her and others. She told, and because of new trainings for adults, because of new policies for prevention, because of new awareness due to new initiatives demanded by parents (and MCPS being shamed into implementing them because of media attention), this brave girl told and she was believed. Mr. Vigna was arrested. He was convicted and at least 10 known victims and countless others who are not yet known, saw a little, tiny bit of justice.

This could have been prevented by the common sense measures proposed in HB 1072

In 2012, I began my long journey trying to prevent sexual abuse in MCPS schools naively thinking the county would care about the voiceless, the defenseless, the victims. I’m not so naïve anymore. I have learned what the victims and their families have known for decades, that in many cases, the county dissembles, contorts, and covers up the truth to protect itself. Documents are created to retroactively justify bad policy. Half-truths, manipulations and playing cat & mouse with truth seekers is the norm. And who suffers? Those who are too young to advocate for themselves.

Seven year olds don’t have twitter accounts, they cannot join the #metoo movement. Instead, by the silence and complicity of the adults in our communities, these children are by default, unwilling members of the club no one wants to join. The club of #IfAdultsHadActedWeWouldn’tHaveToSuffer

The cases I described here are just a few of many which have occurred all across the State of Maryland. In all the cases I have described, had House Bill 1072 been in place, it likely would have prevented not only the first victim in many of the cases but also prevented dozens and dozens of other children from becoming victimized by the same offender.

Our local, county officials have shown they will not willingly, voluntarily take common sense, well established steps to prevent sexual abuse of our children. They have demonstrated they will not voluntarily implement steps to educate adults and children so they may better stop abuse before it starts by requiring codes of conduct, education regarding grooming, creating safe environments. They have shown they will not willingly educate line staff and parents about the law regarding reporting abuse to authorities and the other steps this bill would require.

We can as a society prevent most childhood sexual abuse. For what we cannot prevent, we can as a society help get victims help sooner so they do not needlessly suffer for years in silence for things which should never have happened and for which they were not at fault. We can as a society stop offenders from victimizing one child, much less dozens.

We are asking you, our elected officials, to step in and protect our most vulnerable. We are asking you to legislate what local governments have refused to voluntarily implement. Our children deserve no less.

I commend the delegates, particularly Delegate CT Wilson who have introduced and support this bill. **For the reasons stated, I respectfully urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 1072**