



# JOHN SPIROS

State Representative • 86th Assembly District

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## *Assembly Bill 692*

January 28, 2016

Testimony from Rep. Spiros

Good morning and thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice for allowing me to have the opportunity to talk to you today regarding Assembly Bill 692, a bill that would require schools to implement an educational program for grades 6-12 that teaches students about what constitutes a healthy relationship and includes instruction to identify teen dating violence.

Teen dating violence is an often unnoticed yet pervasive problem for Wisconsin's youth. In one year, 10.3% of WI high school girls have experienced physical violence in a dating relationship and 15.7% have experienced sexual violence. 1 in 3 teens in the U.S. is a victim of physical, emotional, or verbal abuse from a dating partner and over half of teens, 57%, know someone who has been physically, sexually, or verbally abusive in a dating relationship.

Research has shown that school-based violence prevention programs have demonstrated remarkable potential to increase the safety of young people and to prevent domestic violence in our communities over the long term. If we teach our teenagers about respect, healthy relationships, and boundaries, it will not only give them the tools they need when identifying unhealthy or abusive relationships in their own dating relationships, but the tools to identify and combat assault and/or domestic violence for the rest of their lives.

Several states have developed school-based programs to educate students on healthy relationships with the goal of preventing teen dating violence. According to NCSL at least 19 states, ranging from Texas to Rhode Island, have laws that urge or require school boards to develop curriculum on teen dating violence.

This bill requires schools to implement an educational program for grades 6 through 12 that teaches students about what constitutes a healthy relationship and includes instruction to identify teen dating violence. The bill requires the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to create a model policy addressing the prevention of and appropriate responses to teen dating violence.

The bill also requires that starting in the 2017-2018 school year each school board can adopt that policy or implement its own policy addressing these issues. The bill allows school boards to provide this program within their human growth and development curriculum. Therefore for any school district offering human growth and development, the school board appoints an ad hoc advisory committee whose role is to advise the school board on the design, implementation, and review of this curriculum. Parents, teachers, school administrators, pupils, health care professionals, members of the clergy, and other residents of the school district comprise the committee.

It is important to note that under this bill the educational program is not a graduation requirement. This bill also includes an option for parents to choose that his or her child not participate in the educational program.

Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to testify in support of this bill, and I would welcome any questions.



**AB 692: A bill relating to grades 6-12 education of healthy relationships and dating violence.**

January 28, 2016

Members of the Committee,

Dating violence and unhealthy relationships are a tragic reality in the lives of today's teenagers and preteens. 1 in 10 high school girls in Wisconsin have experienced physical violence, and 57% know someone who has been physically, sexually, or verbally abusive in a dating relationship. One in four women who are victims of domestic violence attempt suicide. These terrifying statistics are often a result of a complete lack of education about what constitutes a healthy relationship and how to identify dating violence.

Wisconsin currently requires schools to implement anti-bullying education and policies, but this education does not address dating violence and unhealthy relationships. This bill would:

- 1.) Mandate that the Department of Public Instruction provide students in grades 6-12 and educators with information about this important and inevitable topic, starting in the 2017-2018 school year.
- 2.) Provide policies from DPI on lessons that would include information about what defines healthy and unhealthy relationships, identifying what constitutes dating violence and abusive behavior, and the meaning of consent.
- 3.) Include instruction for staff to navigate teen dating violence and healthy relationships.

Parents would be able to request that their children not receive this education, and their wishes would be honored, but the education would be available to all students. We must work to maintain that healthy family values are also communicated where children spend the most time: in the classroom.

Education is critical in changing this trend and giving students the tools to have healthy, safe relationships. Students who experience this abuse at a young age are much more likely to be in unhealthy and dangerous relationships in the future. Violence in a relationship often goes unreported and therefore victims cannot seek help or safety. In Wisconsin we must provide security, through knowledge, to our children and permanently reduce domestic violence in our communities. This bill is the starting point in providing our children the resources and tools to further prevent violence and abuse. Starting to educate our younger generation on this issue now will help protect them for a lifetime.

This timely bill is an urgent matter, and I would greatly appreciate your support.

Respectfully,

Representative Melissa Sargent



Date: January 28, 2016

To: Members, Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

From: Dee Pettack, Legislative Liaison, Department of Public Instruction

RE: Statement on AB 692

The Department of Public Instruction (the department) is deeply concerned about the incidents of teen dating violence experienced by Wisconsin youth. The number of students that experience dating and sexual violence is too high. We also see these numbers reflected in our colleges and universities. The department has taken active steps to better know the scope of the problem and provide school districts with the tools to address this very serious and concerning problem.

The department has administered the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey in a random sample of Wisconsin public high schools. The most recent survey found that approximately one in 12 students reported being intentionally hurt physically by someone they were dating over the previous 12 months. The numbers were higher for girls, with one in ten reporting being hurt. In addition, this survey found that approximately one in ten students reported being forced to engage in sexual activity they did not want. Once again, the numbers were higher for girls, with almost one in six reporting being a victim of forced sexual activity in the previous year.

In order to help Wisconsin schools respond to these serious concerns, the department created a teen dating violence curriculum in collaboration with Wisconsin health education teachers and community educators in sexual assault and domestic violence prevention centers. The department encourages Wisconsin schools to utilize this curriculum as part of their health education instruction. Copies are provided for your review and consideration. It is also available on the department's website.

Additionally, all school employees are required under state statute to complete training to be a mandatory reporter. This training is provided by the department and provides school staff with the tools to recognize behaviors that indicate a need for referral and supports.

AB 692 would require Wisconsin school districts to provide teen dating violence prevention education to students in secondary school grades. It would also require the department incorporate a teen dating violence curriculum into its model units of health instruction, which school districts could choose to use or adapt. Additionally, the bill would require the department to develop a model policy to help Wisconsin schools respond to incidents of teen dating violence at school or during school-sponsored events, and to periodically review and revise its model bullying policy.

Should this bill become law, the department will update our existing curriculum to ensure it meets the requirements in this bill and may search for other available curricula that Wisconsin school districts could access. The department would continue to update the model bullying policy on a regular basis and distribute a model policy related to teen dating violence.

# testimony



**To:** Members of the Assembly Committee on  
Criminal Justice  
**Date:** January 28, 2016  
**From:** Tony Gibart, Public Policy Director  
**Re:** Support for Assembly Bill 692

Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
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Chairman Kleefisch and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to you in strong support of Assembly Bill 692. My name is Tony Gibart, and I am the Public Policy Director of End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin. End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin is the statewide voice for survivors of domestic violence and the membership organization representing the local domestic violence victim service providers and shelters in Wisconsin. I want to thank Chairman Kleefisch for holding this hearing and also thank Representatives Spiros and Sargent for bringing this proactive bill forward. We strongly support Assembly Bill 692 because it represents one of the most important and impactful steps we can take as a state to protect young people and to build a future in which domestic violence is not a scourge on the people of our state.

Assembly Bill 692 would accomplish three main things. First, it would direct school districts to integrate teen dating violence prevention education into classroom instruction for middle-school and high-school students (grades 6 through 12). This instruction would give students the tools to recognize the warning signs of controlling and abusive behaviors and to strive for healthy relationships. It would also empower students who see signs of abuse in a friend's relationship to get help from supportive adults. Research shows that victims are much more likely to disclose violence to a peer rather than to seek help from an adult. Second, the bill would ensure that schools develop responses to teen dating violence to create an atmosphere in which victims can get help and abuse is not tolerated. Third, the bill provides teen dating violence training for teachers and administrators. The telltale signs of victimization can be subtle and are often mistaken as behavior or academic issues. Importantly, the bill preserves local school district control by not requiring any particular curriculum or prescribed policy. Rather, the bill delegates these choices to local school districts.

Those are the particulars of the bill, but I want to step back for a moment and discuss why Assembly Bill 692 is so critical to a comprehensive and forward-looking response to domestic violence in Wisconsin. My organization was founded in 1978, around the time the anti-domestic violence movement was becoming established. Before this time, our society didn't talk about or really even have words to describe the violence, abuse and sometimes terror that occurred behind closed doors, mostly to women and children. Since then, the response to domestic violence in our state has developed considerably. You and your predecessors have passed specific criminal and civil laws to protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable. We have

established a statewide network of shelters and service providers. We have enlisted the help of healthcare and social service providers, businesses and the larger community in the effort to identify and support victims. All of this progress has done considerable good. The best evidence shows that we have decreased domestic violence over time. Certainly, our collective efforts have saved untold lives. Yet, it remains the case that over 700,000 Wisconsin women have been victims of domestic violence at some point in their lives. Moreover, every year, about 35,000 to 40,000 Wisconsinites seek crisis services at shelters and service providers, and police respond to at least 30,000 domestic violence incidents in our state. This Committee understands, probably as well or better than any other committee of this Legislature, that our current interventions in domestic violence cases are absolutely necessary, but that they are also imperfect and often do not touch the root of the issue.

That is why I urge this Committee to take this important step in addressing domestic violence in a proactive and preventive way. Let me explain.

If you walk into a typical Wisconsin high school, more than one in ten girls will have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of a dating partner in the last year. Essentially, more than ten percent of Wisconsin high school girls are currently being or have very recently been victimized by a dating partner. One in three youth will experience abuse in a dating relationship at some point in their teen years. Being victimized at such a young age has enormous consequences: it is associated with depression, suicide risk, academic decline and low self-esteem. And, experiencing or perpetrating dating violence as a young person sets that teen on a path to continue to be in unhealthy, abusive and violent relationships as he or she grows into adulthood.

As these facts suggest, the under-recognized issue of teen dating violence is a serious challenge. It entails an almost unimaginable amount of anxiety, pain and suffering in the lives of Wisconsin's next generation. But this problem is also our greatest opportunity to create the change we all want to see. That is because the steps we take now to help young people recognize the warning signs of abuse and strive for respectful relationships will not only decrease violence in the present. Assembly Bill 692 will also help create the conditions so that the next generation grows with a greater awareness and respect for healthy relationships. This approach will position Wisconsin, like the at least 19 other states that have adopted similar bills, towards actually preventing domestic violence before it ever happens by acting when we can have the most impact and by working at the root of the issue.

Again, I urge the Committee to take the important step of advancing AB 692, both to protect young people now and to create a better future for us all. I would be happy to answer any questions.