

Testimony of Ann Burke, R.N., M.Ed.

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Chairman Whitehouse, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on why Congress needs to prioritize teen dating violence prevention in the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act.

I speak to you today as a mother, an advocate, and retired teacher. It has been almost six years since my daughter Lindsay, a 23 year old aspiring teacher, was brutally tortured and murdered by her ex-boyfriend. We cannot change the past, but we can help shape and determine the future. And so, I am proud that we have created a positive legacy in honor of Lindsay. In 2007, Rhode Island became the first state to pass a comprehensive teen dating violence law; now, at least 14 states have followed the example of the Lindsay Ann Burke Act and passed laws to support education on teen dating violence. Many times, the states passed laws after other parents experienced my same nightmare.

I know many of these parents from across our nation. We have a parent email support group; a group no one wants to belong to. And today, I speak for them as well as myself. Not only do we live with the tremendous loss of our daughters and sons, but we have all been traumatized by the horrendous, horrific manner in which many of our children were tortured and murdered. Suffice it to say that the details of dating violence murders are beyond any sense of decency and morality.

Just like the victims of dating violence, we come from all walks of life, crossing lines of race, socio-economics, and education. Anyone can be a victim and anyone can be an abuser. And that's precisely why I feel so strongly, both as a parent and a teacher, that ALL students, no matter where they reside or their background, deserve to be educated about this topic in order to protect themselves and others.

In Rhode Island, the attention given to this subject has made a difference. Since the passage of the Lindsay Ann Burke Act, physical teen dating violence rates have decreased from 14 percent in 2007 to 10 percent in 2009 (CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey). Just as importantly, the law created awareness on the severity of the issue among school personnel. Now, teachers are more receptive to teaching the topic of healthy relationships in health class. Before the law, it was unclear where and whether this subject should be addressed.

The Lindsay Ann Burke Memorial Fund has worked to address dating violence primarily through educating teachers, parents, and students. The stigma of hiding abuse is being lifted. The lack of awareness of abusive behaviors is ending. Beyond the statistics, I'd like to share some real-life success stories. When speaking with student groups, invariably one or two students will disclose that they are in or have been in an abusive relationship. Since teaching the topic of dating violence in my own classroom, I have heard from several former students who told me how their education helped them

and their friends to identify their relationships as abusive and get out of those relationships safely. One student wrote me a two page letter about the abusive relationship she found herself in. The last paragraph reads “So I wrote this letter because I’ll always wonder how long my initial relationship with that boy would have lasted if I hadn’t had your voice in my head warning me to get out quickly. I think that if you had never taught me all of the warning signs of an abusive relationship, I would have strived to be a better girlfriend and I would have let him control me because I wouldn’t have known better. I’d never had a real boyfriend before, so how would I know the difference? Anything could have happened last year. Thank you for teaching me those lessons. Keep doing what you’re doing. You are truly making a difference.”

Another health teacher received a letter from a former student who wrote “Last year in health class we learned about healthy relationships...I listened...I’m glad I did because over the summer I realized that my boyfriend was starting to become abusive. He would call me 30 times a day, leaving me voicemails of him screaming at the top of his lungs. One day I couldn’t hang out and he punched a wall, and threatened to do the same to me. If I hadn’t taken your health class, I would definitely still be with him. So thank you for teaching us about relationships. It really does matter. People don’t think it happens in our school, it does.” Another health teacher told me that after he finished teaching his unit on dating violence one student walked up to him after class, pulled up the sleeve of her shirt exposing several bruises and said “This is what my boyfriend did to me.”

As we have learned, it is not enough to ask teachers to add on a brief, one-time lesson or hold one assembly on dating violence. To truly prevent another tragedy like Lindsay, we need to start early and meet youth at every point of their day on an ongoing, consistent basis – in school, after-school, in the community, and in the home.

There is no silver bullet, single message, intervention, or campaign that has been demonstrated to prevent teen dating violence. Success will require a comprehensive approach. But on a positive note, we know that prevention works. We have solid evidence that school-based teen dating violence prevention programs have been effective in changing behaviors.

Prevention research tells us we need to support education programs starting in middle school that do not simply talk about the warning signs of dating abuse but help initiate conversations about healthy relationships. We need to educate and engage those who influence teens including parents, teachers, coaches, older youth, and others. Many times these leaders do not know the critical role they play in young people’s lives and the power they have to promote healthy relationships and steer teens away from unhealthy ones. We need to meet youth where they are – in person but just as importantly online through social marketing campaigns and tools. And, policies need to be adopted to support this programming.

The Lindsay Ann Burke Act required schools to adopt a teen dating violence policy. The implementation varies, but some schools in Rhode Island have adopted a strong prevention and intervention school policy. I worked with Futures Without Violence, formerly Family Violence Prevention Fund, and others to draft a national model middle school policy. This policy, based largely on the model policy developed

by the Rhode Island Department of Education, is being advanced in communities across the country. There are a few core elements including school-wide prevention education, training programs for school personnel, parent engagement, innovative intervention strategies to respond to abuse, and partnerships with community agencies to help victims of abuse.

Why is teen dating violence prevention an issue for the Violence Against Women Act and this committee? Last year, we spent more than \$400 million through the Department of Justice VAWA programs to combat the serious crimes of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking. We need to invest in preventing teen dating violence to stop these crimes.

A recent report released by the World Health Organization said: “there is currently only one strategy for the prevention of domestic violence that can be classified *effective* at preventing actual violence. This is the use of school-based programs to prevent violence within *dating relationships*.”

As a mother, I can still remember the deep pain in my heart five years ago, when I first learned that dating violence is a preventable health problem. My hope is that the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act continues to support and expand services for teen victims but also includes a focus on the prevention and early intervention of teen dating violence. By involving the whole community, we will recognize that teen dating violence is a real and serious issue that can be prevented.