

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

JUNEAU
STATE CAPITOL BLDG. RM 417
JUNEAU, AK 99801-1182
PHONE (907) 465-4930
ALASKASENATEDEMS.COM/GARDNER



ANCHORAGE
716 W. 4TH AVENUE
ANCHORAGE, AK 99501
PHONE (907) 269-0174
FACEBOOK.COM/BERTAGARDNER

SENATOR BERTA GARDNER SENATE DISTRICT I

Sponsor Statement

SB31 - *"An Act relating to sexual abuse and sexual assault awareness and prevention efforts in public schools."*

Child abuse in Alaska is a chronic and devastating problem. In 2013, Office of Children's Services statistics show that there were 2,296 allegations of child sexual abuse with 1,817 unique victims, over 40% of whom were Alaska Native children. 884 of these cases were sent to law enforcement and OCS went on to assess 809 allegations. The trend of high rates of abuse in Alaska must stop and prevention efforts are critical to that effort. We must break the cycle of abuse and give Alaskans the tools they need to protect themselves and help others.

This bill requires school districts to develop age-appropriate sexual abuse and assault awareness and prevention education in grades kindergarten through 12. The bill is part of a national effort to enact "Erin's Law" in all fifty states (www.erinslaw.org). Erin Merryn is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and made it her mission to have legislation passed across the country giving children the tools to protect themselves from abuse and school staff and administrators the ability to recognize the signs of abuse.

"Had someone taught me about safe touch, unsafe touch, safe secrets, and unsafe secrets, I would have known it was safe to tell. Instead I lived in my horror in silence. I am now on a mission to give children across this country the voice I never had as a child," said Merryn. To date, versions of Erin's Law have been enacted in eight states; twenty-five states, including Alaska, have a version of Erin's Law proposed this session.

This bill requires Alaska public schools to create age-appropriate curricula while allowing the flexibility to provide the training most beneficial to their community. Curricula should include warning signs of sexual abuse, referral and resource information, counseling and educational support, methods for increasing awareness of issues regarding sexual abuse of children, and actions a child may take to prevent and report sexual abuse or sexual assault. In many cases, by the time anyone other than the perpetrator and the victim know of the abuse, it is too late to stop it.

Current numbers show that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before the age of 18. While teachers and administrators within the state say some education is happening to lower these numbers, they agree that we need to do more.

I ask for your support in this measure.