

Madam Chair, Madam Vice-Chair, and members of the Committee:

My name is Jane Valentino, and I am a constituent writing in strong support of HB 1168.

I support this bill because I have lived through the consequences of silence and uncertainty when credible allegations of sexual abuse surfaced in my children's elementary school.

I am the mother of three children who attended Severna Park Elementary School. In March of 2024, I began hearing from other parents that a teacher—someone who had taught two of my sons—would be out of the school indefinitely with no explanation. Like many parents, I assumed he or his family were facing a personal hardship. Text messages circulated about how we could support him.

Three weeks later, I was sitting on the sidelines at my son's soccer game when another parent told me that this same teacher had allegedly molested multiple students.

The shock is hard to describe. I remember trying to hold back tears while watching my son play, my heart pounding as my mind raced. I knew I had need to talk to my son - to ask if he had experienced or witnessed any abuse.

How do you even begin that conversation? How do you ask your child if something terrible has happened to them—without leading them, frightening them, or confusing them? I felt completely unprepared and utterly alone in that moment. I did not know if this was rumor or reality, or even whether it was something I should raise with my child. On the ride home, I carefully asked a few neutral questions. My son seemed surprised and confused. I wanted to believe it was all rumor.

The second my son got out of the car, I called a close friend whose daughter had been in this teacher's class. She answered the phone sobbing. When she had approached her daughters, one responded like my son. The other reacted with intense emotion and distress. My friend was frantic. She did not know where to turn, who to call, or how to navigate what might be unfolding.

That same weekend, I had to speak with my other son. I knew there was no way to delay the conversation—children talk. I wanted my sons to hear from me before hearing about this from classmates. I had less than 48 hours to prepare for one of the most difficult conversations a parent can face - without guidance, without resources, and without clear information from the school.

That Monday, one of my sons came home visibly shaken. Eventually, he told me he had learned at school that two of his friends' sisters were victims. As a parent, there is no way to prepare you for explaining to your child that one of his favorite teachers is accused of harming children he knows.

In the weeks that followed, many of us hoped for clear information and resources to help families navigate these conversations and support our children. The guidance did not come.

HB 1168 would change that.

This bill ensures that parents are informed directly and transparently by the school system. It would prevent families from learning life-altering information through rumor. It provides clarity in moments when uncertainty compounds trauma.

Most importantly, it would empower parents to protect and support their children with accurate information, rather than speculation and fear.

Silence does not protect children. Transparency does.

No parent should have to scramble in panic, unsure whether they are responding to gossip or to a serious threat. No child should learn about allegations of abuse through hallway whispers before their parents have the chance to guide them.

HB 1168 is about communication, consistency, and putting children first. It ensures that families are treated as partners in safeguarding students—not as bystanders left in the dark.

I respectfully request a favorable report on HB 1168.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jane Valentino