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**Remarks To Virginia Superintendents**  
**The Virginia Health and Physical Activity Institute**  
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I want to start by commending the *Board of Education Guidelines and Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools' Family Life Education*. They are impressive. Someone did a lot of hard, honest work to put those together. They are thorough and in my experience, represent the state of the art on sexual and domestic violence reduction education.

Surprisingly, they match the content of our program. I say surprisingly because we developed our program independent of those guidelines. The guidelines of other states, to the extent they exist, are not nearly as thorough or as well thought out. And to be clear, the guidelines in Virginia for sexual and domestic violence are not mandatory, but I would encourage Virginia to implement them for all schools grades 1-12.

A bit on my background: I started my career as a juvenile rehabilitation counselor in a maximum security unit, which housed murderers, rapists, those who assaulted staff in lesser security units, and captured escapees. We were an activist staff, which means we put ourselves at risk every shift making sure murderers and rapists did not do that to each other.

Following that work, I got my master's degree, where I focused significantly on crime statistics, as it was an obvious area of interest for me. Then I became an attorney and represented *pro bono* many survivors of domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual violence.

During my career, it repeatedly occurred to me that I was hearing the same story over and over. I could sit down with a domestic violence survivor or the parent of a child who was molested or a predator, and I could basically finish their story for them. It's like these predators attended the same school where they learned how to groom people for violence. I came to realize if we could teach someone these predators' tricks, we could reduce that person's risk of being harmed by a predator by half or more.

So, some like-minded professionals from various fields and I, based on intensive research, put together age-appropriate programs for girls grades 1 - college. We added a self-defense component because researcher after researcher has concluded that teaching females self-defense with situational awareness offers the best hope of reducing rape. It works better than locking people up, better than kicking people off campus, and better than education campaigns directed at young men. The research shows our type of program reduces rape by at least 1/2 and attempted rape by 2/3.

Even though it is not mentioned in the guidelines, the self-defense component to us seems essential to a reduction in the violence because without self-defense the content just scares everyone but with self-defense they feel empowered. The lessons on avoidance and escape

sink in much better with the self-defense. Part of that is because the students get to move during class so they can pay better attention. But the biggest part of it is that the girls feel empowered. With self-defense, they feel they have some control. Without it, gender violence is just this big scary thing, so they stick their heads in the sand and hope it won't happen to them. But unfortunately, it does happen to them. According to the best data available, if nothing changes, over 43% of women will experience a sexual assault in their lifetime. But things can change and they can change in a positive way.

In fact, it has been gratifying that the girls and their parents are having fun at our program. We have trained thousands of girls and parents, and to date every girl but one said she had "fun" at our program. The exception said the program was "not fun, but necessary" and "useful".

The other thing that parents of girls really liked is that our program addressed what they saw as an inequity in K-12 education. Boys get football where they learn to throw people to the ground and not be thrown to the ground and wrestling where they learn to pin someone and escape being pinned. Girls get what equivalent? That seems unfair.

On the other side, we kept getting the question what are you doing *for* the boys? Or alternatively, what are you doing *about* the boys? So, we looked at existing boys' programs and talked to parents and boys who had taken them, and we were disappointed. What the boys were hearing – irrespective of what was being said – was "you're a rapist, stop raping!"

This does not encourage young men to be receptive to the lesson. To us, this seems to also produce a Werther effect, in that it normalizes rape as a common activity for young men. And we don't believe that the way to reduce rape is to normalize it.

It is true, as the advocates behind those boys' programs say, that most rape is perpetrated by young men. But it is also true that the majority of people who step forward to defend this country in times of war, who take jobs as policemen and firefighters, who risk their lives to save others, are also young men. The vast majority of young men are not rapists and will protect others if given the skills.

I should also point out that the rate of coercion of sexual activity against young men is shockingly high – 43% report having been coerced and of those, 50% wind up having sex against their will. There is presently no reliable source for these young men on how to deal with that.

We need to be that source and give them the skills to understand what situations present a danger to their well-being, including whether they are setting themselves up for a true or false accusation of sexual assault, involvement in a violent relationship, or dealing with coercive behavior.

In addition, if we are going to be true to the guidelines, we need to acknowledge that young men can also be subjects of coercion and violence. Nothing in the guidelines suggests that we

are supposed to put young men in the camp of perpetrator and young women in the camp of victim.

One more thing about the guidelines: they are great, but it is asking a lot for someone from the local police department or domestic violence shelter to come to the school and tick and tie their presentation to the guidelines. A lot of the people who worked on our program are lawyers, so ticking and tie'ing is normal behavior for us. That's not normal behavior for anyone else. So, we've done the heavy lifting on that already.

We've put together an administration page that has the parental consent forms you need, the program outline from which you can teach the program, and the links to online tutorials that teaches your teachers the program content. It also has a video breaking down the defensive moves in detail.

Thus, implementation in any school for grades 1-12 is easy. A class takes only an hour and can alternatively be folded into your existing physical education or health program. Your professionals can learn the curriculum online. Then we would follow up with a short live training so they can perfect our simple self-defense moves with a real person, and they are good to go.

There is a detailed outline that matches the Virginia guidelines from which they can teach the classes. They can also substitute videos we have created if they aren't comfortable with the subject matter.

We also encourage you to share the online resource with the parents in your district for three reasons. First, parents who review the online content and discuss it with their child will have better outcomes. Second, parental review and involvement is encouraged by Virginia law. Third, the vast majority of parents will react positively to the content as it answers many questions that they have about something that worries them deeply.

People ask me why I keep teaching these classes, and it is addictive in a way. A light goes on with these students. You see them empowered in ways they have never been before. The parents love it and feel relieved. All of our instructors report enormous enjoyment and satisfaction from teaching our curriculum. And guess what? Teaching our curriculum empowers the instructors as well.

It really is some of the most rewarding teaching we can do, and I hope you'll give your teachers the opportunity to experience it and make their own judgments based on the reactions of the students and their parents.