

# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

## State guidelines aim to educate students about dating violence

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By the time Gary Cuccia and his family started thinking seriously about dating violence, the worst had happened.

Cuccia's daughter Demi Brea was murdered by an ex-boyfriend in August 2007. Witnesses later said he had been controlling, threatening and abusive to the 16-year-old Monroeville cheerleader.

"As a father, I knew nothing about this before my daughter was taken from me," Cuccia said. "My daughter never experienced domestic violence before this. My family never experienced it. A lot of parents have no idea this can happen."

A set of guidelines for schools under development by the state Department of Education is meant to help other families. Once released, the guidelines could help schools teach students, parents and teachers to recognize the signs of dating abuse and how to respond appropriately when dating violence occurs.

The department released a draft of the dating violence education and response guidelines last week. Adopting the recommendations won't be mandatory for Pennsylvania schools, but Cuccia and others who were instrumental in formulating the new policies hope that won't matter.

"We fought so hard to get a mandate for these policies. That didn't happen, but we've been successful raising awareness, and I think that's going to make a difference," Cuccia said.

Rep. Scott Conklin, D-Centre County, took up Demi Brea's case last year, sponsoring the Demi Brea Cuccia Bill. The legislation would have obligated school districts to educate students about dating and domestic violence.

The bill passed overwhelmingly in the House, but after stalling in the Senate, it was amended in part into the 2010 school code that passed alongside last year's state budget.

The language adopted in the school code was scaled back to recommend schools take up a dating violence program, rather than force them to do so. The

law also instructed the Education Department to develop a model dating violence complaint form to be distributed to schools.

Studies indicate as many as one in 11 high school students nationwide experience physical abuse from a dating partner in a given year, according to the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence, which helped the state develop the guidelines.

PCADV also cites studies on its website that found as many as one in five high school girls has been sexually abused by a dating partner.

Ellen Kramer, managing attorney for the coalition, said the recommendations are "still a work in progress, though we're pleased with what we have been able to accomplish so far."

"We would have preferred mandates as well," Kramer said. "It's up to all of us as adults, especially those adults in the schools who have a tremendous impact on our young people's lives, to push back against the parts of our culture that perpetuate some of these violent behaviors. I absolutely believe that adults can and should and will push back."

John Mullarky Jr. is serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole for killing Demi Brea.

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