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## Father asks for board's support of dating violence education bill

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Gary Cuccia, whose daughter, Demi Brae Cuccia, was murdered by her ex-boyfriend, wants municipalities to support a house bill mandating teenage dating violence education in high schools statewide.

House Bill 2026, named the Demi Brae Cuccia Law, passed in the state House of Representatives in December and currently sits with the Senate Education Committee.

Cuccia, a Greensburg resident, stood before the North Huntingdon commissioners last week to ask for their support, in hopes of moving the bill through the committee. He plans to visit several other municipalities asking for the same thing.

"We're trying to gain as much momentum as we can, so we can get it to the governor and sign it into law," he said.

Demi Cuccia's ex-boyfriend, John Mullarkey Jr., stabbed her 16 times on Aug. 15, 2007, the day after her 16th birthday, before attempting suicide by slitting his own throat.

She dated Mullarkey for about two years.

Cuccia said that he knew his daughter and Mullarkey broke up but had no idea it had the potential to turn violent.

"He was one of my son's best friends and was around for a number of years," he said. "You would think that if you were around somebody that long, you could pick something like this up.

"We were unaware that this was a dangerous and lethal time."

A jury convicted Mullarkey in June 2009 on a charge of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

The bill is modeled after a similar mandate in Rhode Island and features information downloaded for free from Liz Claiborne Inc.'s anti-dating violence website, [www.loveisnotabuse.com](http://www.loveisnotabuse.com). [1] It also features a free DVD to train teachers.

It would provide age-appropriate materials to students in grades seven through 12.

"I feel that our children need this education," Cuccia said. "Educating more teenagers is the best way to stop or prevent further cases like this."

Tracy McNelly, Norwin School District's assistant superintendent of secondary education, said dating

violence is not currently a part of the district's health curriculum, although it is addressed in the middle and high schools.

"We bring in organizations every year as an add-on when we can fit them in," she said. "We're obligated to teach the standards, which takes up a great bit of time, but it is an important topic and I think it could fit into the health curriculum."

If mandated, McNelly said health teachers could reorganize their curriculum to allot specific time for dating violence.

Although she did not know the bill's specifics, Anne Emmerling, executive director of the Blackburn Center, supports mandating dating and domestic violence education.

Based in Greensburg, the Blackburn Center is an agency providing services to victims of domestic and sexual violence in Westmoreland County, as well as educational services. Currently, it provides presentations in each of the county's 17 school districts.

"Dating violence is clearly a big issue," Emmerling said. "The more information we can get to teens about the dynamics of teen dating violence, warning signs and how to get help and begin to talk about how to prevent it in terms of changing social norms and expectations are part of a long-term change."

Commissioners planned to vote on a resolution to support the bill today, Thursday, during their voting meeting. Other governing bodies voicing support for the bill include the Westmoreland County commissioners, Pittsburgh City Council, Monroeville, Mt. Lebanon, and New Alexandria.

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**Links:**

[1] <http://www.loveisnotabuse.com>