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# Senate Bill 338—Safe-to-Tell Program

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## ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

**MAY 25, 2015**

Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the Committee. For the record, I am Dale Erquiaga, Superintendent of Public Instruction, filling in for Senator Debbie Smith, who could not be here this afternoon.

I am here to present an amended version of Senate Bill 338 for your consideration.

Senate Bill 338 creates an easy mechanism through which Nevadans can anonymously report violent or unlawful activities or threats of violence on school property and at school events.

Before I walk you through the bill, Senator Smith asked me to talk briefly about why this bill is so important to her.

It started in February of 2014 when she partnered with the Washoe County School District and others, to host a school safety summit in response to the shooting at Sparks Middle School which her children attended and is in her neighborhood.

At that summit, she met Susan Payne from the Colorado Attorney General's Office and, when the School Boards Association brought Susan Payne to Nevada to speak at a conference, the two of them worked on the idea for this bill.

As many of you know, Senator Smith has always been a passionate supporter of suicide prevention and served on several committees on the topic.

Then, a month or so ago, like many of us, she opened the Reno Gazette and read about a middle school student in Fallon who committed suicide and that re-ignited her desire to do more.

We all believe that school should be a place where students feel safe; an environment that fosters growth, learning, and encouragement; a place where young people do not fear for their security or well-being.

Research shows that school climate, culture, and safety, significantly affect student achievement and behavior. In short, safety is a key condition for learning and academic success. Violence and threats have no place in our schools.

Yet, during the 2013–2014 school year, thousands of dangerous, violent, or unlawful incidents occurred in Nevada's schools. Nearly 5,600 incidents of violence against students resulted in suspension or expulsion last year. There were 275 instances of violence against staff; 440 weapons-related incidents; and more than 1,200 issues related to possession or use of controlled substances.

Data show that such incidents do not happen in a vacuum. More often than not, someone other than the person committing the violent or unlawful act is aware something is going to happen.

However, in the vast majority of these incidences, the friends, classmates, or siblings who have prior knowledge that something may—or will—happen, do not report it. This bill aims to address that problem.

### **Senate Bill 338—What it Does**

Senate Bill 338 requires the Director of the Office for a Safe and Respectful Learning Environment to create the “Safe-to-Tell Program” within the Office.

You will recall the Office of Safe and Respectful Learning in the Department of Education was created in the Governor’s anti-bullying bill — S.B. 504 — signed into law last week.

The Safe-to-Tell Program allows anonymous reporting of dangerous, violent, or unlawful activity, or the threat of such activity on school property; at an activity sponsored by a public school; or on a public school bus.

Any information reported would be confidential and may only be disclosed in the very limited circumstances as set forth in the bill.

However, the identity of any person calling the Safe-to-Tell Program remains confidential and anyone who unlawfully shares information reported to the Program will be guilty of a misdemeanor.

Senate Bill 338 also creates a new entity — the Safe-to-Tell Advisory Committee within the Office of Safe and Respectful Learning.

Committee members include two Senators and two Assemblymembers, appointed by the Majority and Minority Leaders of both houses; numerous members appointed by the Governor, including representatives from law enforcement, the Office of Suicide Prevention, the Department of Public Safety, a teacher, a school psychologist, and a victim advocate; myself, and others.

The Committee must meet as soon as possible on or after August 1, 2015, and may seek the input of persons with knowledge, interest, or expertise related to its duties.

In addition, S.B. 338 requires the Committee to report the number of calls received by the Safe-to-Tell Program to the Governor and the Legislature, and to make recommendations for legislation to improve the Program by June 30, 2016.

Finally, the bill also creates the Safe-to-Tell Program Account to implement the program and to accept gifts, grants, or donations.

## **Closing Remarks**

Madam Chair, we know that young people typically know more about what is happening in their lives than most adults. We know that anonymity must be guaranteed for a program like Safe-to-Tell to be effective.

Young people tell us that one of the biggest deterrents to reporting dangerous, violent, or unlawful activity is the fear of retaliation. This program addresses that fear and provides a safe, easy, anonymous means through which students can report dangerous threats and activities.

In past testimony, I have said I go to work every day thinking about the 15,000 children being failed by our school system but Senator Smith has eloquently suggested that we also think every day about the 343 school children who have committed suicide and who might have been saved.

So, on behalf of all of the students, parents, and educators who want safe, secure schools that foster learning and growth, where Nevada youth need not fear for their safety, I urge your support of this critical legislation.

Thank you Madam Chair and I am happy to answer any questions.