

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Minority Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee, my name is Mark Hiser and I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act.

Despite significant changes in laws and attitudes, persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer still lack basic protections granted others. I ask that you move forward the Ohio Fairness Act and vote to provide those protections.

Less you think these protections are not relevant, let me share with you excerpts from the letter-of-intent-to-retain I sent to my employer a few short years ago. Please note I have removed the identifying information for the Ohio school district where I was employed for thirty years.

I hereby submit my letter-of-intent to retain:

“On Monday October 20, I reach year thirty in my teaching career. That will, therefore, be my final day of teaching...”

Over the years, _____ has taken major steps to make schools more welcoming of minorities. Many of the staff and faculty have attended workshops and classes dealing with diversity, and most work to make our schools free of hatred, intolerance, and bigotry since we all know learning becomes secondary to any student who does not feel he/she is accepted or wanted.

One group, however, is still often ignored: the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals who are part of the _____ School District’s faculty, staff, student, and community population.

As a teacher, for thirty years I knew I was not secure in my job. Though most teachers are accepting, every principal with whom I have worked has “reminded” me in some way that as a gay man I am to remain hidden. Two principals told me I must not mention the word “partner” or give any indication of being gay, even though straight members of the faculty are permitted to say the word “husband,” or “wife,” or “boy/girl friend” and may have photos of their spouses on the desk.

I understand the political nature of an administrator’s position, so for many years I tried to remain closeted. I worked to never say the word “we” in conversations other persons might hear, or I changed pronouns when I was talking about someone I love...someone I have now been with for over 20 years. In fact, for many years, I tried never to acknowledge the existence of my partner (now my husband).

It was always difficult to lie daily, to live without integrity and honesty, and to put most of my energy into keeping people comfortable rather than into being an effective teacher.

I lived in daily fear of losing my job because of who I am. For many years, I tried to accommodate and make others comfortable. I strived to keep distance from persons connected with our schools so there was less chance they would understand I am gay. I seldom attended school functions, sporting events, plays, or faculty parties. I ate alone in my room rather than in the faculty lounge. This climate, obviously, does not create conditions that promote or encourage strong teaching, collegiality, and healthy living.

Eventually, when I could no longer hide and remain closeted on the job, a minister of a local church requested I be fired. A couple parents had their children removed from my class. Someone mailed death threat letters to my home.

The year after four of us “recently out” faculty members presented an administration-approved optional workshop on LGBTQ issues to faculty and staff, three of us were involuntarily transferred to other schools so that no two of us were ever again in the same building. Whether this was due to our openness in school I do not know. When I asked several administrators about my transfer no one would speak with me in a straight-forward way.

Why did I stay for thirty years? Because I love teaching and believe in the power of education to change the world. Why did I stay in _____? Because it is probably not much different from most other school districts in how it treats its LGBTQ population. It is my hope, though, that _____ will one day become a leader in this civil rights issue and will take more steps to welcome all persons into its family.

What I write is not out of anger but out of my love for education and students, and out of the optimistic belief that most people involved with the _____ Schools care more about education, youth, and our future than they do about the gender of the person I love.”

Though not part of my letter, what I write is out of the optimistic belief that most Ohioans understand that when LGBTQ citizens of the state feel threatened and unprotected, the energy and talents they might bring to being good neighbors, good workers, and good people must be spent on self-protection. Everyone loses.

I urge you to pass House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act.

Thank you for your time and consideration.