

Melissa McLaren

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Melissa McLaren she/her. I've been a resident of Ohio for most of my life; I was born in Columbus, graduated from Groveport Madison, and got my nursing degree from OSU. While I did get my doctorate at another Big 10 school, our family chose to move back to Ohio this is home. I am coming today in opposition to HB 454, which would effectively ban the evidence-based health care my daughter needs to remain a happy and healthy teenager. Before I begin, I do want to acknowledge that I have my daughter's permission to share her story today.

Over sixteen years ago, I was thrilled to give birth to identical twins. Though they were identical, we began to see many differences around 18 months of age. Murphy loved trucks and Transformers. Conner loved my heels and Dora the Explorer. Even the preschool teachers noticed that Conner always play-acted the mommy. My friends who told me their young sons occasionally wore their heels so I tried not to think too much of it as Conner twirled around the living room with a towel on their head like hair and a blanket around their body like a dress.

At three, Conner and Murphy saw me changing my niece's diaper. They were *shocked* to realize we have different body parts. Conner quizzed everyone about their gender and their body parts in the way that only three-year-olds can get away with and much to my embarrassment when we went to the grocery store. Every single day, Conner would ask me when they would wake up with girl's body parts. Every single day, I would tell them they wouldn't because their body was perfectly made. This daily conversation happened for months.

By four, Conner was asking for a dress. We tried to convince ourselves it was because my husband sometimes wore a kilt, but I knew that wasn't it. In an effort to prove this wasn't a big deal, we agreed to get a dress for each child. Murphy threw his on top of his jeans and snow boots then immediately pulled it back off. Conner gasped with delight, snatched the dress out of my fingers and ran upstairs. They flew back down moments later wearing the dress and a sparkly pink headband I didn't even know they had. They twirled in our living room wearing the biggest smile and the most joy I had ever seen.

As parents, we know that feeling in our gut when something is off. I knew when my child was playing pretend. This insistence on being a girl had an intensity to it that was so much different from playing Dora the Explorer.

One day, I was driving and Conner again asked when they would wake up and be a girl. I told them for the thousandth time that he was a boy. They asked when they would be a mommy with long hair and a baby in his tummy. For the thousandth time, I said, "You will never be a mommy but will grow up and be a wonderful daddy." I was emphatic. These conversations had to end. Conner was fully crying and then I heard a whimper, "But I don't want to be a daddy. I don't want hair on my face and I don't want to have a penis because I'm a girl." I had to pull the car over because I couldn't see through my sobbing. Conner was devastated and I was making it worse with each conversation.

I went home and got on my computer and started searching. I called everywhere from Boston Children's to Gender Spectrum in California crying on the phone when they could only give me limited information because they didn't know my child or our situation.

We found a therapist in Chicago who specializes in gender diverse kids. Given the level of distress our child was in, we decided to make the smallest changes possible to bring our child out of distress. This included meeting regularly with a therapist and telling Conner that it was okay to be a boy who liked to wear dresses. That worked for a short time, but within several weeks, Conner was insisting that she was a girl and that we use "she" pronouns. After much discussion, we decided changing pronouns was reversible, and with the help of our therapist and pediatrician we began using affirming pronouns. Conner started kindergarten as a girl.

We moved back to Ohio and joined the THRIVE program in 2015, when Conner was 10. For several years, her care consisted of regular visits with a psychiatrist, primary care provider, and a therapist. WE approached the team for puberty blockers after being with THRIVE for some time. We met with an endocrinologist many times and waited for Conner's labs to show us that she was already in puberty before starting blockers. We also approached the team about gender-affirming hormones after being on blockers for several years. We had so many appointments with the entire team spanning years, including many conversations about fertility preservation options. Conner started gender affirming hormones at 14.5 years old. We are starting the process of talking about surgical options because we know it will be a lengthy process with many appointments. In fact, it took six months to even get in for a consult and will likely take another 9-12 months to get all the requirements met before surgery is an option for our daughter.

I've sat in these hearings and heard from moms in pain about their child's gender identity. It is so hard as a parent to not understand what your child is going through. I recognized that my daughter was choosing a destination that hadn't even occurred to me and I could not give her directions to navigate someplace I had never been. I can't imagine how our lives would be different if our medical team hadn't been able to provide safe, effective, and evidence-based interventions to support our daughter's health and safety. I don't regret a single second that we've spent affirming her identity. The SAFE act for trans youth is to support them with the medical care backed by the American Academy of Pediatricians, the Endocrine Society, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the American Psychiatric Association. HB 454 would force my daughter to de-transition by stopping the medications that have kept her SAFE.

As I write this, my daughter's main stressors are finishing high school, getting into her first choice college, and this legislation. This issue is complex and nuanced and these decisions should be made by parents, patients, and providers not politicians. Don't take away my rights as a parent simply because you or other parents don't believe trans people exist. Transgender people do exist and they have a right to evidence-based medically-necessary healthcare. If you vote yes on this bill and it eventually gets signed into law, I will hold you personally responsible for every child who is harmed because you prevented them from getting the evidence-based medical care they have a right to receive.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on HB 454 which is NOT a SAFE act. Thank you for allowing me to share our family's story.