

November 29, 2023

Chair Young, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the House Higher Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony against Senate Bill 83. My name is Clovis Westlund, and I am a third-year undergraduate at Ohio State University and an Organizing Fellow with Honesty for Ohio Education.

In my time in Ohio's public K-12 and higher education systems, I've learned that schooling can be a transformational process. Both my Northeast Ohio public school district and my time at Ohio State have clarified my perspective, challenged my articulation, and pushed forward my thinking.

More than anything, identity-affirming public education has saved my life.

When I was first moving through the schooling system, I learned to isolate certain aspects of myself to survive and be accepted by those around me. My health and history courses made no mention of LGBTQ+ people, and as I was coming into my queer and non-binary identities, I was left without the language, history, and context to understand myself. I operated in an all-encompassing culture of invisibility.

It was really only through teachers, who saw my struggles and supported me in making the curriculum my own, that my education first began to serve me. In the last years of high school, I analyzed literature with queer theory, read histories of LGBTQ+ resilience, and advocated for inclusive practices in my community—and I finally felt personally engaged in my education. Beyond any report card metrics of achievement and attainment, I was truly learning because educators were free to support me in meeting my needs.

Adrienne Rich, on the topic of women's education, said that ignorance of ourselves is the basis of our powerlessness. Through education, we achieve a freedom separate from material conditions. My education brought me back to my body, not because of any specific district policy or legislative effort, but because my educators and counselors knew they could do what was best for the student they saw before them. It's as simple as that.

For many students, higher education is the first time identity-affirming learning is accessible, and the first time they learn the force of their humanity and agency.

However, for many of the students I've supported in advocacy on Senate Bill 83 over the past six months, I've seen the gravity of this bill settle on their faces. I still see the looks of concern after reading the full text of a bill that paints a picture of Ohio universities that couldn't be farther from the truth. From the Senate, to the Budget, to the House, I've seen a growing frustration in the eyes of students with political processes unresponsive to their opposition.

Finally, I witness students' doubts about enrolling in their state flagship university over their out-of-state private options. They might have wanted to stay close to home or reinvest in their community, but now they second guess. They see themselves and Ohio higher education on two diverging trajectories, one where Ohio students are centered in their learning and another defined by external forces and political interests.

As these students look forward to careers and lives outside of Ohio lines after graduation, they now hope you listen to their concerns on a bill as deceitful and damaging as Senate Bill 83.

I urge you to vote no on Senate Bill 83. Ohio students deserve much better than what's offered.

Thank you.