

Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to House Bill 8. My name is Dion Manley, and I am a parent, a school volunteer, and a local school board member. I am testifying today as a private citizen of Ohio, representing only myself.

As a parent, I am here to speak in opposition to what is being called a “parent’s bill of rights,” and I’d like to explain why.

My daughter attended Ohio public schools from grades K-12, and graduated last year. I’m so proud of her accomplishments! In my family, I was the first to attend college, and the first to attend trade school then earn a Bachelor’s degree. I’ve been blessed with many amazing opportunities to act as a coach, a substitute teacher, and a mentor for young folks in my community.

As a parent, I am here to tell you that I am in favor of parental rights, for all parents. Of course we all agree on parental rights. As you know, generations of leaders before us have agreed on parental rights as well, resulting in a robust history of federal, state, and local laws, policies and guidelines that shape the relationship between schools and families.

In my experience as a school board member, I’ve seen how these policies are implemented at the local level. We have school district bylaws and policies specifically in place for students, parents, families, classified staff, professional staff, administration, programming, finances, property, operations and relations. These policies are routinely reviewed utilizing input from trained professionals, district leadership, families, and other experts. These policies are specific, effective, and hard at work in today’s local school districts. House Bill 8 replaces these policies with broadly written, politically motivated language that I feel confused about how to implement in the district where I serve.

As a parent, I understand the language in this bill around notification about “sexually explicit material,” because I have had my own experiences of wanting to hold boundaries about what my child could be exposed to and at what age. When my daughter was in high school, one of her English classes included a book with a plot line about sexual violence that I worried would be too extreme or disturbing for my daughter.

My first step was to talk with my daughter. I wanted to understand her point of view, whether she was interested in this book, and why or why not. My second step was to contact her teacher.

Her teacher affirmed my role as my daughter's parent, and offered the option to select another book. Her teacher also explained why the book had been chosen, providing sound reasoning behind the educational approach and the timing of the subject matter as part of that semester's curriculum.

My daughter was growing up, and experiencing age-appropriate materials that would help to prepare her for the real world. She was being given the opportunity to demonstrate critical thinking skills about a complicated, real-world problem. More importantly, my daughter was growing into a young woman. In order for her to understand how and why she needs to keep herself safe as an adult, she needs to understand the world she's living in. So I read the book too, and my daughter and I had some meaningful discussions about it. The assignment of this book gave me an opportunity to be the best parent possible to my daughter, and to make sure that she felt supported at home and in school.

As a parent, I knew that my daughter's teachers would always hear my input in my daughter's education. But I know too that my personal preferences are not always practical or applicable for other families. I view my relationship with her school as a partnership, and so while I have been frustrated with some decisions along the way, I remain respectful of her teachers, school, and district and the incredible public education she received.

I'm an out member of the LGBTQ+ community, and in my younger years, I heard a lot of messages that who I was as a person was wrong, or bad, or scary. I first came out as a teenager and have spent decades coming out to people. I went through a lot of my life confused about my gender, and eventually came out as transgender. Growing up and figuring out who I was was confusing and complicated, as it is for all young people. When I first came out, I thought I knew my mom, and I thought she would support me, but I was wrong. Forcing a young person to come out to their parent before they are ready is harmful. I am glad that decision in my life was left in my hands, instead of a third party.

House Bill 8 reduces the responsibility of a student's education to kneejerk, emotional reactions from parents. In fact, education is a complex journey, one that requires active educators, engaged students and families, and multiple resources from a school district. I don't want to be my daughter's watchdog; I want to be an active participant in her growth and development.

This bill sets Ohio's schools up for continued confusion and failings because of its broad and vague language. House Bill 8 will hurt LGBTQ+ students, and it hurts families like mine. And as a board member, I am concerned about being responsible for legal language that is broad, vague, and potentially harmful to our students.

I urge you to work with local school board members like me to identify opportunities to serve all students, and all families. And I urge you to **vote NO on House Bill 8**.

Thank you,

Dion Manley