

Chairman Bird, Vice Chair Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is James Vacca. I am a student at Columbus State Community College, a professional in the human services field, and a member of the LGBTQ+ community. I am strongly opposed to House Bill 8 and its companion bill in the Ohio Senate.

House Bill 8 is an answer in search of a problem. Ohio already has regulations that govern parental notice, review, and opting out of instruction. Public schools are already required to establish policies that allow parents to be actively involved in their children's education and maintain "consistent and effective" communication between parents and their children's schools. Districts are already required to establish a parental advisory committee or some other strategy to enable parental review of instructional materials and academic curricula.

The "oversight" outlined in this bill could create a culture of intimidating or targeting educators. This bill foments division and distrust of educators and creates a pipeline for the community to micromanage educators. It is important for students and families to have safe, trusted relationships with educators and leaders.

But the most damning indictment of this bill is that it is harmful to LGBTQ+ students. Requiring a district to report "changes to a student's mental, emotional, or physical health or well-being" to a parent is code for requiring districts to out LGBTQ+ students to their family. Sharing this deeply personal information without student consent can be traumatizing and dangerous for the student. Schools must remain a safe, trusted space for students and educators. This vague standard goes against the Whole Child Framework of the Department of Education, which emphasizes "equity and [the] specific needs of individual students" as one of the core tenets of our strategic plan for education.

The proposed language of this bill would decrease access to medically accurate sex education, which local schools may be providing to their students. The bill does not require a standard of medical accuracy in the instructional materials used in high schools across the state. The intentionally vague definition of "sexually explicit content" offers no practical understanding of what qualifies as sexually explicit, allowing some to remove diverse, inclusive content and material. Worse, the definition is a politicized dog whistle targeting gender identity, sexuality, diverse family dynamics, and relationships.

Our education system is facing incredible challenges right now: a state-wide teacher shortage, COVID-related learning loss, under-funding, the need for mental health services for students, not to mention the fear & trauma caused by recent gun violence incidents. This bill could add significant strain and tension in an already strained and tense education system.

I urge you to vote No on this bill.