

Chairman Lipps, Vice Chair Stewart, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the House Public Health Committee,

Thank you for reading my testimony. My name is Zoe Plotnick, and I am a career educator from Dayton who works with a nonprofit supporting community schools that serve vulnerable student populations. I facilitate trainings for teachers and administrators on best practices for supporting high-needs children in K-12 schools, and I'm currently working on a doctoral dissertation that aims to help dropout recovery high schools serve at-risk students more effectively. Not only have I devoted my career to understanding and supporting the needs of children who live in the margins, but I am also the parent of an LGBTQ+ child. As a teacher, advocate and mother, I am urging you to reject HB 68.

The so-called "SAFE" Act puts some of our most vulnerable youth in danger of losing access to crucial, best-practice healthcare. While proponents of this bill may attempt to frame it as a measure to protect youth from "dangerous experimental hormonal treatments," the reality is that puberty blockers have been in mainstream use since the 1980's to delay puberty for medical reasons and are known to be fully reversible. The use of gender-affirming treatments like puberty blockers to address gender dysphoria is confidently endorsed by a dozen major medical associations in the United States, including the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Endocrine Society.

Furthermore, the bill also limits access to mental health care approaches that have been proven to reduce suicide rates and lead to healthier outcomes, including ones that may involve no hormones or physical alterations of the body at all. A staggering body of peer-reviewed research demonstrates that transgender children and teens are at drastically increased risk of harassment, sexual assault, and suicide without this care. Across the board, children whose gender identity is affirmed by therapy experience far more positive outcomes. Gender-affirming therapy saves lives, but if HB 68 becomes law, even this care will be lost to transgender kids.

The passing of this dangerous legislation would lead to forcibly re-transitioning all transgender youth in the state of Ohio. The lives of very real children and their families in our state would be completely upended. This is the very definition of government overreach, as it takes away the autonomy of parents and youth to consult with doctors and choose treatments that could save their life. At best, many families would be forced to flee the state to protect their children. At worst, this legislation may lead to death for children whose families are unable to relocate. According to a 2022 UCLA study analyzing CDC data, 1.4% of people aged 13-17 identify as transgender. This group experiences some of the highest rates of depression and suicide of any subgroup in the nation, but a University of Washington study last year showed that gender-affirming care is the best answer we have to this crisis as it can reduce the risk of suicide for these young people by a whopping 73%.

A “yes” vote for HB 68 is a vote against access to safe care that is medically proven to save lives. A "yes" vote communicates the belief that the lives of over 36,000 children in Ohio are expendable for the sake of trying to win a culture war. On the other hand, a "no" vote is a vote for autonomy and freedom for parents to seek care that can save the lives of children.

While I have a compelling interest in this bill as an advocate for at-risk children, this is also a bit personal for me. When my daughter Sophie, who uses *she* and *they* pronouns, was four years old, her preschool teacher told me she fearlessly stepped in and told off one of the big kids who was throwing toys at a toddler she did not know at all. When she was six – with no prompting from any adults whatsoever – she volunteered to donate her tooth fairy money to Hurricane Harvey survivors. I watched her put the first money anyone ever gave her to spend on whatever she liked into the donation fishbowl in the school office because she felt compelled to help strangers who were suffering. Sophie is twelve now, and she still goes out of her way to show compassion to others. When a new girl transferred into her middle school right before her birthday this year, she asked me right away if she could invite her to her slumber party. “I want her to feel welcome,” she told me, “because being left out sucks.” Unfortunately, Sophie does know what it is like to feel left out. Despite the bullying she has experienced for just being who she is, though, she exudes kindness towards those who are vulnerable, even if she doesn't know them personally.

If you agree that children like Sophie are worthy of even a fraction of the compassion they offer the world, please vote NO on HB 68. Thank you for your time and consideration.

-T. Zoe Plotnick
Dayton, Ohio