

December 12, 2023

Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Ingram, and the other members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Kara Butlien-Cohen and I stand here today to speak against HB 8. If enacted, HB 8 would create chaos and confusion in the education system. This bill is completely unnecessary and actually does more harm than good to schools. In a sense, it creates solutions to problems that do not exist.

Before I state why this bill is harmful, I wanted to point out that I am an educator. I have seen the impact that various pieces of legislation have on my profession. In my 11 years of teaching in Ohio schools, I have seen bills that favor public education and others that make the profession more arduous. HB 8 creates more red tape for teachers, staff and administrators in any school district. While the intent is parental rights in education, there are other pieces in this bill that are much more troublesome. The areas of focus that I want to address today are issues in the language of the bill itself vs the matter of interpretations and the challenges that it poses for a school district.

First, let's analyze the language itself. Right away, it is evident that certain terms are not defined or they go against precedent. HB 8 does not have an explicit definition for the word "sexual concepts" or "gender ideology," which allows the words to be tied to LGBTQ+ identities, which in turn justifies attacks on LGBTQ+ students and staff. How would you interpret those definitions? Would all teachers have the same definitions? Would all administrators have the same interpretations of those definitions? Would teachers and administrators have the same understanding? What would districts tell parents? One can see how confusing interpreting definitions are. Yet, there are darker consequences if we look deeper into the bill.

Consequently, there is an increase in censorship. While by no means am I legal expert, isn't censorship an infringement of 1st Amendment rights? Think about that for a moment. It is troubling to see that the party that represents limited government proposes a bill that encourages the government to get involved with local school district decisions. Correct me if I am wrong, but don't local school districts already create policies that meet the needs of the district? Each school district, superintendent, and school board is tasked with proposing what works best for that particular school district.

If a parent decides to file a complaint about sexually explicit content against a teacher, administrator, or school district, the complaint must be dealt with in 30 days. While this may seem like an adequate solution, this is not the answer. Instead we are encouraging parents to raise numerous complaints against teachers, administrators, staff, and school districts that families

may not like. Districts already have procedures in place for such occurrences. These attacks would contribute to an unprecedented amount of attacks on public schools.

I often wonder, will I be the target of someone's vitriol? Am I doing everything I can to avoid controversial topics? Did I say something that I should not have said? Could I get in trouble? These are all questions that overwhelm me, which in turn leads me to consider teaching. I know that many educators are struggling with these questions too.

Teaching is already a difficult profession. Everyday we have the demands of teaching children in an environment that is difficult to work with (increased discipline challenges, increased student poverty and homelessness, and other district and school expectations). The proposal of HB 8 would make it even more difficult for teachers to do their jobs without having to worry about additional restrictions. Members of the committee, I urge you to understand the complexities and challenges of teaching. I urge you to realize these consequences and vote no on HB 8.