



The Society for Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and
Gender Expansive Identities of Ohio

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Sandra O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram and esteemed members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in opposition to House Bill 8. My name is Mariah Payne, and I am submitting written testimony on behalf of the Ohio Counseling Association (OCA). In the OCA, I act as the Society for Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and Gender Expansive Identities of Ohio (SAIGEO) Government Relations Committee Liaison. I am a licensed professional counselor in North Ridgeville Ohio and am incredibly active in my community. My clinical work focuses on LGBTQ+ mental health, making me well-qualified to testify on this topic.

The OCA and SAIGEO oppose House Bill 8 due to the adverse impact it will have on youth and school counselors across the state. In addition, this bill has the ability to place our LGBTQ+ students at an increased risk due to the language of this bill dictating that staff and school counselors must disclose students' identities or orientations. House Bill 8 threatens the safety and mental wellbeing of students exploring their sexual, affectional, or gender identities. In fact, the continued proposal of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation is already negatively impacting the mental wellbeing of LGBTQ+ youth (The Trevor Project, 2023).

As mental health professionals, we can empathize with parents and their concerns about the wellbeing of their children. We encourage parents to create a safe and affirming environment so that their children can feel comfortable to discuss their mental health, identities, and orientations. We want parents to be involved in counseling as this is a crucial aspect to counseling services for minors. School counselors are already asking students if their parents are aware of the social or emotional issues they're experiencing. If the client has not yet informed their parents, the school counselor is working with the students to build their skills and work towards self-disclosure. Every child is unique and has the inalienable right to disclose their orientations at their own pace. We are opposed to immediate or universal disclosure requirements that do not take into account the nuances of each situation. Forcing trained professionals to immediately disclose this information to students' parents, regardless of the student's readiness, would reduce the amount of safe adults available to these children and threaten the rapport of school counselors.

There is evidence that suggests students are disclosing their identities at higher rates to their parents than they are to school staff. In a recent study conducted by The Trevor Project, sixty-eight percent of participants reported they disclosed their sexual orientations to their parents and fifty-one percent reported their parents are aware of their gender identity. Less than half (43% for sexual orientation; 40% for gender identity) of LGBTQ+ respondents were out to an adult at school (Trevor Project, 2019). House Bill 8 creates unnecessary procedures and barriers for our school staff around the potential disclosure of a student's gender identity.

Counselor-client relationships are built on trust and a mutual understanding of the client's confidentiality. This is crucial to the efficacy of counseling adolescents (Bray, 2022). School counselors are trained in understanding the limitations of confidentiality and how to navigate disclosure when providing services. It is crucial that students feel safe turning to teachers and school counselors as LGBTQ+ youth who have at least one accepting adult are less likely to attempt suicide (The Trevor Project, 2019). If passed, House Bill 8 would tell students they should not disclose their mental health difficulties or identities to staff at their school.

This bill won't just make LGBTQ+ youth feel less safe in schools, it will make their schools less safe. Every child should feel safe in Ohio's schools, that is why we urge you not to pass House Bill 8. We are clinical mental health counselors, school counselors, counselor educators, and counselors-in-training. We have the expertise to tell you that this will irreversibly harm the mental and emotional well-being of youth in this state.

Written by Mariah Payne, MA, LPC, SAIGEO Liaison to the OCA Government Relations Committee 2023-2024, and Gene Dockery, MA, LPC, NCC, SAIGEO Liaison to the OCA Government Relations Committee 2022-2023 and SAIGE Public Policy Chairperson

Edited by Kristin S. Curran, MAEd, LPC, SAIGEO Secretary

References

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