

Written Opposition Testimony HB 8

Senate Education Committee

Chair Brennen, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to submit written testimony today. My name is Elizabeth Rieger. I am a licensed independent social worker. I have 44 years of experience working directly with people in this field. Twelve of my 44 years of experience have been working as a school social worker, also certified by the Ohio Department of Education. For 12 years prior to my retirement in September 2024, I have been a private practice clinician, working with children and adults. I am strongly opposed to HB 8.

Among all the tasks children are called upon to develop when they enter school, developing autonomy may be one of the most important. Children reaching adolescence are in a critical time for development of identity. Erik Erikson developed the psycho-social stages of development theory, a theory which has aided parents, education personnel, the mental health community, and many others to understand developmental tasks through the lifespan.¹ Stage 5 of Erikson's theory is titled "identity vs. role confusion" and occurs between the ages of 12-18. Saul McLeod, PhD, researcher, suggests in an article titled "Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychological Development", that adolescents given the freedom to explore their identity, are likely to have a strong sense of independence, while those adolescents who are restricted from exploring their identity may struggle to identify their purpose or path.² In order to grow into healthy adults, children in grades Kindergarten through high school benefit from opportunities to explore and develop their own identities, and the freedom to figure out their identity.

School social workers are uniquely qualified and well trained to assist students in exploring their identity. School social workers can provide all students, and in particular, gender diverse students with a safe space to process their feelings and experiences. School social workers are highly qualified to assist students in developing skills to navigate difficult discussions with parents regarding any and all subjects. As it pertains to transgender and gender diverse students deciding to come out to parents, school social workers are trained to provide clinical interventions designed to aide both student and parent in that process. If HB 8 passes, however, school social workers, who will be required to out students, will no longer be seen by students as a safe person, nor will school social work offices be seen as safe spaces by the student body, potentially leaving transgender and gender diverse youth vulnerable and without a safe adult in their lives. This bill will fundamentally change school social workers ability to offer best practice, evidenced-based treatment within the school setting.

Federal law protects members of the LGBTQ+ community from discrimination after the Supreme Court ruling in 2020. According to the LGBTQ+ Bill of Rights, students have the right to decide when, and how to come out.³ HB 8 not only violates students privacy rights, it can open the student to hostility, rejection, and even violence in unsafe homes when outed prior to being ready.

The Ohio School Social Workers Association, an organization that is an essential resource for social workers serving as school social workers, defines the areas within the schools where social workers serve: students; parents/families; school personnel; communities; and entire districts, of note, parents and families are listed directly after students.⁴ It is the goal of school social workers to work with and understand students as members of their individual family system, and to embrace the student's family as a potential part of their interventions. It is, critical, however, that school social workers have the opportunity to use their clinical skills and judgement to assist students in planning for and navigating difficult conversations with parents. In particular, it is vital to the safety of gender diverse students that school social workers not be required to out students who could be returning home to an unsafe home, potentially leading to abuse, or even kicked out of their home.

As a therapist, I talked with children and their parents about my Informed Consent prior to commencing therapy. We discussed at length the possibility of a child being able to talk openly about things in their life they are not ready to share with parents. In all my years of clinical work experience, I have only had one parent who decided to not allow for that. Having tried everything in their parent toolbox prior to seeking therapy, almost every other parent said, enthusiastically, they wanted their child to be able to build a trusting relationship with a therapist, in hopes that the therapeutic process will improve the way their child is feeling about themselves, as well as improve the parent/child relationship. My Informed Consent was absolutely clear that if a child is feeling suicidal, homicidal, or engaged in highly dangerous behavior, parents will be notified immediately. HB 8 will destroy the trust that school social workers build with children. That lack of trust, could lead to anxiety, isolation, and decreased sense of worth for many students, but of particular concern are transgender and gender diverse students.

The Trevor Project 2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People reports that nearly 1 in 3 LGBTQ youth said their mental health was poor most of the time or always due to anti-LGBTQ policies or legislation.⁵ LGBTQ+ students are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight and cisgender peers.⁶ My experience providing clinical social work services to a school district for 12 years, allows me to report to the Senate Education Committee that the devastating effect of student's deaths by suicide is something that has far reaching impact on parents/families, school personnel, districts, communities, and most profoundly, peers, who are suddenly placed at risk for questioning their own worth and value. One of the primary roles when counseling students following a student death by suicide, is to provide interventions for students, and education to staff and parents (all of whom are grieving) regarding the contagious nature of suicide. Teens who know a family member or friend who has attempted suicide are three times more likely to attempt suicide than teens who do not.⁷

As a social worker with 44 years of experience, and almost 24 years of clinical work with children, and due to the risk associated with outing LGBTQ+ students, should HB 8 pass, I urge each of the members of the Senate Education Committee to consider the potential risks for anxiety, isolation, decreased sense of self-worth, abuse, homelessness, and most importantly, suicide for young Ohioans, and vote no on HB 8.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions. You can reach me by phone at 937-203-8141 or via email at liz@lizriegeer.com

¹Psychology Today (January 31, 2019) Retrieved October 9, 2023 from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/lifespan-perspectives/201901/erikson-s-gift-the-developmental-tasks-adulthood>

²Simply Psychology (August 2, 2023) Retrieved October 9, 2023 from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/erik-erikson.html>

³ACLU (June 15, 2020) Retrieved October 9, 2023 from <https://www.glsen.org/activity/lgbtq-student-rights>

⁴OSSWA (website 2019) Retrieved April 21, 2024 from <https://osswa1.wildapricot.org/school-social-workers>

⁵The Trevor Project 2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People (2023) Retrieved May 20, 2023 from <https://www.thetrevorproject>

⁶The Trevor Project (July 2023) Retrieved April 21, 2024 from <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/guide/creating-safer-spaces-in-schools-for-lgbtq-young-people/>

⁷The National Institute of Health: The Contagion of Suicidal Behavior (2013) Retrieved April 21, 2024 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207262/>