

December 9, 2024

Re: HB 8

Dear Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today. My name is Jennifer Martinez Atzberger and I am an education attorney and advocate for families and children in schools, residing in Bay Village, Ohio. My clients are facing various issues that require extra support, such as children with disabilities, children experiencing bullying or discrimination, or children dealing with trauma related to circumstances in their home life beyond their control, such as poverty, homelessness, or parents struggling with addiction or mental health issues.

For these children and families, schools and school counselors and staff may be the only source of safety and support that they have access to on a daily basis. It is vital that these staff can be trusted to provide mental health supports to children confidentially and that they feel safe talking to trusted adults at school. Ideally, children also have their parents to provide support and guidance, but I know from my personal experience of being an advocate for children for over 20 years that this is often just not the case. Therefore, I urge the Committee to reject passage of this bill because it creates unnecessary barriers to children receiving mental health support in schools and could create dangerous situations for kids who do not feel safe in their homes or for LGBTQ+ youth whose parents are not supportive of them.

Additionally, this bill creates a solution for a problem that does not exist. Parents already have the right to review school curriculum and opt-out of their child's participation in discussions of sensitive topics. However, many parents count on the resources and information provided in schools to help inform their children and create opportunities to engage in important discussions about relationships and sexuality that they might otherwise not have the ability or comfort level to initiate on their own. These discussions can prove to be essential to the development and well-being of adolescents as they navigate the world around them.

Therefore, I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this dangerous and harmful bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Martinez Atzberger, Esq.