

My name is Dawn Riggs, and I am a retired educator with 34 years of experience. I am also the mother of two adult children who are both gender non-conforming. I'm here to share my personal story in the hopes that you will hear the harm that HB 8 would do to our students and children, and to our teachers and educational system.

Imagine having a secret, a part of yourself that you know to be the truest part, and being afraid that the world will condemn you for it. Being afraid that your friends, your family, your employer, your church, would reject you and condemn you as a non-entity. Knowing that your government has an active campaign to take away your rights, your safety. An active campaign to try to erase you.

HB 8 has many facets that are problematic, but I want to focus on one - the coded language that would out LGBTQ students who are not ready to be out to the world. The language in this bill requiring a district to report "changes to a student's mental, emotional, or physical health or well-being" to a parent is code for requiring districts to out LGBTQ+ students to their family. Do you know how horrifying that is? To students? To educators?

I recently had a conversation with a good friend - a former theatre student who I'm now "aunt" to her kids. She said, "I'd want to know if my kids were asking to be called a different name, or use different pronouns!" And I know she would. She's a good person, an awesome mom, and would embrace her kids and tell them she loves them unconditionally and take the journey with them. But I asked her, "What if a kid doesn't have a supportive home environment? What then?" She paused, and then understood. The truth is that some students are in situations where their coming out as gay, or transgender, or questioning their sexuality or gender identity is deadly. And under HB 8, you're telling us that teachers are to be required to PUT THOSE KIDS IN HARM'S WAY? What's the alternative? Students know that they can't trust their teachers? And they live with never having anyone see their truest selves?

Do you know why a teacher is often the first to know after a young person's closest friend? Because they're testing the waters to see if the world will accept them. Yes, if a trusted educator rejects them, it's awful. But at least it's not your mom. Or your dad. Because rejection by your parents carries with it such devastation. And it can be dangerous. Some kids are kicked out, or physically harmed. Not to mention the emotional harm.

See, here's the thing: It's not just kids from homes that don't accept them that are worried. My own child, at the age of 21, felt the need to write me a note to tell me about themselves. My kid. Who grew up in a home where they saw how I interacted with their gay and trans classmates at school every day. My kid. Who had already seen us accept their older sibling. My kid. Gentle, and kind, and scared as hell at age 21, when they were in college. My husband and I read that letter, stunned not that our child was LGBTQ, but that they were SCARED that we'd reject them. If my kid, with all the support right out there in plain sight was worried about acceptance, can you imagine coming out to someone who you had every indication that they *wouldn't* accept you? Devastating.

As a teacher, I had the privilege of working with many gay, lesbian, trans and non-binary students in my classes over the years. My experience with Transgender individuals spans my entire career. I am still in touch with many of these folks. Every single former student has told me how much knowing that they had a safe place to be their authentic selves has meant to them. They have shared stories about traumas they were experiencing outside my classroom, from classmates, other teachers, family members. They have told me about their cutting. Their suicidal thoughts. Their depression and anxiety and wish to just disappear. The fact that they could walk into my classroom, be called the name they chose, or be called by the pronouns that reflected their lived experience, made a difference. Even if no other adult in their life affirmed their identity, they knew they would be safe for at least a little while each day. I did not know how much trauma they faced. I just knew that I cared for and respected my students.

The language in this proposal that teachers must "out" their students when they are not ready to be out is horrifying. The statistics surrounding suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and completed suicides are stark. But you all have the statistics about teen suicide, and especially suicide rates among transgender youth. I'm not sure why those don't seem to matter to so many people. Legislative bodies, not just this one, seem determined to demonize *someone* for political gain. Are you trying to erase the LGBTQ community? Because if you are, you should just be honest and say that, instead of pretending to protect the children.

The protective effects of a caring individual, school, or community has been well documented. Our students must be able to choose the time and manner in which they share their truth. It is not our place to force them to do so. And it is wrong to turn teachers into gender police. Our schools must be welcoming and safe for ALL students. And this includes our LGBTQ kids.

I urge this committee to oppose HB 8. Thank you for your time.