

Testimony Opposing Ohio House Bill 8

Rachel Coyne
Fairview Park, OH 44126
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To Whom it May Concern,

I submit this testimony in opposition to Ohio House Bill 8, a bill that would end client confidentiality in the school setting. I believe this legislation, if enacted, would have harmful consequences for the mental health and well-being of students across Ohio, and I plead, to please reconsider this bill's provisions.

First, I would like to emphasize the importance of confidentiality in the school counseling and mental health context. For many students, school counselors, therapists, and other mental health professionals are often the only trusted adults in their lives with whom they feel comfortable discussing personal, sensitive, or traumatic experiences. Removing client confidentiality would undermine this trust and could create an unwelcoming environment, where students are less likely to seek help when they need it most.

Confidentiality is a cornerstone of ethical practice for school counselors and mental health professionals. The ability to speak openly with a counselor without fear of judgment or unintended consequences is essential for a student's emotional growth and well-being. If Ohio House Bill 8 passes, students may choose to suffer in silence rather than risk having their private issues exposed to parents, teachers, or other authorities. This could prevent students from accessing the support they need to navigate challenging situations such as bullying, family issues, mental health struggles, or trauma.

Additionally, the bill could have significant negative effects on vulnerable populations, including students dealing with abuse and students struggling with severe mental health disorders. These students may already feel isolated or marginalized and may be particularly reluctant to reach out for help if they believe their confidential conversations could be disclosed. The risk of exposing personal information without a student's consent could create even greater barriers to seeking care, ultimately exacerbating mental health problems and potentially leading to harmful outcomes such as increased depression, anxiety, or even self-harm.

From a legal perspective, Ohio House Bill 8 could also conflict with federal regulations that protect the privacy of students. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law designed to protect the privacy of student education records, and ending client confidentiality could violate the spirit of these protections. Furthermore, breaking confidentiality could lead to potential legal consequences for counselors and schools, including breaches of professional ethics and licensure issues.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that many school counselors and mental health professionals have specific training to handle sensitive information and maintain a safe,

supportive environment for students. These professionals are not only educated in mental health support but also in the ethical and legal standards governing their practice. Removing the protections of confidentiality could leave these professionals vulnerable and severely limit their ability to provide effective care.

Currently, parents and guardians who consent on the minor's behalf generally have the right to know the content of the child's treatment. With this guideline currently in place, we see parents all across Ohio, involved in their child's therapeutic progress. We must continue to prioritize solutions that protect students' mental health and encourage them to reach out for support without fear of repercussion.

In conclusion, I urge you to vote against Ohio House Bill 8. Removing client confidentiality from the school setting would endanger students' mental health, hinder their access to necessary services, and undermine the critical trust between students and counselors. We must prioritize the safety and well-being of our students and children by ensuring that they have a safe space to seek help without fear of their personal information being disclosed without their consent.

Thank you for considering.

Sincerely,
Rachel Coyne, LSW