

Robyn Houze HB183 Testimony for October 11, 2023

Thank you to Chair Young, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the Higher Education Committee for allowing me to speak today.

This bill is essential for K-12 schools in Ohio since public schools are choosing not to be transparent with the parents of the student body regarding changes in processes and procedures inside the school building walls.

For those of you who have never been a teenage girl. Let me share a bit of what it's like to be a teenage girl in a school restroom post puberty. Having your monthly period is often embarrassing to young girls. And you don't want anyone to know when it's happening. So, you try really hard to conceal why you are in the restroom. But it's hard when there is packaging to unwrap and put in a noisy waste bin with a metal door. Many girls want privacy as to when they are on their period from other girls who too are dealing with the same challenges. So, with all that in mind try to imagine what it's like to have a teenage boy walk in the restroom beside you and occupy the stall next to you. A boy who will never have to change his feminine pad at school.

To take this one step further if you as a teenage girl have the guts to stand up for yourself after being caught off guard by a boy's presence in the girls' restroom it is made clear to you by the trusted adult that the feelings of the boy are more important than your feelings. As the standard Olentangy response given by staff members is that if you are uncomfortable sharing a private space with a boy then you are the one required to use an alternative restroom.

Now flip the roles:

Prior to the summer of 2022, lodging at High school marching band camp consisted of boys' cabins and girls' cabins. However, in 2022, teenage boys at one of the Olentangy High Schools returned home from band camp upset that they had to share their sleeping, showering, and changing accommodations with two members of the opposite sex. The male marching band students were provided no advance notification or warning about sharing their overnight lodging & facilities with girls for an entire week. No one asked them if they would feel comfortable sharing their space with females. As a parent would you like to be informed in advance of your high school son lodging with girls for a week?

The opposition testimony claimed that the kids are fine with anyone using any restroom, it's only the parents who have an issue. This has not been my experience on this issue. Some students are uncomfortable sharing private spaces with members of the opposite sex. In addition, just because kids are okay with something doesn't make it okay. For example, my kids are fine with not putting on sunscreen when we go to the pool. However, I am not fine with the potential harm they may experience if they don't wear sunscreen at the pool. It's my job to educate my children based on what is truth and protect them while they grow and mature into adults capable of making their own decisions.

Once I found out that Olentangy had changed the restroom rules in the elementary buildings I began speaking out asking for transparency on the issue. In my boy's school there was at least one 4th grade child using the restroom of their identity not their biology. I contacted our Elementary Principal; I spoke at board meetings; I asked questions of the district leadership team. I was told that there was nothing to

share, that Olentangy was following the “controlling body of law”. And that it was parent’s responsibility to keep current on such controlling law. I was left with more questions than answers.

I personally have asked the District Leadership team for several documents to be shared with parents in a district wide communication. I believe parents have a right to view items such as the current restroom usage policy, an internal email that provided guidelines for decision making on transgender situations, the District’s Transgender FAQs, and the district’s gender support plan. Repeatedly I was told no. I have tried asking direct yes or no questions as to if parents will be notified when their student asks for accommodation related to a new gender identity and have not been able to get a clear answer. Educating a student should be a partnership between the school and the parents. Parents should never have to wonder what secrets the school is keeping related to their own student. Most parents do not know that the district utilizes a gender support plan let alone the fact that a parent’s signature for the created plan is “desired but not required”.

Public schools are refusing to share information on restroom usage with parents, making this bill a necessity to protect Ohio’s kids. The lack of transparency on this topic which leads to lack of trust is just one of the reasons why some parents are choosing to leave the Olentangy Local School district. Allowing children to use the restroom of their choice rather than the one matching their biology is a significant change to how children interact at school. The surprise and confusion felt by students often leads to feelings of resentment rather than the desired equity and inclusion. Parents deserve to be informed when previous social norms are changed inside our school buildings. Schools are failing to inform both students and parents of the happenings inside the school building related to gender identity. Whether it be teaching about it, counseling to students regarding it, or facility usage changes due to it. Therefore, it is essential for the State to set the policy to be followed to ensure transparency with parents.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.