

McLaren Opponent Testimony to HB 8

To Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, my name is Melissa McLaren, I am the mother of two high school students in Ohio, and I am urging you to vote no on House Bill 8. While I believe parts of the bill to have merit, some of the language is very problematic for kids like mine.

As the parent of a child who identifies as LGBTQ, I have always considered the faculty, administrators, and staff of our local schools to be partners in the health and safety of my child. My child knows that certain members of the school staff are safe adults to reach out to when needed. There have been several instances when my child has told me after the fact that they visited the school nurse or the school counselor. I have at minimum, annual conversations with the school staff regarding the mental health and well-being of my child. I trust them to care for her needs during the school day and to reach out to me appropriately when necessary. I also know that I must allow them to do their jobs to create a safe environment for my child. Our partnership in her care has been seamless and collaborative. I hope that is the goal for all families working with the school staff.

The concerns I have regarding HB 8 is that it disrupts a child's right to safety, well-being, and reasonable education through vague language regarding "sexually explicit content." Without clear and standardized language regarding what is considered "sexually explicit content" then everything from passages in the Bible (most of the book of Song of Solomon, many stories about King David and his wives, the treatment of Lot's daughters) to biology textbooks and works of art could fall under this terminology. Clear definitions of what is considered sexually explicit are necessary within the bill before I would be comfortable with it. Our children already have access to sexually explicit content on the internet. Our schools can put their head in the sand and ignore the issue, or we can ensure that they are hearing accurate and relevant information in a safe environment.

This language would also impact medically accurate sex information. I am a nurse and have always used appropriate terminology with my children regarding body parts, sexual education, consent, and body autonomy, but I know many adults who either don't know this information or don't share it with their children, relying on the schools to educate them on these matters. I would hope that the schools have at least clearly identified competencies that each school must meet to help all our children with baseline knowledge in these areas.

Regarding safety, I worry that the vague language of this bill will put LGBTQ students at risk. I know of several high school students who are not "out" to their parents for many reasons. One reason is that they are still working through their sexuality and gender expression. Talking about it with their parent before they are ready makes them feel like they must declare a specific stance when they are just looking for a safe place to explore. Other kids know that if they shared their sexual orientation or gender identity with their parents, they would be forced to leave the home. My children both have friends that were forced to leave the home the moment they turned 18, despite still being in high school, because their parents kicked them out due to their SOGI status. Others are suffering in households where who they are is used against them physically, emotionally, and financially. Finally, I trust my school staff to provide my child with autonomy in knowing when it is the right time for her to share her information with me. Forcing the schools to share information before a child is ready will do more harm than good. If the school counselor is the only place a child feels safe, and we are then making that outlet an unsafe one, then who will a child turn to? School counselors have codes of ethics and practice standards that

keep our children safe. I trust school staff to do the jobs they were trained to do and consider them experts in their field.

The name of this bill is the Ohio Unsafe Students act. However, by forcing school staff to “out” students before they are ready, and even if the staff feel it puts children at risk, then we are not keeping our children safe at all. If the intention of the bill is to keep Ohio students safe, then isn't a forced outing regardless of risk of harm the exact opposite?

Please let our experts continue to do their job. Politicians, while well meaning, do not need to take on the role of experts in this area. Please do not pass HB 8 and usurp the expertise of our trained professionals or remove schools as safe spaces to learn accurate and relevant information.

Thank you.