



**Ohio Senate Public Testimony
Senate Education Committee**

December 11, 2023

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

My name is Dr. Rhea Debussy, and my pronouns are she/her. I'm the Director of External Affairs for Equitas Health. As you're likely aware, Equitas Health is a non-profit community health center and one of the largest LGBTQ+ and HIV/AIDS serving healthcare organizations in the country. Each year, we serve tens of thousands of patients in Ohio, Texas, Kentucky, and West Virginia, and since 1984, we have been working to advance "care for all."¹ I'm thankful for the opportunity to address you all today, and I'm here to provide testimony in opposition to the proposed and so-called "Parent's Bill of Rights" (HB 8), given the harm that it would cause to LGBTQ+ youth across the state.

There has been an ongoing debate over so-called "parent's rights" in relation to both educational curriculum and student support. Such debates – which are just now beginning here in the Ohio Statehouse – have already been occurring at the federal level, and in March 2023, the U.S. House of Representatives advanced a so-called "Parent's Bill of Rights."² As noted by PBS, many have noted that such legislation raises serious concerns, such as "propel[ing] a far-right movement that has led to book bans, [unconstitutional] restrictions aimed at transgender students, and raucous school board meetings across the country."³ However, it should be noted that the such legislation at the federal level could not even obtain the full support of Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and to the surprise of many, even members of the Freedom Caucus opposed it.⁴ And of course, the White House specifically noted that such legislation 1) puts LGBTQ+ students at a greater risk, 2) politicizes children's education, and 3) fails to deliver the resources that schools and families need.⁵

When considering this so-called "Parental Bill of Rights" bill here in Ohio, we urge this committee to actively reflect on what problems this bill is even attempting to solve. For instance, some proponents of this bill have noted that they have 'concerns' about educational curriculum in local school districts across the state. Given the rhetoric about 'big government' that often accompanies legislation like this, then why do the sponsors of this bill presume that they – as leaders in the state, rather than local, government – should tell local school districts across Ohio how to support their students' needs? As you'll probably notice, this bill seems to be less focused upon ensuring "parent's rights" and more about forcing local school districts and Boards of Education to enact policies that don't actually make sense for their students or their school districts.

Furthermore, our agency has a number of concerns with the actual text of HB 8, including but not limited to the failure to require medically accurate instructional materials for sex education programs in high schools across the state. Regarding the proposed revisions to Section 3313.473(A)(1)(b), the proposed language would

¹ <https://equitashealth.com/about-us/>

² <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/5/text>

³ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/house-republicans-pass-parents-rights-bill-in-fight-over-schools>

⁴ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/gop-sets-vote-parents-rights-clash-schools-98092677>

⁵ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/SAP-H.R.-5-Parents-Bill-of-Rights-Act.pdf>

decrease access to medically accurate sex education, which local school districts may be providing their students. While Ohio mandates sex education in schools across the state, parents already have the right to opt their students out of such education, and quite alarmingly, such education is not even required to be medically accurate, as noted by the Guttmacher Institute.⁶ Simply put, HB 8 fails both Ohio students and parents by focusing on the presumed need for “alternative instruction,” rather than real and medically accurate information.⁷ And as noted by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, numerous “studies have demonstrated that comprehensive sexuality education programs reduce the rates of sexual activity, sexual risk behaviors..., sexually transmitted infections, and adolescent pregnancy.”⁸ In short, the sponsors of HB 8 fail to even understand the problems facing Ohio students and parents, as this legislation may cause direct harm to our students, their families, and public health more broadly.

Additionally, our agency is also concerned with other areas of HB 8, including the likely forced ‘outing’ of LGBTQ+ and questioning students to potentially unsupportive and/or abusive parents or guardians. Regarding the proposed revisions to Section 3313.473(A)(2), the proposed language would require all employees of a school district to “notify a student’s parents of any change...in the mental, emotional, or physical health or well-being...for the student.”⁹ Because of the alarmingly vague *and* unnecessarily broad language that is proposed here, such revisions could lead to the presumably required ‘outing’ of LGBTQ+ and questioning students to non-supportive and/or abusive parents, which would cause real and direct harm to students across the state. As you likely know, inclusion and equity are important to many Ohioans, and the Ohio Dept. of Education’s strategic plan, “Each Child, Our Future,” clearly emphasizes this. This strategic plan for Ohio’s schools specifically 1) lists “equity” as one of three core principles, 2) indicates “meet[ing] needs of [the] whole child” as one of ten priority strategies,¹⁰ and 3) conceptualizes “honoring each student” by emphasizing “equity and [the] specific needs of individual students” as one of five major shifts for the state’s educational policy.¹¹ Simply put, this proposed language from HB 8 fails to meet the goals of the Ohio Dept. of Education’s strategic plan, and furthermore, it clearly fails to meet the needs of Ohio students and parents.

With all of this in mind, Equitas Health is firmly opposed to the proposed and so-called “Parent’s Bill of Rights” (HB 8), given the harm that it would cause to LGBTQ+ youth across the state. As such, we urge this committee to oppose the proposed legislation and to ensure that it does not reach the floor of the Ohio Senate.

Respectfully submitted,

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⁶ https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education?gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwl6OiBhA2EiwAuUwWZYSAxOnVBGw7dctUkXvULS4pk5bOuxgYcslBCN82QVOOFDV5ehv8BoCnKMQAvD_BwE

⁷ https://search-prod.lis.state.oh.us/solarapi/v1/general_assembly_135/bills/hb8/IN/00/hb8_00_IN?format=pdf

⁸ <https://www.acog.org/clinical/clinical-guidance/committee-opinion/articles/2016/11/comprehensive-sexuality-education#:~:text=Studies%20have%20demonstrated%20that%20comprehensive,transmitted%20infections%2C%20and%20adolescent%20pregnancy.>

⁹ Ibid, supra note 7.

¹⁰ <https://education.ohio.gov/about/eachchildourfuture>

¹¹ <https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/About/EachChildOurFuture/ECOF-Five-Shifts.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>