

**Opponent Testimony, HB 8
Senate Education Committee
December 12, 2023**

Chair Brenner, Vice-Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for your time and for providing the opportunity to hear our testimony.

My name is Liam Strausbaugh, I use he/they pronouns, and I am a licensed Ohio social worker and staff member with the Ohio chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW OH). I am testifying today to express NASW OH's opposition to HB 8 which would have not only a catastrophic impact on gender diverse youth here in our state, but also on ethical social work practice in Ohio.

School-based therapeutic amenities are an integral part of a child's mental health services. They allow youth to have a safe, supportive environment where they are allowed to explore their thoughts, feelings, and concerns in a judgement-free space. We all know that not every child has a safe or loving or supportive home for even the most basic of emotions, but this number of unsupportive adults grows exponentially when we're talking about queer or gender-diverse youth.

If parents do not know that their child is queer, transgender, or is questioning their identity, it is because that child either knows that their parent is not a safe person to come out to or because they don't have the knowledge, language, or coping skills to be able to tell their parents. This is why it is important for youth to have a place outside of their home where they can process these big feelings and work towards telling their parents or guardians when they feel safe and ready to do so.

As social workers, it is never our direct intention to leave parents or families out of a child's care, but it's crucial to remember that the child is our client, not the parents. We have an ethical obligation to promote our clients' well-being, promote clients' rights to self-determination, and respect our clients' right to privacy. Making it a requirement for school-based social workers and counselors to out children to their parents and guardians can be extremely harmful, not only to students who may be put in harm's way should their parents find out something about their child that they may not agree with, but it also destroys the therapeutic relationship built between staff

and student. How could that child possibly trust that the professional who says they are there to help, won't run and tell their parents everything else that is supposedly said in confidence?

In a similar vein, parents already do have the legal right to request their child's medical and mental health records, however, in mental health settings, they are often encouraged by the provider *not* to request these records. This is not because we want parents kept out of their children's lives or because we want to encourage youth to hide things from their parents, but rather so that youth feel less pressure sharing with the professional if they know that their parents are not able to see every detail of their thoughts and feelings. It is also so that the professional can work *with* the youth on developing healthy and effective coping strategies and communication skills to be able to tell their parents themselves. Professionals are also already legally and ethically obligated to report to parents if there are any concerns of suicidality or harm to the child. HB 8 would no longer allow for professionals to encourage parents to not request these records to protect the child's self-determination, privacy, and therapeutic trust.

If licensed mental health professionals are no longer allowed to use their professional judgement to determine when it is appropriate and when it is disadvantageous for parents to be privy to a client's innermost concerns, and must disclose sensitive information with no exceptions for potential harm for the child, how can we possibly perform our jobs ethically?

This bill would force licensed professionals to choose between following legal statute or our ethical responsibilities, forgoing either one of which could land us in front of the licensing board and at risk of losing our licenses and the way to our livelihood.

We ask that you vote no on HB 8 to help protect ethical mental health care for youth and to protect ethical social work practice.

Thank you.