

Testimony in support of HB 6599: An Act Concerning Discrimination

My name is Dr. Laura Saunders and I have been asked by ctEQUALITY to speak about the impact of gender non-conformity on children.

I am a licensed psychologist specializing in child and adolescent development and psychopathology. I have been working in this field for over 20 years.

The issues of greatest concern when we discuss the impact on young children are their social, emotional and psychological health. First, we need a more clear understanding of the relevant developmental issues. Gender identity is the child's identification of himself or herself as male or female. By age 4 to 5, gender identity is stable and, in typical development, a child's internal feeling of maleness or femaleness is congruent with their biological sex. Multiple factors determine core gender identity including biological, genetic and experiential influences. Epidemiological studies suggest that 1/350-500 children born in the United States are gender atypical and that one is born into one's gender. One does not CHOOSE to be one gender or another. By the time a child enters elementary school at age 5, their gender identity is firmly secure and is not subject to undue influence by others.

There was a seminal study by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) in 2009 called the National School Climate Study. Key findings include:

- 63.7% of LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered) students reported being verbally harassed, 27.2% reported being physically harassed and 12.5% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their gender expression.
- Nearly two-thirds (61.1%) of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and more than a third (39.9%) felt unsafe because of their gender expression
- The reported grade point average of students who were more frequently harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression was almost half a grade lower than for students who were less often harassed (2.7 vs. 3.1).
- Being out in school had positive and negative repercussions for LGBT students. Outness was related to higher levels of victimization, but also higher levels of psychological well-being.
- Students attending schools with an anti-bullying policy that included protections based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression heard fewer homophobic remarks, experienced lower levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation, were more likely to report that staff intervened when hearing homophobic remarks and were more likely to report incidents of harassment and assault to school staff than students at schools with a general policy or no policy

There is a need for protection for our gender non-conforming youth and young adults who are most vulnerable. Specific protection against discrimination may cause teachers and administrators to make a concerted effort to better protect gender variant youth. A minority of LGBT students report having adequate support in school, which may explain why there have not been greater improvements regarding in-school victimization. There

needs to be greater leadership and commitment to addressing anti-LGBT bias and behavior before these students will feel safe in our schools.

In regard to the research on transgender teachers and their impact on children, the research is non-existent. What exists is mostly single case studies and anecdotal stories. There is a small body of research done on the children of transgender parents. These studies conclude that children of transgender parents are NOT negatively affected by their parent's gender identity. Additionally, none of the children of transgender parents developed any characteristics of their own gender identity disorder. Thus, no child raised by a gender non-conforming parent had any negative psychological impact. This is far greater contact and influence than a teacher.

There is no scientific evidence to support the fear that transgendered or gender variant teachers would create anxiety or confusion or create gender confusion in students. Additionally, there is no evidence that children have been traumatized by exposure to gender variant adults.

It should also be noted that the transition for gender non-conforming adults is a long-term process. It takes months and years to transition, which is more than adequate time to help others adjust to the transition.

An age-appropriate explanation of gender non-conformity can be easily produced for those children who are educated by transgender teachers. Positive interactions with gender non-conforming people increase positive attitudes, break down stereotypes and increase awareness and understanding; these interactions do not damage our children, their development or their education.

It is important to remember that children are tolerant and flexible in their thinking and can understand experiences different than their own. This only serves to enhance children's empathy and their appreciation of diversity.

Respectfully submitted,

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