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OPPOSE H5668: “Don’t Say Gay” copycats have NO place in our state!

The Womxn Project is a statewide organization focused on leveraging the power of art, activism, advocacy and education to advance the principles of reproductive justice, which demands that we all have the right to determine when and how we build our relationships, families and futures and that we have the ability to live and raise our children with dignity.

We are submitting testimony in extremely strong opposition to H5688, a bill that copies policies being moved in other states that would be harmful to many young people and to building safe, inclusive school communities. These are often referred to as “don’t say gay” bills. Essentially the aim is to try to undermine discussions around health, sex and sexuality and to put teachers in a position where they cannot answer questions or have age appropriate, compassionate conversations about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. This is not only wrong and incredibly out of touch with our state’s values, it is also damaging to young people and to our ability to ensure a safe educational environment for all.

These are often framed as positive pieces of legislation to support parents or improve educational curricula, but they actually aim to police teachers and school staff and thus obstruct the independent flow of education for students - and let’s be honest, cut off certain information, especially related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

This type of legislation incorrectly implies that parents are not listened to in schools. It calls for things that sound reasonable like the “right of a parent to inspect school district instructional materials”, but in actuality the somewhat vague language and list is actually couching a more radical and harmful set of demands in what seems like a reasonable or innocuous bill. This is about sex education and ensuring honest, compassionate, medically accurate information, but we need to look around to see how these bills are getting much bigger and causing huge issues.

In states with these policies school boards are fighting book bans and libraries are having to clear off shelves. It’s a scary and dangerous slippery slope that we cannot let happen here. This bill could create detrimental impacts on our most marginalized

children and damage parent and teacher relationships. Instead of promoting the values and priorities that the overwhelming majority of parents from all backgrounds and neighborhoods in our state share, the bill would cut off information and undermine the health and well-being of many, especially some of those most vulnerable LGBTQ+ youth who may not have support at home or in their communities. It would also embolden a very small, but loud group of people who are trying to selectively stamp out the perspectives of Black people, and deny the needs of or respect for LGBTQ+ people.

Many schools are struggling with bullying and the challenge of creating a place where everyone can learn and grow and thrive. Modeling values of inclusion and respect in our classrooms and making it clear through open conversations about gender and relationships that our schools are a place where everyone is respected is a pretty great way to start to push for the kind of change that means more students can succeed and grow with confidence.

Ignoring, making invisible or denying the experiences of gay or transgender people does not change anyone's sexual orientation or gender identity. It does make LGBT people feel unsafe and implies that it is ok to treat them as lesser or different. It perpetuates hate plain and simple.

We talk about the children being our future and that is a beautiful vision as long as we prepare and support them to do better than we have and to have the information and tools to help them reshape stronger, healthier communities where we all feel respected and have the opportunity to succeed and thrive.

Every person whether they are under 18 or over 80 should have the information and the support to be who they are without judgment. We have the opportunity to make sure that as young people are figuring out who they are and finding their place in the world that they are received with support and provided information, instead of judged or harmed. We urge you to vote no on this bill. We should be improving information in our schools to help students to be empowered members of healthy, safe, inclusive communities where we respect all people and celebrate and respect LGBT people and families and you can't do that when sexual orientation is a censored topic or teachers are afraid to answer questions accurately based on health and science.

This bill is wrong. It is the wrong direction for our state. It mentions "morality"; but what is moral across faith beliefs and religions and that is included in different ways in so many texts is a concept to do unto others, to serve and support those with less than us, to lead with love and to pursue justice or at least peace. So let us create school environments where all students are empowered and supported not only to learn and play and grow, but to be respected and protected and to thrive. That is the call to action and that demands a no vote on H5688. Thank you.

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