

Wednesday, March 29th, 2023 Michael McNaughton, DO | Providence, RI

Against H5859

Dear Honorable Representatives,

I am currently a pediatric resident physician at Hasbro Children's Hospital. I dedicated my life and career to serving and protecting the well being of children and youth, including trans and gender diverse youth. I chose to complete my pediatric residency training at Brown and Hasbro Children's Hospital in large part because Rhode Island has long since been a leader in recognizing the humanity and equality of LGBTQ+ people and was the second state in the U.S. to comprehensively protect transgender individuals. Rhode Islanders are proud of that legacy and it is one we should work to protect.

The slew of bills being introduced in Rhode Island are largely modeled after out-of-state legislation and focus on schools and young people, a strategy played out elsewhere in the country to create moral panic under the false framing of working to "protect the children". We've already seen real-world examples of how bills like these are hurting young people in states like Florida and New Hampshire. They are leading teachers to stop addressing anti-LGBTQ and racist bullying out of fear of legal consequence, erasing LGBTQ+ students and families from the classroom, and banishing books that provide important stories for students as they explore their sense of self.

Another tactic and false framing used by those pushing through this harmful legislation is that of "parents' rights." This narrative glosses over the fact that many parents want a more fair and inclusive education for their children, and value free expression and access to books, critical analysis, and current events. Some parents are also Black, LGBTQ, and/or parents of LGBTQ children, and have the same rights as any other group of parents to see themselves and their families reflected in literature and resources available at libraries and in schools.

These bills act by using vague language, leaving certain provisions open to broad interpretation, which may serve to protect the targeting of minority students rather than serve to protect those students from being targeted. Further, many of these bills would restrict our teachers' ability to foster an environment where all students thrive and concentrate on learning and growth rather than just on survival. A recent poll by the Trevor project highlights the degree to which even the threat of and debate surrounding anti-LGBTQ+ legislation takes a great toll on the mental health and feelings of safety among queer and gender diverse youth, with over 86% of trans and nonbinary students reporting a negative impact on their mental health.

LGBTQ+ youth have some of the highest rates of suicidal ideation and attempts, not because they are inherently a higher risk population, but because they are subject to discrimination, rejection, exclusion, and erasure. One of the primary reasons youth are admitted to Hasbro Children's Hospital is in the setting of psychiatric emergencies as they await inpatient psychiatric placement— all too many of those kids report lack of support at home or at school as a factor contributing factor to their suicide attempts and self harm. We know from research that when trans and gender diverse youth, are supported and made to feel seen and respected, the rate of suicidal falls dramatically, down to that of the general population. For many kids, school is one of the only places they can be their full authentic selves— please don't let that be taken away.

It can be hard to understand what it is like to be an LGBTQ person. But, we long ago agreed as a state that LGBTQ people should be treated with the same dignity and respect as everyone else. I urge you to reaffirm Rhode Island's values, reject these dangerous proposals, and ensure that our state motto, *Hope*, is afforded to everyone.

Sincerely,

Michael McNaughton, DO

