

Chairperson Joseph M. McNamara  
House Education Committee  
Rhode Island House of Representatives  
Rhode Island State House  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

April 2, 2024

Dear Chairperson McNamara:

I write to you all today on behalf of Youth Pride, Inc. the only 501(c)3 that explicitly serves the unique needs of the LGBTQ+ youth community within the state of Rhode Island. In addition to the array of services and programming we provide, we serve as representatives and advocates for the community. These are duties we perform with the utmost professionalism and dedication. Which is why I write to you today in strong opposition to H7781, the proposed Parent's Bill of Rights. While parental involvement in a child's education is crucial, this bill goes too far and has the potential to create a hostile and unsafe learning environment for LGBTQ+ students.

This bill prioritizes the hypothetical rights of some parents over the real and present needs of LGBTQ+ students. National surveys consistently show that a significant number of LGBTQ+ youth experience rejection from their families. A 2021 survey by the Trevor Project, a leading suicide prevention organization for LGBTQ+ youth, found that over 40% reported experiencing familial rejection in the past year. This rejection can take many forms, including verbal or physical abuse, withholding of emotional support, or pressure to conform to heterosexual norms. Schools play a vital role in providing a safe haven for LGBTQ+ students who may not find acceptance at home. This bill could be used by unsupportive parents to restrict access to information and support systems that are vital for their well-being. For example, a parent might attempt to block their child from joining a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) club, which can provide a critical sense of community and belonging for LGBTQ+ students. Additionally, the bill could limit access to counselors or other health professionals who are trained to address the specific needs of LGBTQ+ youth.

The bill's provisions allowing parents to object to curriculum materials and opt their child out of health education classes could have a chilling effect on the creation of a more inclusive and welcoming school environment for all students. Exposure to discussions about diversity and inclusion is essential for fostering empathy and respect among all students. LGBTQ+ students themselves benefit from learning about LGBTQ+ identities and issues in a positive and affirming light. This curriculum can help them understand their own identities and feel more accepted by their peers. Furthermore, it can help non-LGBTQ+ students develop a better understanding of LGBTQ+ people and challenge any prejudices they may hold. Limiting access to this type of education can lead to a more hostile environment for LGBTQ+ students, who may be ostracized or bullied by classmates who lack understanding. It can also hinder the development of critical thinking skills in all students, as they are not given the opportunity to grapple with complex issues of identity and social justice.

Studies consistently show that LGBTQ+ youth who experience discrimination and family rejection are at a higher risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. This bill, by potentially giving parents tools to limit their child's access to support networks and information about LGBTQ+ identities, could exacerbate these mental health concerns. Our schools should be places that promote the well-being of all students, not contribute to their marginalization. According to a 2020 study by the Journal of Adolescent Health, LGBTQ+ youth who reported having access to affirming spaces, such as GSA clubs or supportive teachers, were less likely to report experiencing suicidal ideation. The Trevor Project also found that LGBTQ+ youth who felt accepted by their families were at a significantly lower risk of attempting suicide. This bill, by potentially limiting access to these support systems, could have a devastating impact on the mental health of LGBTQ+ students.

Open communication is essential for a healthy parent-child relationship, and schools should encourage it. However, this bill should not be used to undermine a child's right to privacy. Some LGBTQ+ students may not be comfortable disclosing their identities to their parents, and this bill could create a chilling effect on open communication between students and school counselors or teachers.

H7781 prioritizes parental control over the needs of LGBTQ+ students and could have a detrimental impact on their mental health and overall well-being. Schools should be bastions of inclusivity and support for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Let's create an environment where open dialogue flourishes, diversity is celebrated, and all students feel safe and empowered to be themselves.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Youth Pride, Inc.  
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