

To: Chair and Members of the House Committee on Education

Re: Oppose H 5604

Date: April 1, 2025

Chair McNamara and Members of the House Committee on Education:

I am writing to oppose H 5604, An Act Relating to Education – Rights and Duties of Teachers generally. I am a faculty member in the School of Social Work at Rhode Island College, where I teach course in clinical practice, including work with the LGBTQ community. Prior to this, I was a school social worker the Executive Director of Youth Pride, an organization providing support and advocacy to LGBTQ youth.

I believe this legislation is problematic for several reasons and will focus on two. First, the legislation states that teachers and other school professionals should be “afforded full freedom in expressing personal opinions on all matters relevant to course content so long as the teacher makes every effort to indicate that they are speaking personally.” That would seem to allow teachers to say, “I personally believe Nazis were right to use gas chambers” or allow a social worker to say, “I personally believe gay people are mentally ill” or a nurse to say, “I personally believe trans people are lurking dangerously in women’s bathrooms.” Although most school personnel would not make offensive comments about marginalized people, a bill of rights that affords them the opportunity to without impunity is dangerous and inappropriate. They are educators and health care providers; their words matter and will be taken as truth irrespective of stating it is their personal belief. Real harm could be done to impressionable young people who need support, nurturance, and information, not “personal opinion,” misinformation, or bigotry.

Second, this bill allows teachers, social workers and school counselors to “share information regarding a student's educational experience, health, or safety with the student's parent.” This essentially seems to be an outing bill. School officials have an ethical responsibility to protect the safety and well-being of their students; outing a student without their consent is a breach of that responsibility. Our schools must be places where students feel safe, valued, and supported—where they can freely express themselves without fear and confide in educators, knowing that their privacy will be respected.

When I train social workers to work with LGBT youth, one of the most important things I suggest is that the coming out process is an individual journey – the when and the whether must be at a youth’s pace and choice; some young people are in the closet for a reason. It can be a terrifying process, a process that can lead to losses, rejection, mental health crises and housing insecurity. A study done at the University of Connecticut and published in the Journal of Youth and Adolescence shows this, finding that unauthorized disclosure of sexual and/or gender identity to parents can greatly undermine kids’ well-being. They found that students who were

outed to their parents were more likely to experience elevated depressive symptoms and lower family support compared to those who were not. (McCauley, 2023) Kids have to control the whether and when.

Instead of focusing on policies that put students in harm's way, we should work towards ensuring that schools are inclusive, supportive, and safe spaces for all students, regardless of their identity. I urge the committee to reject this bill and prioritize the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of students over misguided policies that could cause irreparable harm.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Wendy Becker, PhD, LICSW