

Dear Chair Weisz and members of the House Human Services Committee,

My testimony is in opposition to House Bill 1522. I ask that you give this bill a Do Not Pass.

I am a suicide prevention advocate and our state's expert in LGBTQ+ outcome data for North Dakota, especially as it relates to youth and schools. I am the author of the LGBTQ+ School Climate Report, a year-long look into school policies across North Dakota, student outcomes, and process improvement.

### **North Dakota LGBTQ+ Data**

[\(2021\)](#) North Dakota LGBTQ+ School Climate Report

[\(2021 Summary\)](#): High School LGBTQ+

- [\(2021\)](#) High School LGB
- [\(2021\)](#) High School Trans

[\(2021 Summary\)](#) Middle School LGBTQ+

- [\(2021\)](#) Middle School LGB
- [\(2021\)](#) Middle School Trans

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data is the data our schools use for understanding their student population and needs. It is the data our health centers use for targeting approaches for community health. It is the data we advocate funding for state and federal grants. When looking at the base comparison of LGBTQ+ youth compared to straight cisgender youth, the discrepancies in outcomes are clear.

Before I continue, we must be honest with the intent of HB 1522. This bill would effectively remove trans individuals from any sort of acknowledgment or support within our school system. This will have tremendous consequences on trans and non-binary youth, according to the data.

### **Currently Trans Experience High School**

- 94.4% Do not talk to parents when feeling sad, empty, hopeless, or angry (HS)
- 72.7% Didn't feel safe at school most of time or always (HS)
- 61.0% Bullied on School Property (MS)
- 27.0% Didn't Sleep in Parents Home + 20.0% Have Run away or homeless (HS)

It is worth noting that disallowing transgender students does not cause them to go away, but does cause any opportunity for help or support to disappear from our school systems. While youth aren't talking to their parents when feeling sad, empty, hopeless, or angry, they are nine times more likely to talk to adults within a school for support when they're experiencing a problem.

These students turn to adults at school, because they don't feel safe at home. When these youth have one adult who can accept them, [their suicidality reduces by 39%](#). Suicidality in this population is shown to be significantly higher when they have [unsupportive parents](#). When they don't feel safe at home they're likely to use illicit substances and run away. When schools don't

offer some kind of safety net for them, they flee the state and open themselves up to homelessness and trafficking.

### **Social Contagion**

One suspects this bill is intended in some part to stop social contagion. The broad concept of social contagion influencing transgender identity was popularized by [Littman 2018](#). This research is extremely important for understanding how fear of transgender youth identity has emerged over the last five years.

The research appears to accurately convey the worry and fear parents have about kids and gender identity. What actually occurs is that a youth typically knows they're LGBTQ+ at [much younger age than they tell their parents](#) or get treatment. It could be confusion, shame, fear or just not having the right words. But parents assume their kids are straight and cisgender. Some assume that being transgender is wrong or awful. What they see is their kids going to interact with other trans kids and then gain confidence and courage to come out. They tell their parents and their parents only see the superficial. They think their kid was perfectly 'normal' before hanging out with the trans kids and was 'influenced' into the identity. They don't understand why their kid would gravitate towards that in the first place; why would they seek safety and support in people who share their experience.

We understand trans to have a biological underpinning. We did a [forty year literature](#) review on the subject by the Endocrine Society of America. There are brain scans featuring affirmation of trans identity when looking at the bed nucleus of the stria terminalis, there are identical twin studies supporting a genetic basis, and even developmental psychology literature on gender identity during development showing strong and persistent identity regardless of natal biological features. We have decades of research and a wealth of knowledge indicating that trans identity is not a choice, not being influenced, and the harm in forcing these kids to ascribe to their sex assigned at birth or conversation therapy as it's more commonly known. That is what the literature suggests. It may not be a law of science, more research may need to be done, but there is nothing in literature suggesting denying trans identity to kids will help them and a lot to suggest it will be very harmful.

It is worth noting that this very research shows that you can't force someone to be trans or cisgender. They would be harmed by pursuing a gender identity not congruent to who they are. And if a youth was influenced into being trans, they wouldn't get happier identifying that way. Their outcomes wouldn't improve if it was a mistake. And if they do improve, if they have more energy, if they have more hope - that is maybe the right direction to go. Nobody locks down trans or cisgender identity in a single visit or conversation. These things are often what youth explore throughout their childhood to see what is right for them. And we pay attention to what makes them happy and what makes them thrive. If a kid transitioned socially and became miserable, probably should stop that.

The worst part is that when we heavily restrict the ability for kids to just experiment, we sometimes force kids into rebelling against us. A child may tell their parent they're trans and if

the parent denies that, the kids may just see that as rejection. The kid may just pretend to be trans out of spite. The kid may just not trust their parents anymore. Even if that kid wasn't trans, knowing that there is a specific condition in which they won't be loved or supported is a scary situation for them to be in.

The point of this suggestion is to suggest that schools are not making kids transgender. That supporting trans youth is not the same as creating trans youth. State CDC data is pretty consistent in the trans demographic regardless of states that support or are hostile to trans identity. You don't stop trans kids by not supporting them, you just...have kids who get no support. The data in North Dakota is clear on that.

### **Support in Schools**

All of the data I've looked over in the last few years around trans individuals in schools indicate accepting and affirming them is the best course of action. This includes looking at recommendations for school boards, school policy, teacher's code of ethics, guidelines for principals and so on. The experts who actually do research on policy and inclusion tend to come to the same conclusion on these matters.

I don't even see these as debates within education, so much as within political organizations and entities. At the moment transgender students have federal protections to ensure accessibility to spaces. It may be needless to say this piece of legislation violates federal law, but when trans youth do not feel safe at school or accepted, that's not an accessible learning environment. If they can't use a bathroom that makes sense for them, they won't drink water. When they can't be themselves in school, they won't go to school. And if they're forced to comply with regulations that are devastating to their mental health, they simply won't continue.

It is worth understanding how we got to the level of inclusion we see today. It was educators realizing there was a problem impacting queer youth. Doing research on best practices and incorporating those practices to get the best outcome. This proposed legislation would take away all of that.

If we want to assert the absolute rights of cisgender populations over transgender people within North Dakota, there is probably little I can do to stop that. As a suicide prevention advocate and researcher, I can just tell you the data. If you want to learn how to reduce suicidality in LGBTQ+ populations, I can tell you how to do that. If you want to make these kids feel isolated, hopeless, and prone to every tragedy you can imagine for a youth, then this is a pretty good step in that direction.

One final thing to keep in mind is that even if this legislation fails, even if all of the bills targeting our trans population don't pass or are declared unconstitutional - we still find ourselves at a crisis. If you'd like to work with me to reduce suicides in this population, please reach out. Until then, I recommend voting Do No Pass.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and service to our state

Best regards,

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