

I write in opposition to the passage of this bill.

If this bill had been in effect earlier in my teaching career two of my students would have been in grave danger. As a teacher I do not bring up LGBTQIA+ things out of the blue. but it is critical that I remain allowed to address them when they come up. One affirming adult reduces suicide risk so much in queer youth. Anything that takes them away from that puts them in literal danger. In addition, simply passing anti-LGBTQIA+ laws increase the risk of suicide attempt by 72%. Passing this law will quite literally result in dead children. If a LGBTQIA+ kid was capable of not being queer, they would already be. This is extra true in a state with a social climate like North Dakota.

I have had a gay student whose suicide attempts I prevented more than once. If I had not responded with affirmation he did not get at home when he came to me during lunch breaks and after school with fear about being kicked out of his home, I know he won't have come to me for help in his time of crisis.

Another student came to me about the abuse she suffered at her dad's hand, because she was trans. There was a part of her who thought her dad choking her was justified for being "an abomination". If we didn't already have a relationship where she knew I didn't think of her like this, I don't now if she would have asked anyone for help. She is living safely with her other parent because of the trust we built by my respecting her pronouns and names.

There is a perception out there that schools are encouraging students to be queer. In my experience, this could not be further from the truth. Even my luckiest students had only 2/7 of their teachers accept them. Even that student had a teacher who went out of the way to misgender them (never using the word "lady" for them until they'd come out as non-binary, doing it over 10 times a class period after).

Of the four trans students I've had, one was physically abused for it, one went back into the closet because people were cruel to them, and one never told anyone but me. While my gay students have better odds the majority still hide who they are with at least chunk of the people in their lives. North Dakota is not a place where kids are coming out as queer or trans unless their identities are so pressing that abuse and bullying is more comfortable than abandoning parts of themselves. For every affirming message a queer student gets from someone like me, they hear literally hundreds of negative ones. Taking away the few positive messages they do receive is beyond cruel.

Teachers are not out to keep secrets from parents. In every case where it was safe for the student (about 90% of cases) my support has lead to students telling at least one caregiver about their identities. In cases where that secret stayed kept either the child's safety or housing was at risk.

Not only that, this law would have unintended consequences concerning bullying. Just this week a straight student was upset that another straight student was calling him "gay," in a repetitive bullying manner. I stepped in and dealt with it the way I deal with all bullying. If this law passed, I couldn't have dealt with it without getting both parent's permission. I'm quite sure that one and possibly both would have withheld it. I would then have been forced to watch a student be bullied by his classmate without doing anything to stop it.

The name and pronoun portion have unintended consequences as well. It would be cumbersome to have to obtain consent every time one of my middle school students wants to be called a name different from their birth name (for example: John for Jonathan or Mandy for Amanda). This would require teachers to reach out in hundreds of cases per year at the middle school level. Experimenting with nicknames is developmentally appropriate at the middle school level and is very harmless. A Catherine might try on Cat for a month before going back to Cathy and no one has been harmed in the process. It would particularly take a lot of manpower when considering children of immigrants who have Americanized their names and whose parents don't speak English and would need translation services (sometimes for languages no one at the school speaks). Almost all the time students who ask me to call them something different are not trans. In several cases kids have asked to go by middle names to distance themselves from abusive parents they were named after (and are no longer in their lives). The idea of making that painful and unnecessary call to the parent when I could just show the child compassion turns my stomach.