

DO NOT PASS HB 1522

Chair Lee and members of the Senate Human Services Committee, I am writing to you today to urge a DO NOT PASS on HB 1522. I am the founder of an organization called Project RAI, we work with gender queer children ages 3-14. We work to provide them resources, advocacy, and community so kids are able to when feeling lonely and reduce the risk of suicide.

I am trying to understand the purpose of this bill and how it will ensure the creation of a healthy and positive school climate. Are teachers only able to affirm pronouns of cis kids? I am unsure how teachers will teach if they are not allowed to use any child's preferred pronouns.

Research on affirming school policies and practices shows that affirming and welcoming all students for who they are leads to a more positive school environment as a whole. School climate for both LGBTQ children and cisgender children are impacted heavily by the practices that are in place. Amy Gower et al., defined school climate as "the quality and character of school life", and it has been associated with a variety of student behaviors, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (2018, p. 814). The research found that schools with supportive climates are able to follow best practices to create that supportive climate throughout; these best practices had positive impacts on all students in the school, not just LGBTQ children.

Kris T. De Pedro et al., examined safety, victimization, and school climate in rural LGBTQ youth. The study aimed to compare feelings of safety among rural vs urban LGBTQ children and what supports are available to them. School victimization has an adverse impact on the academic achievement and well-being of LGBTQ youth. Researchers found that safety is enhanced for LGBTQ youth when enumerated anti-bullying policies are in place (De Pedro, et, al., 2018, pgs 265-266). As shown in other studies, LGBTQ students feel safer and more supported when school climate and policies are inclusive; this study found similar results, however, LGBTQ youth in rural communities may have difficulty accessing basic resources and support typically found in urban areas (p. 277). Lack of basic resources can lead to higher depression rates, greater feelings of insecurity in school, and greater rates of isolation.

According to the report, 61.6% of queer youth in North Dakota have seriously considered attempting suicide. 84% do not have any adult to turn to when feeling sad, hopeless, angry, or anxious, 61% reported bad mental health for one week or more each month (Seidler, 2021, p. 4). Our queer youth in North Dakota deserve to confidently exist in spaces as their cisgender classmates; schools will play a big role in helping our youth feel affirmed and accepted.

LGBTQ positive school climates exist in very small percentages across the state. Not supporting LGBTQ professional development training and having comprehensive LGBTQ anti-bullying/harassment polices creates a negative cascade across all outcomes related to school belonging, opportunity, and support (Seidler, 2022, p.6). Noted in the research, positive school climate practices and policies were major contributors to the success of LGBTQ students:

A positive LGBTQ-specific school climate, as opposed to a general positive school climate, is one that has supportive staff, teachers, and nurses who provide a sense of safety and support for LGBTQ students, promotes student empowerment and visibility through gay-straight alliances and inclusive curricula, has policies that explicitly enumerate protections on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, has staff

that are required to learn about LGBTQ topics as part of their professional development, and has staff that intervene when sexual orientation and gender identity-based harassment take place (Kosciw et al., 2016, p. 144).

The research showing positive impacts of gender affirming policies and procedures in public schools for not only queer students, but all students. Our state is at risk of creating school environments that queer students will not be able to exist in; OR our kids will go against these radical and dangerous policies and continue to affirm and welcome their friends. It is not fair to shove queer students back to the dark reaches of their personal closet, if they do not have a safe person to turn to at home, not able to talk to their supportive adult at school, what options do they have left? Nothing good, that's for sure. What a lonely existence the legislative body is setting up for our kids. I absolutely understand why families are making plans to leave.

Again, I urge a DO NOT PASS on HB 1522. Just because the authors of this bill hate queer kids, does not mean queer kids do not exist. These bills will kill kids, do not do this to them.