



LGBTQ+ Students Deserve Supportive Schools that Affirm their Identity

IDRA Testimony Against Senate Bill 88, submitted by Mikayla Arciaga, M.A. Ed, to the Georgia Senate Education and Youth Committee, February 14, 2023

Good afternoon, Chairman Dixon and Members of the Committee:

My name is Mikayla Arciaga, M.A. Ed., and I am the Georgia Advocacy Director at IDRA, an independent, non-partisan non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

We oppose Senate Bill 88 because it discriminates against one of the most vulnerable student populations in our country. This bill endangers LGBTQ+ students by limiting their ability to have necessary conversations with supportive, trusted adults at school. This policy would place student lives at risk, make it harder to support LGBTQ+ students, and negatively impact LGBTQ+ students' academic outcomes.

SB 88 Puts LGBTQ+ Student Lives at Risk

LGBTQ+ students experience exclusion, harassment and bullying in schools at higher rates than their peers due to their gender identity and sexual orientation. In 2019, more than two in three LGBTQ+ students in Georgia reported experiencing at least one form of anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination at school during the past year (GLSEN, 2019). Already, over 52% of LGBTQ+ youth enrolled in middle and high school reported experiencing bullying in social settings, including school. Transgender and gender non-conforming students reported the highest rate of bullying at 61% compared to cisgender students (Trevor Project, 2021). Discriminatory policies and practices in schools exacerbate a pre-existing climate of social bullying and violence against LGBTQ+ students, hurting their ability to learn and thrive in their education.

Measures like the proposed SB 88 have real life and death consequences for students. Tragically 42% of LGBTQ+ youth consider attempting suicide, including more than half of transgender and non-binary youth (Trevor Project, 2021). Such suicide attempts are also more common among youth of color as the suicide rate of Indigenous LGBTQ+ youth (31%) is over double the rate of white students. Black (21%), multiracial (21%), Latino (18%) and Asian American and Pacific Islander youth have much higher rates of suicide when compared to their white peers (12%) (Trevor Project, 2021).

SB 88 Makes it Harder for Schools to Support LGBTQ+ Students

Discriminatory legislation like SB 88 discourages teachers and school staff from creating safe and welcoming places for their LGBTQ+ students. It discourages them from incorporating best

practices, such as using a students' desired pronouns to acknowledge them, supporting student-led clubs, such as gay-straight alliances or gender and sexuality alliances, that promote a safe and welcoming environment for students of all orientations and genders, and identifying "safe spaces," such as counselor's offices or designated classrooms where LGBTQ+ students can receive support from administrators, teachers and other school staff (CDC, 2017).

This bill would block supportive individuals in schools from having conversations with students about their experiences and concerns. School officials will be severely limited in the supports that they can provide for LGBTQ+ students.

SB 88 Creates Negative Academic Environments that Negatively Impact Academic Outcomes for LGBTQ+ Youth

Discriminatory policies and practices in schools hurt students' ability to learn and thrive in their education. Students who experience discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation are more likely to miss school days, have lower GPAs and drop out of school (GLSEN, 2019).

In Georgia, gender-based harassment led 25% of transgender and gender nonconforming students to drop out of their school or university (NCTE & NGLT, 2010).

Student success depends on their ability to attend schools with school climates that support and sustain all aspects of their identity. A vital part of a supportive school climate is having educators, administrators and other personnel who students can talk to about what is going on in their lives.

Unfortunately, some LGBTQ+ students do not have parents and caregivers who are supportive of this aspect of their identities. In fact, studies show that LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience sexual abuse, physical abuse and peer victimization during childhood when compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth (Friedmen, et al., 2011).

Georgia leaders have the responsibility to ensure that *all* students are supported at school, even when they are not supported elsewhere. The *Parent and Child Protection Act* does the opposite of what it claims to do: It puts a target on the backs of already-targeted school children. This bill would undoubtedly harm students' prospects of performing well and graduating from high school. At its worst, it endangers their lives.

Recommendations

- Support safe and welcoming schools by rejecting SB 88.
- Support comprehensive school policies regarding bullying and sexual harassment that specifically speak to LGBTQ+ youth.
- Provide resources for schools to adopt research-based school climate strategies that make all students feel safe and welcome.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. Thank you for your consideration. For more information, please contact Mikayla Arciaga, M.A. Ed., IDRA Georgia Advocacy Director at mikayla.arciaga@idra.edu.

Resources

- CDC. (2017). LGBT Youth, webpage. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm#print>
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- Freedom for All Americans. (2021). Legislative Tracker: Youth Sports Bans, webpage. <https://freedomforallamericans.org/legislative-tracker/student-athletics/>
- GLSEN. (2019). School Climate for LGBTQ Students in Georgia. 2019 State Snapshot. <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Georgia-Snapshot-2019.pdf>
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- NCTE and NGLT. (2010). Findings of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey. National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce. https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/resources/ntds_state_tx.pdf
- NEA. (June 2016). Legal Guidance on Transgender Students’ Rights. National Education Association. https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/2018_Legal%20Guidance_Transgender%20Student%20Rights.pdf
- Trevor Project. (2021). National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2021/>

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.