



End discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity

Liz Hamor, Equality Kansas Director of Community Outreach
Testimony in Opposition of SB208
Senate Education Committee
Hearing date - February 23, 2021, 1:30pm

Dear Senate Education Committee members,

I am writing in opposition of SB208. I'm going to share a few experiences from my years as an advocate and invite you to seek further education on, exposure to, and experiences with transgender youth **before voting for a bill that will be unequivocally harmful to them**. I am happy to provide or facilitate any education or resources.

Over the past four years, Equality Kansas has partnered with GLSEN Kansas to bring LGBTQ students to the Capitol, to share their stories with Kansas legislators and advocate for their own rights. Many of you have probably met some of these youth and heard their stories. For those of you who have not but would like to, I am happy to facilitate that as well.

One of the students from this photo of an Equality Day just a few years ago is no longer alive. Please, look at the faces of these bright, shining youth whose lives should be full of possibility, not pain.



This school year, one of the transgender boys on this field trip died by overdose. His name was [REDACTED]. His friends said he'd battled suicidal thoughts for quite some time. Some of you may have met him and/or heard about the hostility he experienced from his hometown, Derby, while he visited the Capitol. If you were one of the legislators he visited on the day of this photo, he may have told you about his experience from when he was in middle school, in which a large portion of the town's adults put anti-trans yard signs in their yards one summer, wielding them as modern-day torches and pitchforks to attack the local transgender kids in their town. You may have heard him tell his stories about how teachers and peers repeatedly misgendered him and made him feel unsafe and unwelcome – not just in the school, but in this world. His chaperone that day vividly remembers the experience this student

shared about being segregated – forced to use the nurse’s bathroom which singled him out and brought out bullying, harassment, and assault from other students that he endured his entire four years of high school. At the same time, legislators in Kansas and around the nation were attacking his identity through bathroom bills, and emboldened students in his school to bully him, physically attack and assault him, and to threaten his life, making him feel unsafe and unwelcome, in his school, in this state, in this world.

Our society failed █████ as it has failed many others kids with whom I have worked. **Instead of policies to attack the identities of some of the most vulnerable children, our legislators, administrators, educators, and all others in positions of authority and power should be *protecting them*.** When children are being bullied by some of the highest-ranking adults in our state, this hostility trickles down and emboldens others to be outwardly hostile.

As you have certainly seen in other testimonies, trans youth are disproportionately more likely to have higher rates of depression and anxiety, experience substance abuse, homelessness, and die by suicide than their fellow students. Let me be perfectly clear: Being transgender is NOT a mental illness nor leads to these disparities on its own. Transgender writer Sam Dylan Finch says, “It’s not being transgender that, in and of itself, creates distress and dysfunction. It’s the difficulty in trying to be who you are when the society around you is deeply hostile toward you.”

Our school climates will remain hostile for trans youth until administrators and school boards are courageous enough to enact non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity/gender expression. They must also implement better bullying prevention policies that include required trainings for educators on how to better intervene in bullying. From my seven years working with school districts around the state to provide this education and help them implement these policies, I know that our state climate makes these local-level policy changes a monumental challenge. Local administrators and school board members do not have to, and may not, confront their competing values on their own. Most legislators, administrators, or teachers would publicly agree that ALL students should feel safe, valued, and respected at school. Most would also agree that schools should be environments where ALL students can have that foundation in order to learn and become their best selves. However, many are not willing to consider where those values are contradicted by their behavior that harms transgender students. Will you? Will you be the leadership that ALL our students, including our transgender youth, can count on to make our schools and state a place where they can live, learn, and thrive?

Since Equality Kansas is not able to bring anyone to the Capitol this year, including some of our state’s most vulnerable youth, please check out the following pictures and remember that THESE are just a tiny fraction of the Kansas children that your votes are affecting with life and death consequences.

As always, I am happy to answer any questions and provide any educational resources and connections to help you better understand transgender students and how to support them.

Regards,
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