



Ohio State Board of Education Public Testimony

October 12, 2022

President Charlotte McGuire, Vice President Martha Manchester, and other State Board of Education members:

My name is Dr. Rhea Debussy, and my pronouns are she/her. I'm the Director of External Affairs for Equitas Health. As you're likely aware, Equitas Health is a federally designated community health center and one of the largest LGBTQ+ and HIV/AIDS serving healthcare organizations in the country. Each year, we serve tens of thousands of patients in Ohio, Texas, Kentucky, and West Virginia, and since 1984, we have been working to advance "care for all."¹ I'm thankful for the opportunity to address you all today, and as you likely recall, I joined you last month to provide testimony in opposition to the proposed and so-called "Resolution to Support Parents, Schools, and Districts in Rejecting Harmful, Coercive, and Burdensome Gender Identity Policies."² I'm here, once again, to do the same.

Last month, I shared that our agency joined the National Women's Law Center and more than 200 other organizations in calling for the Biden administration and the U.S. Dept. of Education to undo the Trump-era Title IX regulations, which were put in place under former U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos.³ As mentioned at last month's meeting, we joined this coalition of more than 200 organizations – including other Ohio-based organizations like the Ace and Aro Alliance of Central Ohio, Equality Ohio, LGBTQ+ Allies of Lake County, TransOhio, and others – because the roll-back of Obama-era protections has put LGBTQ+ youth at risk.⁴

However, it bears repeating that the unconstitutional Trump-era regulations, which we called on the Biden administration to replace, were particularly dangerous for the well-being of transgender, non-binary, and gender expansive youth.⁵ These unconstitutional Trump-era regulations removed existing protections for gender expansive youth, and the proposed resolution – which is unfortunately still under consideration by the Ohio State Board of Education here today – seeks to defend those regulations as sound policy.

During my testimony to this body last month, I shared numerous data points from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),⁶ GLSEN (i.e. a national organization that focuses on LGBTQ+ inclusion in K through 12 settings),⁷ and The Trevor Project (i.e. a national organization that focuses on suicide prevention initiatives for LGBTQ+ youth and young adults).⁸ Many other individuals and organizations shared similar testimonies, and *even more importantly*, testimony was also provided from transgender, non-binary, and gender expansive youth, who would be directly affected by this resolution. However, this dangerous resolution is still under consideration here today, as even more people from across our state and country wait for the events of today's meeting to unfold.

¹ <https://equitashealth.com/about-us/>

² <http://public.education.ohio.gov/StateBoardBooks/2022%20-%20Board%20Books/September%20-%202022/Public%20Participation/Rhea%20Debussy%20-%20Equitas%20Health%20-%20Testimony.pdf>

³ <https://nwlrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Title-IX-NPRM-Letter-President-Biden-Jun-15-2022.pdf>

⁴ <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201605-title-ix-transgender.pdf>

⁵ <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201702-title-ix.pdf>; https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/proposed-title-ix-regulation-fact-sheet.pdf?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=

⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/68/wr/mm6803a3.htm>

⁷ https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NSCS19-FullReport-032421-Web_0.pdf

⁸ <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2021/?section=Introduction>

As a professional who enjoyed a decade-long career in higher education, I can tell you that this proposed resolution is not a policy that will positively impact students. As someone who was trained as a Title IX and Civil Rights Investigator via the Ohio Dept. of Higher Education, I can tell you that this proposed resolution is not a policy that will positively impact local school districts. And as a transgender woman, I can tell you that this proposed resolution is not a policy that will positively impact transgender, non-binary, and gender expansive students across the state of Ohio.

To provide some additional context for the impact of this resolution, our agency would like you to consider the realities impacting LGBTQ+ — and especially transgender, non-binary, and gender expansive youth — across the country. The Trevor Project, which is the world’s largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for LGBTQ+ youth and young adults, recently released their 2022 National Survey. In it, they note the following data points about their respondents: 45% of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year; over 75% of transgender and non-binary youth reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety; nearly 66% of transgender and non-binary youth reported experiencing symptoms of depression; more than half of transgender and non-binary youth seriously considered suicide in the past year; and ultimately, nearly 1 in 5 transgender and non-binary youth attempted suicide in the past year.

However, they also note that 1) LGBTQ+ youth with high levels of social support from their family reported suicidality at less than half the rate of those who felt only low or moderate levels of support and 2) LGBTQ+ youth who found their school to be affirming reported lower rates of attempting suicide.⁹ And of course, we know that inclusion and equity are important to Ohioans, and this is one of the many reasons that the Ohio Dept. of Education’s strategic plan, “Each Child, Our Future,” clearly 1) lists “equity” as one of three core principles, 2) indicates “meet[ing] needs of [the] whole child” as one of ten priority strategies,¹⁰ and 3) conceptualizes “honoring each student” by emphasizing “equity and [the] specific needs of individual students” as one of five major shifts for the state’s educational policy.¹¹

In reflecting upon these values and their necessity for transgender, non-binary, and gender expansive students, Dr. Teagan Vaughn (she/her), who is the Director of Gender Affirming Care at Equitas Health, notes that:

“Each and every child deserves a safe, welcoming, quality education that prepares and empowers them to become resilient, lifelong learners who contribute to society. Respecting — and embracing — diversity and individuality are easy ways to do just that. Affirming classrooms and schools help foster growth and development and teach all children — regardless of gender — that they are worthy of respect *and* have a future worth living.”¹²

As we concluded last month, Equitas Health firmly opposes the proposed resolution currently under consideration by the State Board of Education here today, and for the sake of our transgender, non-binary, and gender expansive youth, we urge all members to vote against this resolution.

Respectfully submitted,

Rhea Debussy, Ph.D. (she/her)
Director of External Affairs, Equitas Health
1105 Schrock Road, Suite 400, Columbus, OH 43229

⁹ <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/>

¹⁰ <https://education.ohio.gov/about/eachchildourfuture>

¹¹ <https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/About/EachChildOurFuture/ECOF-Five-Shifts.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>

¹² Quotation provided on October 8, 2022.