

SB 199

Primary and Secondary Education – Comprehensive Health Education Framework – Established

Position: Favorable

Testimony by Anne Arundel County Coalition for LGBTQ+ Students

The Anne Arundel Coalition for LGBTQ+ Students is a community organization that is committed to equality for all and to promoting LGBTQ+ rights. We provide support to LGBTQ+ youth through education, policy and advocacy. Our Coalition includes parents, teachers, students, mental health professionals, advocates and members of the LGBTQ+ community. We are writing today to express our strong support for SB 199 and HB 119.

SB 199 and the cross-filed bill HB 119 requires the Maryland Department of Health to develop a comprehensive, medically accurate, and age-appropriate health education upon which the county boards of education can base their curriculum. Comprehensive health education is needed from kindergarten through high school. We believe it is essential for all Maryland students to have access to critically important health education topics including information on gender and sexuality. **We strongly favor this bill.**

Maryland's youth are vibrant, intelligent and inquisitive. We cannot and should not try to avoid teaching certain topics because they are awkward, sensitive or controversial. Our youth will undoubtedly learn about these topics one way or another. Don't we want the best possible information/education about mental health, substance abuse prevention, sexuality and gender identity, to be taught by certified educators and based upon approved, evidence-based curriculum? By doing so, we encourage our students to think critically, understand health issues more fully and if they have questions, be more aware of resources that are available to them. For LGBTQ+ students, comprehensive health curriculum will help them feel better understood and included. For all students, it enhances awareness of the rich diversity in our communities which leads to greater acceptance and diminished hate and bias.

Research from GLSEN and other sources indicates that LGBTQ+ youth are at significantly higher risk of being harassed, bullied, and rejected. Not surprisingly, they are also at higher risk for mental health problems including anxiety, depression and suicide. Arming them, and all students, with comprehensive health education makes them better equipped to make responsible and safe decisions. It is vital for our students' overall educational achievement and success. For many of our students, it is truly life-saving.

Some adults mistakenly believe that children should not obtain information about gender identity and sexuality until they are adolescents. However, child development research

indicates that most children have a clear sense of their gender identity before kindergarten and that they have already received countless messages about gender and sexuality that influence them greatly. Teaching these topics at the elementary school level does not cause confusion or difficulty for these children. It simply ensures that they are getting medically accurate, up to date, and age-appropriate information so they are better prepared and educated.

For all of these reasons, the Coalition for LGBTQ+ Students strongly supports SB 199 and HB 119.