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Health and Government Operations Committee
240 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Monday, January 27, 2025

HB0161 – Primary and Secondary Education - Comprehensive Health Education Framework - Established

Position: **FAVORABLE**

Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and Esteemed Members of the Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Ronnie L. Taylor, and I serve as the Community Advocacy Manager at FreeState Justice. FreeState Justice is Maryland’s statewide LGBTQIA+ advocacy organization dedicated to addressing legal inequities and promoting the well-being of LGBTQIA+ individuals. I am here to testify in strong support of **House Bill 0161**, which establishes a Comprehensive Health Education Framework for Maryland’s public schools.

HB0161 addresses a critical need for inclusive and comprehensive health education by requiring the Maryland Department of Education, in collaboration with the Department of Health, to develop a framework that encompasses topics essential to student health and well-being. These topics include mental health, substance abuse prevention, family life and human sexuality, gender identity, sexual orientation, and more. The bill ensures that all Maryland students receive age-appropriate, equitable, and affirming health education, while empowering local school boards to customize curricula in collaboration with community stakeholders.

Research highlights the urgency of this legislation. According to the Trevor Project’s 2023 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health, 45% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, and access to affirming resources was identified as a key factor in reducing these rates (source: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023/>). Comprehensive health education, inclusive of gender identity and sexual orientation, equips students with the knowledge to navigate their identities and relationships, reducing stigma and improving mental health outcomes.

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HB0161 offers several essential benefits to Maryland’s students, families, and communities:

1. **Inclusion of Marginalized Communities:** By explicitly incorporating topics such as gender identity and sexual orientation into the curriculum, the bill addresses disparities faced by LGBTQIA+ students. Data from GLSEN’s 2021 National School Climate Survey reveals that inclusive curricula significantly reduce bullying and harassment experienced by LGBTQIA+ students, fostering safer and more supportive school environments (source: <https://www.glsen.org/research>).
2. **Mental and Emotional Health:** Including mental health education as a core topic is a proactive step in addressing the youth mental health crisis. The CDC reports that 37% of high school students experienced poor mental health during the pandemic, with LGBTQ students disproportionately affected. Comprehensive education promotes early intervention and access to resources (source: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health/>).
3. **Parental and Community Involvement:** **HB 0161** ensures local input by requiring county school boards to form committees of educators, health experts, and community members to develop curricula aligned with the framework. This collaborative approach fosters transparency and accountability while addressing community-specific needs.
4. **Opt-Out Provisions with Safeguards:** The bill strikes a balance by allowing parents to opt out of certain topics, while prohibiting opt-outs from critical HIV and AIDS prevention education. This ensures that all students receive life-saving health information while respecting parental choice.

As a Black transgender woman and advocate for equity, I understand firsthand the transformative impact of affirming education. Growing up, a lack of inclusive health education perpetuated ignorance and stigma in my community, creating barriers for individuals like me to access support and thrive. **HB0161** represents progress toward Maryland where every student—regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, or background—can learn in an environment that validates their experiences and equips them for success.

In closing, I urge the committee to issue a favorable report for **House Bill 0161**. This legislation reflects Maryland’s commitment to equity, health, and education by addressing the diverse needs of its students and ensuring that no one is left behind. **HB0161** is not merely a policy; it is a lifeline for marginalized communities, a shield against misinformation, and a bridge to a more inclusive future. Thank you for your consideration and your dedication to the well-being of Maryland’s youth.

Best,

Ronnie L. Taylor

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