

House Bill 161
Ways and Means Committee
January 29, 2025
Position: Favorable with Amendments

Esteemed Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and Committee members, my name is Amy Isler. I am a former high school English teacher in Baltimore County Public Schools, mother of two children, and a constituent of Maryland District 44A. **I support with amendments HB 161, Primary and Secondary Education - Comprehensive Health Education Framework - Established.** This bill is essential to ensure our trans and queer—as well as cisgender and straight—youth receive information about their existence in the primary and secondary school environment in the health curriculum. In order to fully support this bill, I suggest an amendment to the bill to remove the requirement for a parental or guardian opt-out. The opt-out provides room for discrimination, as parents or guardians could block their children from receiving important information about themselves in the interest of discriminating against trans and queer youth. Because gender identity and sexual orientation are integral parts of our society's concepts of identity, it makes no sense to omit this information from primary and secondary education. Everyone has a gender identity, whether they be cisgender or transgender, and everyone has a sexual orientation; therefore, these concepts should be taught in a school environment.

As a sanctuary state protecting and defending transgender individuals, Maryland has a responsibility to codify safety and protections for all students, cisgender and transgender, in the interest of preparing our students to live peacefully with and tolerantly of their neighbors. Allowing an opt-out continues to put transgender people in danger, as it allows parents or guardians to pretend trans people do not exist when they have always been here. It is vital that all Maryland students are taught about the existence of trans and queer people to reduce discrimination and violence, and to learn about their fellow classmates, friends, and neighbors.

My children have always been students in Baltimore County Public Schools, which touts its zero-tolerance for bullying; however, we know from the GLSEN 2021 School Climate for LGBTQ+ Students in Maryland survey results that most trans and queer secondary school students experienced victimization at school. In addition my children have often been witness to this bullying. The education offered by HB161 is vital to all students to mitigate bullying and violence that have no place in Maryland schools.

Codifying the parent and guardian opt-out also allows bullying and violence trans and queer students might experience at home. Data from the Trevor Project illustrates that trans and queer youth in affirming schools had nearly 40% lower odds of attempting suicide compared to youth in non-affirming schools (The Trevor Project, 2020). Studies have shown repeatedly that when trans and queer children feel accepted at home, they are less likely to attempt suicide. Therefore, codifying the opt-out leaves space for more harm to be done to trans and queer youth, as a path to connections to their identity through access to education is potentially cut off. Our trans and queer youth in Maryland deserve to thrive. Access to education is vital to their development, and their preparation to be successful adults. For these reasons, **I urge a favorable with amendment report on HB 161. Thank you.**