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February 8, 2022

The Honorable Vanessa Atterbeary  
House of Delegates Ways and Means Committee  
Room 131  
House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

## Testimony of FreeState Justice

### IN SUPPORT OF

### HB489: Commission on History, Culture, and Civics in Education

To the Honorable Chair Vanessa Atterbeary, Vice Chair Alonzo Washington and esteemed members of the Ways and Means Committee:

FreeState Justice is Maryland's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) civil rights advocacy organization. Each year, we provide free legal services to dozens, if not hundreds, of LGBTQ+ Marylanders who could not otherwise be able to afford an attorney, as well as advocate more broadly on behalf of the LGBTQ+ community, including efforts to improve the conditions of students in Maryland schools facing individual bullying and systemic discrimination.

We write today in strong support of House Bill 489, which would drastically improve the learning and school climate for LGBTQ students in Maryland schools.

Studies conducted both nationally and statewide have shown that LGBTQ students experience various challenges when it comes to the virtual and in-person classroom. At the national level, 52% of LGBTQ students enrolled in middle and high school reported

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experiencing electronic or in-person bullying this past year.<sup>1</sup> The majority of LGBTQ students in Maryland regularly hear anti-LGBTQ comments in their school (e.g., 93% of students reported hearing “gay” used in a negative way and 80% have heard other homophobic remarks), and 67% report experiencing harassment or assault based on their identity.<sup>2</sup> Equally distressing, half of students (50%) never reported the incident to school staff, and only 34% of students who reported incidents said it resulted in staff intervention.<sup>3</sup>

These experiences have serious impacts on student learning and school climate as well as on the safety, health, and wellbeing of Maryland students. The Trevor Project, a national LGBTQ crisis intervention and suicide prevention service for youth, reported that 42% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, with more than half of this number representing trans and non-binary youth. And, this number is particularly alarming as we consider that only 1 and 3 LGBTQ youth reported feeling safe in their home, a place where students also had to attend school online due to COVID-19.<sup>4</sup>

Research has demonstrated that the inclusion of LGBTQ identities into school curriculum can significantly reduce suicide, depression, and bullying.<sup>5</sup> For students facing discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity, the erasure of people like them from their education further compounds negative messages from unsupportive sources. By presenting affirming, authentic, and accurate representations of LGBTQ culture, youth can visualize and honor the positive contributions of LGBTQ individuals throughout history. Moreover, LGBTQ students have specifically cited that learning more about LGBTQ history and having more support and representation at school brings them joy and strength in times where they face disproportionate discrimination.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, research shows that educators, including primary and secondary teachers, want to include LGBTQ identities in their curriculum but lack the resource awareness or guidance in order to do so.<sup>7</sup> Maryland has the opportunity to

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<sup>1</sup> The Trevor Project, National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2019 State Snapshot: School Climate for LGBTQ Students in Maryland (2019).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The Trevor Project (2021).

<sup>5</sup> Proulx, Chelsea N., et al. "Associations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning-inclusive sex education with mental health outcomes and school-based victimization in US high school students." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 64.5 (2019): 608-614.

<sup>6</sup> The Trevor Project (2021).

<sup>7</sup> Page, Michelle L. "From awareness to action: Teacher attitude and implementation of LGBT-inclusive curriculum in the English language arts classroom." *SAGE Open* 7.4 (2017): 2158244017739949

comprehensively support both LGBTQ students and educators through the creation of Commission on History, Culture, and Civics in Education. This bill would give schools tools to represent LGBTQ identities throughout their curriculum.

LGBTQ students deserve to have safe and affirming school spaces, and that includes the curriculum they engage with. This legislation contributes to improving the health and wellbeing of LGBTQ students and reduces the frequent experiences of bullying and harassment they encounter in school environment. FreeState Justice whole heartedly supports HB0489, which will create a commission to intentionally include the contribution of the LGBTQ community to civics and history.

For these reasons, FreeState Justice urges a favorable report on House Bill 489.