



## LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY

Bill: HB558 **Comprehensive Health Education**

Organization: PFLAG Salisbury Inc., PO Box 5107, Salisbury Maryland 21802

Submitted by: Nicole Hollywood, Board Member

Position: **FAVORABLE**

### **SALISBURY PFLAG SUPPORTS COMPREHENSIVE HEALTH EDUCATION**

Greetings distinguished committee members. This testimony in FAVOR of **HB558** is being submitted on behalf of PFLAG Salisbury, the Salisbury, Maryland Chapter of PFLAG National, the nation's first and largest national organization dedicated to supporting, educating, and advocating for LGBTQIA+ people and their families.

It is vital that our State's health education be updated to be comprehensive, inclusive, age-appropriate, and relevant. School-based health education helps young people acquire an accurate and purposeful understanding of their own health that will strengthen positive attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors necessary for them to adopt and maintain healthy activities throughout their lives. Studies have found that students who receive comprehensive health education make safer, more informed, less destructive choices, and are better at exerting agency over themselves. Further, the research shows that improving the health acumen of young people not only has a positive influence over their personal choices but can also impact the behaviors of their peers, family members, and others in the community.

An exhaustive systematic review of the literature published in The Journal of Adolescent Health in 2020 found that outcomes of comprehensive health education include appreciation of sexual diversity, dating and intimate partner violence prevention, development of healthy relationships, prevention of child sex abuse, improved social/emotional learning, decreases in homophobia and transphobia, and increased media literacy. Further, substantial evidence strongly supported sex education beginning in elementary school, that is scaffolded and of longer duration, as well as LGBTQIA+-inclusive education across the school curriculum and a social justice approach to healthy sexuality.

Building the health knowledge of young people ensures that teens learn to think about what is right and safe for them, and how to avoid coercion, sexually transmitted infections, and early and unintended pregnancies. Most importantly, it helps to keep young people safe from abuse by teaching them about their bodies.

There are also economic benefits to comprehensive health education as exhaustive health education can increase health literacy, the lack of which is estimated by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion to cost the nation \$1.6 to \$3.6 trillion dollars annually.

The National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) includes the goal to "incorporate accurate, standards-based, and developmentally appropriate health and science information and curricula in childcare and education through the university level". Additionally,

the National Committee on the Future of School Health Education, the Society for Public Health Education (SOPHE) and the American School Health Association (ASHA), developed recommendations for strengthening school health education. The recommendations include- developing and adopting standardized measures of health literacy in children and including them in state accountability systems; changing policies, practices, and systems for quality school health education; and stronger alignment and coordination between the public health and education sectors.

Maryland schools are required to teach health and sexual education. This health education, however, is not required to align with the National Sex Education Standards and abstinence is stressed over the reality that young people are interested in sex and sexual health. The Maryland Health Education Framework includes instruction on sexual orientation, gender identity, and cultural responsiveness in order to meet the needs of ALL young people; however, due to local school boards controlling curriculum there are significant disparities resulting in the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ learners and thousands of young people each year not receiving a representative and medically accurate health and sexual education. What are the results of these disparities beyond marginalization, ostracization, and perpetuation of negative attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ youth? The result is rising STI rates, something that those of us in Maryland's higher education system can affirm has reached crisis levels. In fact, over half of all new STI cases occur in teens and young adults (15-24 years old). Further, Maryland's syphilis rate grew by 102% between 2016 and 2020 and Maryland currently ranks 19 out of 50 for chlamydia, higher than the national average.

The research is consistent and conclusive that states with high STD/STI and teen pregnancy rates have a lack of appropriate health and sexual education for adolescents. According to Dr. Price, Director of Research at the Trevor Project, "when sex education does not address issues important to LGBTQ+ youth they think this doesn't apply to me. I don't need to listen." Making them miss out on crucial, potentially lifesaving information. LGBTQIA+ inclusive health and sexual education helps students understand that gender and sexuality are a spectrum while breaking down harmful stereotypes about LGBTQIA+ identities and while conveying valuable information designed to keep them safe regardless of their anatomy or chosen sexual partners.

The research and recommendations are clear. As such, Salisbury PFLAG supports comprehensive health education and recommends a FAVORABLE report in committee.

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