

House Bill 0495 SUPPORT

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Anne Arundel County

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Dear Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins and members of the House Ways and Means Committee:

I am a resident of Anne Arundel County and a licensed psychologist in the state of Maryland. I am writing to support HB 0495 which aims to strengthen anti-discrimination policies in our public schools.

I support HB0495 because I believe that the existing policies in our school systems need to be more effective, to prevent bullying, discrimination and adverse academic and psychosocial outcomes for marginalized students. I work with organizations that seek to enhance protections for LGBTQIA students in our schools. In addition, I have many family members and friends who are in the LGBTQIA community. Despite the anti-discrimination policies that are currently in place, LGBTQIA students continue to experience far too much bullying, harassment and discrimination in their schools. This is particularly evident with gender non-conforming or transgender students. Research from the Trevor Project indicates that many of these students report being bullied and harassed at school due to their LGBTQIA identities. This puts them at much higher risk for a variety of negative outcomes, including school absenteeism, higher rates of mental health symptoms and elevated rates of suicidal ideation. These students need stronger protections and they need our educators to be better equipped to respond to discrimination and bullying.

Most students do not know much about school policy and the majority are not aware of the anti-discriminatory policies that are in effect. Far too many teachers are not fully equipped or trained to identify or deal with incidents of bullying, hate and discrimination. For example, I know multiple students at several different high schools who have been harassed by other students because of their LGBTQIA identities. These students report that among other things, they were called homophobic slurs and told they should "just die" because of their gender identity. Not surprisingly, this caused them to experience psychological distress and anxiety about being at school. Students who are harassed in this manner are often unaware of the anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies that are in effect. These students frequently do not

report incidents because they fear retaliation, they do not want parents informed, or they believe nothing will be done to effectively address the problem.

Clearly, as parents, concerned citizens and lawmakers, we need to do better.

HB0495 is an important step in addressing the problem. It helps to ensure that anti-discrimination policies in our schools are widely disseminated and that educators are properly trained in how to recognize and address problems. I believe that the majority of our teachers and school administrators are doing the best they can with the tools they have. But I do not think they have enough training in how to recognize and respond to harassment and bullying in our schools. In Anne Arundel County, the school system has worked hard to provide professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators that train them to identify and respond effectively to discrimination and bullying incidents. However, bullying and discrimination continue to be far too frequent in our schools. This needs to be addressed more effectively in every school system in Maryland, to keep our students safe at school and to provide academic environments where all students can thrive. When students have to fear being bullied or being discriminated against at school, they cannot thrive and their academic and psychosocial outcomes suffer.

For all these reasons, please SUPPORT HB 0495.

Thank you for your service to all the citizens of Maryland.

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