

Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Thomsen, and members of the committee,

I am here to speak out in support of this bill, which is long overdue. As a parent of an LGBTQ2IA youth and a part of the community myself, as well as a board member for Bridging Voices LGBTQ2IA Youth Choir, I can't say enough about how important this bill is. My child has faced struggles with bullying, sports access that is not equitable to them, struggles with pronouns and preferred names, and battles with simply finding a bathroom to use during school that they felt safe using. This has caused emotional trauma, spurred depression and disconnection, as well as they have feelings of not being safe or protected in their school and feeling a lack of support from many staff and teachers. The good experiences they have had mimic some of these suggestions and when they have supportive teachers and staff, they do well and want to be in school and engaged. I also work in a middle school and watch so many youth struggle with bullying, exclusion, lack of bathroom access, embarrassment when they speak up for themselves or peers, coping with lack of knowledge from teachers and staff about what to do to help support, and feeling like they have no one stable to talk to or depend on.

The suggestions in this plan are based on data, and the stories of the youth who need the support, they are clearly telling us what needs to happen and I think we should listen. The time spent in putting this plan together was based in research, community, collaboration, and a passion for creating safe spaces and schools for the youth in our state. No youth should feel scared or ashamed to be who they are and it is our job as the adults to help make sure they are protected and included. I know I want my children to feel safe as they grow up throughout their school systems, and to be able to express and love who they are, and this is one way that we can make sure ALL children and youth feel this way in our care as students. My teen is almost done with school and they should have been able to go through their school years in a safe, inclusive, and supportive space, and they didn't. Let's make sure all future students go through it with those things.

Thank you for your time,  
Heidi Esbensen  
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Parent, Board member of Bridging Voices, and advocate