

**Testimony of Willie Carver  
Before the  
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties  
U.S. House of Representatives  
May 18, 2022**

Chairman Raskin, Ranking Member Mace, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to offer this written testimony on such an important issue.

My name is Willie Carver. I am a seventeen-year teaching veteran with a double endorsed MAT, a Rank 1 in French linguistics. I've worked at Montgomery County Schools since 2013. I sponsor multiple school groups, and am a published member of National Council of Teachers of English, the Kentucky World Language Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the Kentucky Philological Association, the Center for Collaborative Center for Literacy Development, as well as a contributing and active member of the Kentucky and National Education Association and the Kentucky Adolescent Literacy Project. I am a recipient of two Praxis Awards of Excellence, a Kendall Smith Kentucky Star Awards recipient, a 2021 University of Kentucky Teacher who Made a Difference, and I am the 2022 Kentucky Teacher of the Year.

When I was a kid in school, I used to teach my sister what I learned every day. She started kindergarten ready for first grade and to this day is still smarter than me.

I was born to teach, and I'm good at it. I represent 42,000 Kentucky teachers as the 2022 Kentucky Teacher of the Year because I transform students' thinking, abilities, and lives.

**Impact of LGBTQ role models**

I've faced hatred, bigotry, and discrimination my whole career as a gay teacher, and I've weathered the storm because my presence saves lives. According to the Trevor Project, 40% of trans people have attempted suicide at some point in their lives, and a heartbreaking 92% of them attempted suicide before turning 25. The Trevor Project also reports that just one affirming adult reduces LGBTQ suicide attempts by 40%.

Research on the impact of LGBTQ role models is hardly new. Research from the *Journal of Adolescent Health* from 2012 already indicated that having positive role models decreases the psychological distress of LGBTQ youth.

Schools have always been a major means of access to positive role models and behaviors. According to research published in *Children and Youth Services Review*, seeing teachers intervene in bullying against marginalized students increases the students' likelihood to intervene themselves. Teachers are role models of inclusion of others and ourselves. Students need positive role models in their lives to be able to project an image of themselves into the future.

The need is immediate and the stakes are dire. Schools are dangerous places for LGBTQ students. According to the GLSEN 2019 Climate Survey, 59% of LGBTQ students feel unsafe at school because of their orientation, 69% are harassed because of their orientation, and 95% hear

anti-LGBTQ slurs daily. Sadly, according to research by Mcdermott et al, those same LGBTQ students experiencing these conditions are 400% more likely to commit suicide than their non-LGBTQ classmates.

These numbers are almost five years old. As shocking as they are, they've gotten much worse in the wake of the current political attacks against LGBTQ youth.

### **Legislation to limit students' rights**

As of this writing, over 300 bills have been introduced to limit or attack conversations or rights of youth who are Black, brown, or LGBTQ. There are bills, mandates, or new interpretations of existing policies, like those in Texas and Tennessee, that would prevent trans youth from getting affirming medical care, despite the fact that every major medical association agrees that affirming care prevents suicide. There are bills preventing trans students from playing sports, despite the fact that all research shows that inclusion is the best prevention of suicide among LGBTQ youth.

Perhaps most egregious, there are bills that limit conversations about the lived experiences of students. New, confusing, ambiguous anti-critical race theory (CRT) laws all but ban discussions about the lived experience of Black and brown students in classrooms. They do so either directly or by being unclear and leveraging disproportionately costly consequences against teachers and schools. As a result, little will be read by Black or brown authors or about Black or brown people. They protect themselves at the cost of their students' dignity and mental health.

The same choice teachers are making to protect themselves while harming students can be most clearly seen in the bills preventing discussion or inclusion of LGBTQ people in classroom settings. They require erasure. Florida's infamous House Bill 1557 will prevent any and all inclusion of LGBTQ people in grades K-3 and, by virtue of the ambiguity of the "age-appropriate" label for older students, will equally erase us in the rest of students' school experiences. Emboldened by the passing of this bill, other states are following suit, with Louisiana's resurrection of House Bill 837 making lessons on LGBTQ identity in K-8 illegal and forbidding teachers from discussing their identity in any grade.

### **Rendering LGBTQ students and teachers invisible**

Identity is rarely discussed by direct means. No teachers come out as straight. They are married to opposite sex spouses whose pictures sit on their desks or whose names come up in stories about vacations or weekend trips to the grocery store.

LGBTQ teachers and students will not be afforded this freedom. They will be required to deny their existence and edit the most basic aspects of their stories, unlike their classmates and colleagues.

Few LGBTQ teachers will survive this current storm. Politicizing our existence has already darkened our schools.

I'm made invisible. When we lost our textbooks during lockdown, I co-wrote two free textbooks with a university professor, made them free to anyone who wanted them, and found sponsors to

print them. I wasn't allowed to share them at my school. Other schools in Kentucky celebrate similar work by teachers, but my name is a liability.

I'm from the small town of Mt. Sterling, KY and I was invited to meet the President of the United States. It was not advertised to my students and colleagues. My school didn't even mention it in an email or morning announcement.

This invisibility extends to all newly politicized identities. Our administrators' new directive about books and lessons is "nothing racial."

We all know how to interpret this.

Works by white people living lives as white people are never called racial.

Works by Black and brown people living lives as Black and brown people are always called racial.

The politicization of identity erases their identities.

Parents now demand alternative assignments when authors of texts or materials are Black or LGBTQ; we teachers are told to accommodate them, but I cannot ethically erase Black or queer voices.

We ban materials by marginalized authors, ignoring official processes. One parent complaint removes all students' books overnight.

### **Endangered educators**

My Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), a campus group dedicated to discussing and helping make schools safe for LGBTQ students, couldn't share an optional campus climate survey with classmates. I was told it might make straight students uncomfortable.

Students now use anti-LGBTQ or racist slurs without consequence. Hatred is politically protected now.

When my GSA's posters were torn from walls, my principal's response was that people think LGBTQ advocacy is "being shoved down their throats"

Inclusive teachers are thrown under the bus by the people driving it.

During a national teacher shortage crisis, I know gay educators with perfect records dismissed this year.

A Kentucky teacher's whiteboard message of "You are free to be yourself with me. You matter" with pride flags resulted in wild accusations and violent threats. During this madness, his superintendent wrote to a parent, "This incident ... is unacceptable and will not be tolerated." The situation became unimaginably unsafe. He resigned.

Last month, a parent's dangerous, false allegations that my GSA was "grooming" students were shared 65 times on Facebook. I felt my students and I were unsafe. Multiple parents and I asked the school to defend us. One father wrote simply, "Please do something!" The school refused to support us.

There are 10,000 people in my town; one fringe parent doesn't represent most parents, who trust us.

### **Student suicides**

School is traumatic; LGBTQ students are trying to survive it. They often don't. Year after year, I receive suicidal goodbye texts from students at night. We've always saved them, but now I panic when my phone goes off after 10:00.

Meryl, a gentle trans girl from Owen County High, took her life in 2020. She always wanted a GSA. Her friends tried to establish one, but the teachers who wanted to help were afraid to sponsor it. Meryl's mother Rachelle runs an unofficial GSA, PRISM, from the local library.

45% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered suicide this year. We chip away at their dignity and spaces to exist. The systems meant to protect them won't even acknowledge them.

I recently attended Becky Oglesby's TED Talk. She described surviving a tornado with first graders, how they huddled, her arms around them, as their school walls lifted into the darkness.

I sobbed uncontrollably. I realized that for fifteen years, I have huddled around students, protecting them from the winds, and now the tornado's here. As the walls rip away, I feel I'm abandoning them.

But I'm tired. I've been fighting since my first day in a classroom. Fighting for kids to feel human. Fighting for kids to be safe. Fighting to stop the fear by changing hearts and minds.

I'm tired. I don't know how much longer I can do it.

I need you. We need you. To be brave enough to face the storm with us.

### **Congress needs to act**

We need you to remember that strong public schools are an issue of national security and moral urgency, and political attacks are exacerbating the teacher shortage, harming our democracy, and, above all, hurting our children.

We need you to pass the Equality Act, to make discrimination against LGBTQ people illegal.

We need you to pass the Safe Schools Improvement Act, to protect *all* students from harassment.

We're not asking for special treatment. We're asking for fundamental human decency, dignity, freedom from fear, and the same opportunity to thrive non-marginalized students and teachers enjoy.

## Sources

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