

## Testimony - Jennifer Cousins

I'm a mom of four empathetic, beautiful and intelligent kids, whom my world revolves around. My kids are 6, 8, 12 and 14, and I have two boys, one girl and one gender non-binary child. I'm a fierce advocate for my children, all of whom have only ever attended public school, an institution I hold sacred. When I saw the bills that were going through Tallahassee earlier this year, I felt the need to travel up there with other concerned parents, students, and advocates to share my concerns about HB1557, HB1467, and HB7. These new laws whitewash history, ban books and more importantly, erase the acknowledgement of students, parents and school staff that belong to the LGBTQIA+ community.

HB 1557, also known as "Don't Say Gay," as written forbids the instruction of sexual orientation and gender identity in grades K-3 and then only where "age-appropriate" thereafter. The bill sponsors didn't bother to define in the law what was meant by "sexual orientation," "gender identity," "classroom instruction," or "age-appropriate," but we, and that includes school policy makers, know its intent is to target LGBTQIA+ inclusive learning. Supporters of the law have argued gender identity inclusion in middle and high school is not age appropriate, and sexual orientation is only included in the voluntary state standard of HIV prevention curriculum. So now our local leadership is desperately waiting for clarity from the Florida DOE.

If gender identity is commonly defined as the personal sense of one's own gender, a book or instructional material that depicts a girl proudly wearing a frilly, pink dress is just as much about gender identity as a material with a transgender character in it. A book featuring a mommy and daddy is just as much about sexual orientation as a book that features two mommies. K-3 classroom materials are usually filled with pictures that are designed to engage early learners. Please take a moment and imagine what classroom materials will look like if they cannot include families or relatable boys and girls.

Teaching about the existence of LGBTQIA+ people in K-3 prevents bullying, builds empathy and ensures every child feels included in the classroom. HB 1557 will impact my family. It will make my rising 1st and 3rd graders second guess whether it's safe to speak proudly about our family and their sibling, for fear of getting themselves or their teachers and school in trouble. It will increase the likelihood my non-binary child will be bullied for simply existing. And it will make it harder for them to seek out support from school staff knowing that this law incentivizes avoiding conversations about sexual orientation and gender identity. In a recent survey by the Trevor Project, it was shown that one in five trans and non-binary youth have attempted suicide in the past year. Now that

Florida is seeking to hide their existence and silence their voices, I fear for what the numbers will look like next year.

In addition to the censorship, these laws allow for legal action to be taken and add a new barrier to building a positive parent/teacher relationship. Teachers are leaving the profession in droves, particularly in Florida, where pay, morale and district support is low. This year my Honors English 6th grader has been bounced between three different teachers, with their last one being a math teacher, and it's looking worse for next year. Laws such as these leave our educators weary of remaining in a profession where politicians are breeding distrust and removing their ability to make adjustments that best serve the unique makeup of their classrooms.

Public school always has and always will continue to serve the largest and most diverse group of students. Teachers are trained to discuss many "controversial topics" in the classroom in a way that will challenge our students to think critically about their own beliefs and perspectives. For most parents across the US exposure to a diverse set of people and beliefs is a major attribute, not a risk.

Why should our teaching professionals question their own expertise to cater to the most conservative voices in the community? LGBTQIA+ people are our family, our friends, our neighbors, our educators, and have been a part of our communities since the beginning of time. Laws like Florida's officially named "Parental Rights in Education" seek to erase their existence for our youngest of children, who by nature are already more open to learning about diversity and accepting one another despite their differences, and definitely deny parents like me a safe learning environment for my children.