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LD 2239

My name is Andrea Mancuso. I frequently engage with the Judiciary Committee in my professional role as the Policy Director of a statewide organization. However, I write to you today in my individual capacity as a mother of two children in Maine's public schools, as a lawyer who serves in a leadership role in Maine's movement to end gender based violence, and as an individual member of my local school committee, serving my sixth year. I urge you to reject LD 2239 and the policies it represents.

The data on the harmful impacts of promoting unsafe environments for the children targeted by this policy proposal is exceedingly clear. The annual Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey consistently reports that children who are LGBTQ+ experience harassment, bullying, physical violence and sexual violence at exponentially higher rates than their cis-gendered, heterosexual peers, with the most significant rates applicable to transgender students. Rates of self-harm and suicide attempts are higher for this population across their lifespan. And the genesis for that starts with the childhood environments that we as adults are responsible for creating.

Transgender students in Maine schools last year faced more than twice the threats, violence and bullying of their peers - disparities that have worsened as political attacks on LGBTQ+-inclusive school policies like the ones that exist in my local school district escalate. I am proud that my school district has implemented policies that strive to create safe places for every child to learn and grow, and I am grateful to our schools' leaders who carry forward these policies in Westbrook schools every day.

Harassment, bullying, physical and sexual violence are all adverse childhood experiences - something the state spends tens of millions of dollars each year to ameliorate in other contexts. And yet, here we are considering policies that would actively work to create them. Because some in our communities have decided that some children have characteristics that make them unworthy of our protection.

The work I've done in my professional career to date has given me a deep understanding about the conditions that allow gender based violence to thrive, as well as in the types of policies and practices that help reduce it and address its impact. Enacting the proposed policies would require schools to knowingly create environments that promote gender based violence in our state.

There is no data that supports the idea that allowing every student to use the school bathroom that aligns with their individual identity causes harm to any other student. Efforts to enact policies like these work only to teach all of our children the roadmap of how to go about structurally "othering" people who are different than them. Those are not the type of lessons we should be teaching in our public schools. It is incumbent on all elected community leaders to send a clear message that all of our students matter, that we know what contributes to safe and supportive public schools, and that we will do whatever we can to make sure our schools have the ability to keep doing what they're doing.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective.

Andrea Mancuso
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