

■ FOR SUBSCRIBERS EDUCATION

LGBTQ+ students, advocates say Ohio lawmakers and some state leaders are targeting them



Michael Lee

The Columbus Dispatch

Published 6:03 a.m. ET Oct. 11, 2022

The first word that comes to Parker Parker’s mind when he thinks about Ohio legislation and resolutions targeting LGBTQ+ students is “stress.”

He said many times, people just talk about how the legislation exists, or what the legislation will do. But he added the effects go beyond that.

“The stress that this causes for a lot of people is not talked about enough,” said the 17-year-old senior at Olentangy High School.

For example, Ohio House Bill 616 — introduced in April and known by opponents as the Buckeye state’s version of a “Don’t Say Gay” bill — would restrict how teachers talk about sexual orientation and gender identity in K-12 classrooms.

More recently, a member of the 19-member State Board of Education, which governs the Ohio Department of Education, proposed a resolution that would oppose the Biden Administration’s planned changes to Title IX that would add federal protections for LGBTQ+ students.

The resolution would require districts to let parents know if their children identify with a different gender, are questioning their gender identity, and/or are requesting to use a preferred name and pronouns.

It would also prohibit transgender women from joining women’s sports teams or use the women’s restroom.

In addition to the legislation and resolutions, LGBTQ students continue to face conflicts in Greater Columbus districts that could possibly take away support resources for them.

Yost lawsuit causes controversy locally

In May, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced its Food and Nutrition Service program would expand Title IX protections — prohibiting discrimination based on sex — to include gender orientation and sexual identity.

A couple months later, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost moved to join a lawsuit with 21 other state attorneys general to block it.

And while Yost's lawsuit eventually led to State Board of Education member Brendan Shea's resolution, it also led some school districts like New Albany-Plain Local Schools to enact similar policies.

New Albany-Plain Local recently came under fire on social media when a user on Reddit claimed that the district told its staff not to use a student's preferred names or preferred pronouns without having written permission from parents.

More: Ohio Board of Education resolution says person's sex 'unchangeable fact'

More: Ohio school board to vote in October on LGBTQ protections for students

New Albany-Plain superintendent Michael Sawyers confirmed there is a new policy and said that after Yost's lawsuit, he did issue written guidance to teachers that “they should honor a parent's right to basically tell us how to best meet the academic and developmental needs of their child.”

Sawyers said the decision was made to protect teachers after consulting with the district's legal counsel and school board members about what's still required by federal law compared to what's being challenged by the state attorneys general.

However, Sawyers said that the district is not outing students to their parents, but rather they start a conversation with the student first about what their needs are when they approach a teacher about using a preferred name and pronouns.

“But at the end of the day, if the conversation takes place with a kid and the student tells us, ‘Listen, this is private, I'm not comfortable sharing this information, I'm not comfortable having this discussion yet,’ then that stays at school,” he said.

Sawyers said that the district would then continue to call a student by their legal name and “appropriate pronoun” until a process works out with a family or a student turns 18.

‘It’s dragging me back from what I want to be’

Amanda Erickson is the director of education and outreach at the Kaleidoscope Youth Center, a community drop-in center in downtown Columbus that offers various programming for LGBTQ+ youth.

Erickson said that even if Shea’s state resolution doesn’t pass, it still has a negative impact on LGBTQ+ students.

“It comes down to just not wanting transgender people to exist,” Erickson said. “It’s really harmful to hear that kind of language coming from a state level.”

The resolution claims that a person's sex is not assigned but an "unchangeable fact," which Erickson said denies the existence of intersex people who have "some kind of biological makeup that makes it hard to categorize them as male or female."

Erickson added that with students using their preferred names and pronouns, it’s no different than if a cisgender student requested to go by a nickname. She said studies have shown that when students are able to use their chosen names and gender pronouns, it can actually improve their mental health.

More: Ohio Republicans want to ban treatments for transgender youth but what would that mean?

Parker said that getting "deadnamed" — when a transgender person is referred to by the name they used before transitioning — makes him feel like he’s being forced to be someone who that he is not.

“It just feels like it’s dragging me back from what I want to be and who I am,” said Parker, who identifies as queer and transgender.

He added that if Ohio legislation and resolutions targeting LGBTQ+ students continue, it puts them in a “scary situation.”

Erickson agreed, and said that it’s the safety of the children that’s at stake.

“We’re going to see higher rates of anxiety and depression in our students, probably higher rates of substance abuse and suicide. and all the negativity that comes along with

experiencing discrimination day in and day out.”

Can districts become safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students?

In Hilliard City Schools, teachers were wearing optional badges from the National Education Association with a QR code directing them to resources on how to better support their LGBTQ+ students. The badges also say “safe person, safe space” on them.

Advocates like Erickson said that the badges are a great sign for young LGBTQ+ students to identify who they may be able to talk to if they have issues.

But some parents like Lisa Chaffee have fought against the badges, claiming that the QR code leads to “borderline pornographic” material. Chaffee said that it hurts teachers who choose not to wear the badge, and that she believes the district should not be favoring LGBTQ+ students.

“The other factor of the badge is they’re only showing support for LGBTQ students, which shows favoritism,” Chaffee said. “All teachers should be safe for all students.”

Hilliard superintendent David Stewart said in a statement that the badges were only provided to teachers who requested one and that the QR code resides on the back of the badge. The badge “is provided to adults by the NEA should they be interested in learning more about LGTBQ+ issues and supporting LGBTQ+ students,” he said.

Teachers were reminded by the district that the resources from the QR code are for adult learning only, that they shouldn't be used in lesson plans, that their responses to students asking about the badge be age-appropriate and were directed to cover up the QR code.

“The Hilliard City School District remains committed to ensuring that all students feel safe, included, and welcomed in their learning experience.,” Stewart said. “While the badges were not created or provided by the Hilliard City School District, the district embraces the inclusive nature of the message.”

Parker said that for him, being able to see a badge like that or a safe space sign allows him to exhale and feel more comfortable in a classroom.

“If something happens, I can tell this teacher, 'Hey, such and such happened,' and we can figure out a way to solve the problem,” he said. “I would say that’s what it really means.”

Other area districts such as Columbus City Schools have also come out in support of LGBTQ+ students, with the district's school board condemning the proposed state resolution both vocally and officially in a resolution passed at a recent meeting.

Parker said seeing support from Columbus City Schools and those who've testified in front of the state board — like he did — is a hopeful sign for the future of LGBTQ+ students.

“I think seeing other people stand up, who you don't really know and are complete strangers to you, is such a great thing,” he said. “It's almost like a blissful feeling, because you feel less alone when you do it.”

USA TODAY Network Ohio Bureau reporter Anna Staver contributed to this report.

Michael Lee is a K-12 education reporter for The Columbus Dispatch. You can follow him on Twitter@leem386 or email him atmylee@dispatch.com. Sign up Extra Credit, the education team's weekly newsletter, here.