



LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY

Bill: **HB 0850/SB 0666 Schools, Prekindergarten Programs, and County Boards of Education - Discrimination**

Organization: PFLAG Salisbury Inc., PO Box 5107, Salisbury Maryland 21802

Submitted by: Michele Copper, Board Member

Position: **FAVORABLE**

SALISBURY PFLAG SUPPORTS THE INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS ACT

I am submitting this testimony in FAVOR of HB 0850/SB 0666 on behalf of PFLAG Salisbury, the Salisbury, Maryland Chapter of PFLAG National.

I want to take a few minutes to explain why passing the Inclusive Schools Act is so important to me. I have two children enrolled in Wicomico County Public Schools. When I enrolled my oldest child in school a decade ago, I asked the principal of his school two very simple questions: What training has your school staff had to work with LGBTQ+ youth? And what policies does the district have in place specific to LGBTQ+ youth? The answer to both questions was “none and none.” I offered to provide resources and access to training to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ youth. In response to this, the principal told me in no uncertain terms that if I was expecting teachers in my child’s school district to have training on working with LGBTQ+ youth, that I should “move to a metropolitan area, like D.C.” I left the meeting with the principal feeling demoralized and berated.

Returning home, I scoured the Wicomico County Public Schools website for any policies or even *mention* of how LGBTQ+ youth are supported in the district. The principal knew his policy, as he was correct: There was none. The website does not even mention LGBTQ+ youth; it’s like LGBTQ+ kids do not exist.

In 2015, I formed Salisbury’s PFLAG Chapter to help push for greater visibility and support for LGBTQ+ people in our community. Since 2015, I have met a steady stream of parents and youth who describe to me severe injustices occurring in our county public schools and area private schools. These include but are not limited to instances of verbal harassment—including by school staff; administrative and public opposition to the formation of GSAs (which are supportive clubs for LGBTQ+ youth); gendered graduation gowns, which alienate and ostracize trans and nonbinary youth; and teachers and school staff who do not honor youth’s pronouns or names. I have met LGBTQ+ kids in our county schools that

don't feel comfortable attending school events, refuse to use the bathrooms at their school, and have even skipped their own graduation ceremony as they felt unsupported. While there are also some positive supports, spurred by the actions of individual teachers and staff who care for our LGBTQ+ youth, we need consistent policies and guidelines across our schools to ensure that children are treated equitably. Otherwise, our children and parents like me are left navigating a system in which we have to proactively seek out supportive faces and spaces.

These types of supports are important for ensuring that our children have every opportunity to excel in school. LGBTQ+ youth in unsupportive school climates miss more school, are less likely to graduate, have a lower GPA, and are less likely to go to college. School climates matter. Our LGBTQ+ youth matter. Our LGBTQ+ youth deserve a supportive school climate which is inclusive of them and their needs.

Yet, here it is a decade since enrolling my oldest child in Wicomico County Public Schools, and little has changed. LGBTQ+ youth remain marginalized in our schools. Our County continues to overlook the importance of supports for LGBTQ+ youth; no non-discrimination policies or guidelines in our County which explicitly identify and protect LGBTQ+ youth exist. When PFLAG Salisbury last approached our Superintendent of Schools in late 2021 asking whether policies specific to protecting and meeting the needs of LGBTQ+ youth exist in our district, we were once again referred to general non-discrimination protections. It is clear no policies specific to our youth exist. General protections are insufficient to protecting our youth. Research has consistently demonstrated that schools with non-discrimination protections which explicitly identify and protect LGBTQ+ youth are the schools that create supportive school environments for LGBTQ+ children. Further, these schools have more inclusive, supportive school environments overall, meaning that all children benefit when LGBTQ+ youth are supported in school.

Please, I call upon our Delegates in Annapolis to enact the Inclusive Schools Act. We need this bill enacted into law. Our LGBTQ+ youth deserve to be protected within all schools in Maryland which receive public funds. HB0850/SB0666 is a major step forward to providing equitable and inclusive education in Maryland public schools, and would greatly help us here in Wicomico County and in other parts of the Eastern Shore in serving our LGBTQ+ youth. Therefore, PFLAG Salisbury Inc. supports this legislation and recommends a FAVORABLE report in committee.