February 21, 2022

The Honorable Wilton Simpson  
President of the Florida Senate  
409, The Capitol  
404 South Monroe Street  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100

The Honorable Chris Sprowls  
Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives  
420, The Capitol  
402 South Monroe Street  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1300

Dear President Simpson and Speaker Sprowls:

We write today regarding two bills being considered by the Florida Legislature, misleadingly titled “Parental Rights in Education” (HB 1557 and SB 1834). Under this legislation, schools would be barred from classroom discussions about sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through third grade, and more vaguely prohibit it in any “manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate.” Furthermore, the bills open the floodgates to frivolous lawsuits by parents seeking to restrict the acknowledgement of LGBTQ+ identities in school. In the interest of academic freedom and the mental health of students, we urge you to oppose these bills and not allow them to come to the floor of the Florida House or Senate for a vote.

The ACLU is currently tracking nearly 150 active state bills that discriminate against the LGBTQ+ community, five of which are moving through the Florida Legislature. While all of these bills threaten LGBTQ+ civil rights, HB 1557 and SB 1834 are additionally egregious due to their disastrous implications for the principles of free speech and freedom of expression and attack the very core of American constitutional democracy. Unfortunately, these bills continue to receive national attention since they have advanced in the legislative process beyond similar bills in other states seeking to restrict LGBTQ+ rights in education.

Under the guise of parents’ rights, these two bills fit into an alarming trend of rising threats to academic freedom and American children’s right to a comprehensive education. Contrary to assertions by the bills’ supporters that discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity are inappropriate for schoolchildren, the American Psychological Association and the National Association of School Psychologists recommend that K-12 schools acknowledge sexual and
gender diversity and “create policies that directly improve, affirm, and support the health and wellbeing of gender and sexual diverse children and adolescents of all ages.”ii

LGBTQ+ youth face a wide breadth of unique barriers to mental wellbeing as they venture to openly embrace their identities and seek acceptance from peers and adults, including their parents and teachers. According to the Trevor Project’s 2021 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health, the overwhelming majority of LGBTQ+ youth reported symptoms of generalized anxiety and major depressive disorder.iii The rising politicization of LGBTQ+ schoolchildren’s lives – and transgender and nonbinary youth in particular – has only worsened recently, with 94% reporting that “recent politics negatively impacted their mental health.” Critically, LGBTQ-inclusive curricula improved mental health outcomes, and LGBTQ+ youth in a school environment that affirmed their identities – rather than erasing or rejecting it – were 33% less likely to report attempting suicide.iv

Florida schools already fail to provide a safe environment for LGBTQ+ students, with one survey of secondary students in Florida finding that 61% experienced at least one form of anti-LGBTQ discrimination.v A new law silencing LGBTQ+ students and inciting a culture of fear around the discussion of LGBTQ+ identities will only serve to further degrade the poor state of LGBTQ+ youth mental health.

Schools must be institutions that foster learning, innovation, and growth – not secrecy and intimidation.

Whether students identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community or not, they deserve to hear the stories of Bayard Rustin, a Black gay man who helped organize the 1963 March on Washington, and Marsha P. Johnson, a Black transgender activist who was a prominent figure in the Stonewall uprising. They should also learn about landmark Supreme Court cases like U.S. v. Windsor and Obergefell v. Hodges – and the loving same-sex couples behind these victories – which drastically advanced justice and equality for LGBTQ+ people in the United States.

An education that lacks these fundamental details of the history of American civil rights is one that is incomplete.

LGBTQ+ kids must not be a pawn exploited in today’s political discourse – not in Florida, nor any other state in our nation. We ask that you consider the harmful toll this legislation would have on LGBTQ+ children’s mental health and individual liberties in education, oppose these bills, and do not bring them to a vote on the floor of the Florida House or Senate.

Sincerely,
Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Member of Congress

David N. Cicilline
Member of Congress

Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

Nikema Williams
Member of Congress

Lois Frankel
Member of Congress

Ted Deutch
Member of Congress

Mark Takano
Member of Congress

Carolyn B. Maloney
Member of Congress

Ritchie Torres
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Sean Casten
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Stephanie Murphy
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Dwight Evans  
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Danny K. Davis  
Member of Congress

Jimmy Panetta  
Member of Congress

Ruben Gallego  
Member of Congress

CC:
The Honorable Ron DeSantis, Governor of Florida
The Honorable Debbie Mayfield, Florida Senate Majority Leader
The Honorable Lauren Book, Florida Senate Minority Leader
The Honorable Michael Grant, Florida House Majority Leader
The Honorable Evan Jenne, Florida House Minority Leader


