



MARYLAND'S LGBTQ ADVOCATES

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Dr. William E. Kirwan, Chairman
Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education

Dear Chairman Kirwan and Members of the Commission:

FreeState Justice, a statewide civil rights advocacy organization, represents the more than 180,000 Marylanders who identify as a part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender expansive (LGBTQ) community, many of whom are youth attending Maryland Public Schools. We would like to express our deeply held concern that the recommendations and work of the Commission do not address the specific needs and issues faced by LGBTQ students in Maryland schools. LGBTQ youth are some of the most vulnerable students in our school system, and we urge the Commission to ensure that their needs are also included in these critical conversations about ensuring an excellent education for all Maryland students.

LGBTQ youth are a sizeable population of our public school system's students. Relying on data from the Maryland Department of Health's 2016 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, it can be estimated that more than 10% of Maryland students identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) and about 3% of Maryland students identify as transgender. Due to a patchwork of varying policies and practices regarding LGBTQ youth in districts across the state, students and families experience wildly varied climates, from supportive and affirming to hostile.

A significant number of Maryland's LGBTQ students do not feel safe, supported, or accepted at school.¹ The 2016 YRBS found that students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender face significantly increased risks of harassment and violence. These students were about twice as likely to have been bullied as their peers and have higher rates of suicidal ideation. In the same year, LGBTQ students were one and half to two times more likely to miss school. Undoubtedly, these circumstances are impacting the academic outcomes of this student community. Given these unique needs, the Commission must make sure LGBTQ student needs are considered and addressed in its recommendations.

¹ According to the 2016 YRBS, as many as 80% of transgender students feel unsafe at school, and 77% of transgender students face some type of mistreatment in schools, 54% being verbally harassed, and 24% being physically attacked. The survey also finds that LGBTQ students are more likely to experience sexual violence, feel consistently sad or hopeless, and are three times more likely to seriously consider suicide than their peers.

FreeState Justice (formerly Equality Maryland and FreeState Legal Project) is a social justice organization that works through direct legal services, legislative and policy advocacy, and community engagement to enable Marylanders across the spectrum of LGBTQ identities to be free to live authentically, with safety and dignity, in all communities in Maryland.

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We strongly urge the Commission to: (1) ensure LGBTQ youth issues are included in discussion of the cultural competency of highly qualified and diverse teachers and leaders; (2) consider LGBTQ student outcomes and experiences when determining the resources that all school districts need to adequately support LGBTQ students; (3) focus on addressing racial inequity throughout the funding formula and other proposed recommendations that impact student opportunity and achievement; and (4) recommend the adoption of standard LGBTQ student policies across districts.

As the Commission provided in its preliminary recommendation, highly qualified and diverse teachers and leaders are critical to an excellent education. Effective teachers and leaders are culturally competent so they can reach every student. Information about LGBTQ students' identities, the issues they commonly face, and strategies for building inclusive and affirming spaces must be included in our understanding of strong cultural competency to ensure these students thrive in every school. The state needs to provide both new and seasoned teachers and leaders with appropriate training and resources to equip our educators.

Not all LGBTQ students are "at-risk," but many are. Without strong data, it is hard to determine the population of LGBTQ students by district or determine which are in need of additional resources and support. In their recommendation, the Commission should consider what resources are needed by all districts to support their LGBTQ student populations whose needs may be different from other students. We also support implementing investments in curricula that are inclusive of diverse families and LGBTQ history. Another important investment is identifying and supporting culturally specific pedagogy and strategies for building affirming classroom and school climates. For instance, research has shown that the presence of a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) student group in a school positively effects both LGBTQ students and their peers.² These investments should be considered as the Commission discusses community schools models.

We emphatically call on the Commission to address racial equity in your final formula recommendation and in all of your policy recommendations. Our organization, which stands for equality and equity, joins this call from the community and from advocates for continued and increasing emphasis on racial equity throughout the rest of the Commission's process. Students of color, many of whom are also LGBTQ students, must receive opportunities to succeed and the schools that serve them need the resources to do so adequately.

Finally, we urge the Commission to recommend the adoption of standard LGBTQ student policies across districts. Student and family experiences vary from school to school and district to district. Standard policies regarding student documents, dress codes, gender-segregated activities, name and pronoun use, facilities access, data collection, and staff training should be standard. Districts should have streamlined policies and should develop specific plans for meeting LGBTQ students' needs.

I hope that the Commission's work will include discussions of our LGBTQ students' needs in your work moving forward in relation to educator quality, at-risk students, and racial equity. As an

² Saewyc, E., C. Konishi, H. Rose, and Y. Homma. "School-Based Strategies To Reduce Suicidal Ideation, Suicide Attempts, and Discrimination Among Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Adolescents." *International Journal of Child, Youth & Family Studies* (2014).

advocate for my community, as a former Baltimore City Public Schools teacher, and as a Marylander, thank you for your service to our students.

Sincerely,

Mark A. Procopio

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FreeState Justice