

May 4, 2016

Dear Members of the Michigan State Board of Education:

As a psychologist and as a Michigander, I am writing to express my support for the Statement and Guidance on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments for LGBTQ Students.

The information and recommendations outlined in the Statement and Guidance are consistent with research-based evidence on sexual orientation and gender diversity. Based on empirical research, we have known for decades that a range of sexual orientations is a healthy feature of human nature. Likewise, a range of gender identities and gender expressions are part of healthy human experience (see, for example, [APA & NASP, 2015](#)). There is no evidence that supports the notion that one kind of identity is inherently healthier than another; instead, we can say with confidence that individuals of all sexual orientations and genders have the capability to learn, contribute productively to society, and have healthy and happy lives.

Simply put, LGBTQ youth are often treated differently. Some youth face social settings that do not support them for who they are, and LGBTQ youth, and those suspected of being LGBTQ, tend to face bullying, rejection, and discrimination targeting their sexual orientations and genders. This maltreatment is toxic to young people. As noted in the Statement and Guidance and in multitudes of research studies (see, for example, [the Family Acceptance Project](#)), these negative social experiences are linked with harmful outcomes including health and mental health problems as well as poorer academic achievement and higher rates of dropout. It is not the students' LGBTQ identities that place them at higher risk of such harm; it is the negative and inappropriate treatment they receive from others that is harmful. All students deserve to participate in a safe school and be supported for who they are.

Treating others as you would want to be treated includes respecting each student's identity. Unfortunately, a large portion of LGBTQ students feel unsafe at school, and transgender and gender non-conforming students are particularly vulnerable in private spaces like restrooms (see, for example, [GLSEN's National School Climate Survey](#)). Individuals often suffer health problems, for example, dehydration and urinary tract and bladder infections, to avoid discrimination and harassment in the restroom ([Herman, 2013](#)). LGBTQ students are being harmed in Michigan. In contrast, the safe school practices offered in the draft Statement and Guidance shows no risk of harm to students.

It is unconscionable to equate LGBTQ youth with predators, particularly when it is LGBTQ youth who have been preyed upon. It is clear that some people are uncomfortable with diversity in sexual orientation and gender, but discomfort is different than harm; allowing students to be themselves does not threaten anyone. This is an opportunity to learn rather than hide from the truth. In trying to provide safe environments for all students, school officials and families would benefit from learning about LGBTQ youth, understanding that being LGBTQ is not dangerous to others, and that everyone benefits from safety and acceptance for who they are.

As a psychologist, I have served many youth and young adults from Michigan's public schools. It is clear that schools are grappling with difficult questions about how to promote the best learning environments for the astonishingly diverse populations of students and families they serve. I have witnessed the heartbreaking psychological struggles and life setbacks of those who suffered rejection and discrimination while trying to learn in our schools. I have also been uplifted by the stories of those who found support and acceptance from teachers, classmates, advisors, and others, and they use these positive experiences to build resilience and achieve higher education, successful careers, and healthy families.

Acceptance and support of youth for who they are is a strategy that can protect the health and safety of youth and can promote a better quality of life for all Michiganders. The Statement and Guidance offers schools an informational resource to help them create policies and practices that will work best for their particular schools. It is clear that a diversity of opinions will not all agree with any statement, but a priority of education is to shine a light on what is true and evidence-based. As the Statement and Guidance promotes factual information, I fully support the Board of Education's acceptance of this Statement and Guidance.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or requests for further information.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melissa Grey".

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