

Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak here tonight. I am here because I was thrilled to read that the board will be voting on new proposed policies regarding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and specifically, policy #7554, Student Gender Identity. In actuality, these policies are not new, because at the very core, they are about respecting our students.

As a teacher at Casey Middle, a former coach, and the social justice club adviser, I have had many students who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Growing up as a student in this district, my sister who stands beside me today bravely came out to her school, her family, and her friends. She did not have many safe spaces at a time when safety was so desperately needed, but school was one place where she found refuge. Many other children walk similar paths. School is a place where all students have a right to feel safe and be respected for who they are, and we build this place through our practices and our policies.

This is not a matter of politics. This is not a matter of pushing a liberal agenda. This is not even a matter of changing people's beliefs and values. This is a matter of safety for the people we are all here for, the people we care most about in the world, our children. Something that may make you uneasy or uncomfortable could save another child's life. Having adults in a school who are affirming is not just a nicety for a child, it is a necessity. It can make or break that child. My number one goal as a teacher is for all of my students to feel loved, valued, respected, and cared for. I am grateful that our Board of Education is considering these policies and I implore you to vote yes because it will lead to more children feeling safe and cared for at school.

- Melissa Bennett, Teacher at Casey Middle School and Former Student at Williamsville East, October 12, 2021

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7KwF0PJ4iw>

For a moment, I want you to imagine that you are sixteen years old and that you are walking home from school. You have a skip in your step because you love life and your heart is full of songs, your world is full of hope and endless possibilities. You are dreaming of your future, of all the things you might accomplish; you are making sense of today and imagining tomorrow through the pages of a book that you have just read in class, which you are replaying in your mind as you walk, no, dance, home from the place that has given you hopes and dreams and the tools to become who you want to be: school.

But then, as you enter through the door into your home, all that, that world of innocence, comes crashing down on you. Words of hate slam into your ear and heart. You're no longer the kid with the bright future ahead; instead, you're a monster, you're nothing, you're a mistake, you're a deformity. You have it drilled into you that you're bad, you're wrong, that you have no future, that there is no place for you. You're told there is something wrong in you; your baby brother can't be around you because of who you are, because you might convert him, you might corrupt him, the evil in you might spread. Words, like hurling axes, are thrown at your head, but they don't hit you, they don't even scratch you, because, somehow, there is a shield defending you, a shield that you made *at school*, a shield made out of the groups you were able to join to help build a better world than the one at home, a shield made out of the kind words of your teacher, a shield made out of the rainbow flag hanging above the chalkboard in your classroom, a shield made out of the policies that the school created to protect you, a shield made out of the opportunities to be you and be loved as you are at school, which come to your rescue and protect you from believing that you're a monster just because you're gay or lesbian or gender non-conforming.

The child in this story was me, when I was a student at East. But the child in this story could have been you. It will be one of our precious children. When you vote on Policy #7554, I am asking you to remember the child who might have a lifetime of axes thrown at them. You have the power to be a companion and a shield to that child, to give them the protection and the help they need to survive and thrive along the way. Thank you.

- Jessica Lowell Mason, Ph.D. Candidate at the University at Buffalo and Former Williamsville East Student, October 12, 2021