

March 2, 2022

The Honorable Wilton Simpson
409 The Capitol
404 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100

Senate Majority Leader Debbie Mayfield
330 Senate Building
404 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100

Senate Minority Leader Lauren Book
228 Senate Building
404 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100

RE: UnidosUS Strongly Opposes Florida HB 1557

Dear Senate President Simpson, Leader Mayfield, and Leader Book:

On behalf of UnidosUS (formerly the National Council of La Raza), I write to express our strong opposition to **HB 1557**, titled “Parental Rights in Education,” which threatens the safety and well-being of Florida students.

UnidosUS is the nation’s largest Hispanic¹ civil rights and advocacy organization. The UnidosUS Florida-based Affiliates include 17 community-based organizations that invest more than \$113 million and employ more than 3,200 staff to provide direct services from housing counseling to workforce development to approximately 130,000 Floridians annually. UnidosUS—headquartered in Washington, DC—has an office in Miami and staff in Orlando. Through partnerships, community investments, and state research and advocacy on housing, health, and education, UnidosUS advances opportunities for the almost 6 million Latinos who call Florida home and is present in 27 of Florida’s 67 counties.

More than 1 million Florida PreK–12 students identify as Hispanic according to the Florida Department of Education’s EdStats database. National research shows that while at least 22% of Hispanics from ages 25 to 40 identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+), rates are higher for those who are under age 24.¹ The well-being of all students, including LGBTQ+ students, makes the threats of HB 1557 all the more real for Hispanic students and their families.

House Bill 1557 was amended to no longer require teachers and staff to “out” students to their parents if they disclose to someone at school that they identify as LGBTQ+. Outing refers to exposing an LGBTQ+ person’s gender identity or sexuality without their consent. However, the chilling effect of the bill persists, and the required reporting of any emotional support a student may request in confidence has a similar impact. If children have made the decision not to tell a caregiver or parent yet about their identity or the psychosocial support they seek, it is often out of self-preservation. For some students, the only safe adults they feel they can confide in and ask questions are supportive school staff.

¹ The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout our materials to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as “Latinx” to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

Mandating that school staff reveal a student's sexual or gender identity to their parents can not only strain that relationship and put educators in a difficult position, but would also inadvertently harm and traumatize the child.

The social and safety consequences resulting from this bill must be taken into consideration, for instance, students facing abuse or being kicked out of their homes. LGBTQ+ youth are more than twice as likely as their non-LGBTQ+ peers to experience homelessness, according to a Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago [report](#). Rejection of sexual orientation and gender identity is cited as the most frequent factor that contributes to the disproportionate rates of homelessness.ⁱⁱ Moreover, Black or multiracial and LGBTQ+ youth reported the highest rates of homelessness (16%) compared to their White peers.

Moreover, in Florida, the third-leading cause of death of youth ages 15–19 is suicide.ⁱⁱⁱ According to The Trevor Project, the largest suicide prevention organization for LGBTQ+ youth, its [National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health 2021](#) found that 42% of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, including more than half of transgender and nonbinary youth. “[Nonbinary](#)” is a term used to describe people whose gender identity does not fit within the traditional construction of gender as a binary between exclusively male or exclusively female. Although transgender and nonbinary identities can overlap, they are not synonyms that can be used interchangeably. LGBTQ+ youth are four times more likely to seriously consider and to attempt suicide than their peers.^{iv} Transgender, queer, and gender-expansive students exist, and they deserve to be validated in school. If their identities are erased, their mental health will suffer.

The [Florida Snapshot](#) using data from GLSEN's 2019 National School Climate Survey illustrates that:

- The vast majority of LGBTQ+ students (ranging from 72% to 94%) in Florida regularly (sometimes, often, or frequently) heard anti-LGBTQ remarks.
- Most LGBTQ+ students (up to 69%) in Florida experienced anti-LGBTQ+ victimization at school within the previous year.

Without facilitated, affirming conversations about gender identity and sexuality, the harassment and assault of LGBTQ+ youth may increase. Harassment due to sexual orientation and race/ethnicity can contribute to higher absenteeism, a lower likelihood of obtaining a four-year degree, and greater levels of depression. LGBTQ+ students' well-being relies on finding trustworthy adults to report harassment, ask questions, and request resources. Latinx LGBTQ+ students who attend schools with supportive staff have higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression.^v Without adequate support, the suicide rates of some of the most marginalized Hispanic students are expected to rise.

HB 1557, also known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, dismantles the community structures within schools which help to ensure the safety and success of LGBTQ+ students. As outlined in *Erasure and Resilience: The Experiences of LGBTQ Students of Color*, Latinx LGBTQ students with access to more school staff (11 or more) who were supportive of LGBTQ+ students had slightly higher GPAs, had greater academic aspirations, and were less likely to miss school due to safety concerns.^{vi} The bill, in implementation, could restrict GSAs (Gay-Straight Alliances) or similar clubs and make it impossible for supportive school staff to affirm the identities of queer, gender-expansive, and transgender youth. In comparison with students who did not have a GSA club, LGBTQ+ students with a GSA were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation (48.0% vs. 62.7%) and felt a greater sense of belonging to their school community.^{vii} Professional development that educates school staff on empowering queer youth

to make educated decisions on sexual health and on how to work directly with health center providers and staff on LGBTQ+ inclusive sexual health care would become illegal under this bill.

Moreover, this is an added barrier for Latinx and/or immigrant queer youth who will find it even more difficult to speak to a trusted adult in culturally meaningful ways while at school.

Florida cannot continue to regress in its support for student well-being. House Bill 1557 and Senate Bill 1834 are insidiously worded in coded language to obscure the threats they make to LGBTQ+ students of color. **In a state where more than 1 million students identify as Hispanic or Latinx, we strongly oppose HB 1557 and any legislation that undermines the safety and well-being of the most marginalized of these students.**

Sincerely,



Raisa Sequeira
Florida Policy Analyst, UnidosUS

ⁱ Cathy J. Cohen et al., “Millennials’ Attitudes on LGBT Issues: Race, Identity, and Experience,” GenForward Survey (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2018). <http://api.genforwardsurvey.com/download/135/?f=true>

ⁱⁱ Laura E. Durso and Gary J. Gates, *Serving Our Youth: Findings from a National Survey of Service Providers Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth Who Are Homeless or at Risk of Becoming Homeless* (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute with the True Colors Fund and the Palette Fund, 2012). <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Serving-Our-Youth-July-2012.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, “Underlying Cause of Death 1999–2020,” CDC WONDER Online Database, released in 2021, <http://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10.html> (accessed February 17, 2022). Data are from the Multiple Cause of Death Files, 1999–2020, as compiled from data provided by the 57 vital statistics jurisdictions through the Vital Statistics Cooperative Program.

^{iv} Richard Lowry, Michelle Marie Johns, and Leah Robin, “Violence Victimization, Substance Use Disparities, and Gender-Nonconforming Youth,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 58, no. 5 (May 1, 2020): e159–e169. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32147370/>

^v Adrian D. Zongrone, Nhan L. Truong, and Joseph G. Kosciw, *Erasure and Resilience: The Experiences of LGBTQ Students of Color*, Issue brief (New York: GLSEN, Hispanic Federation, and UnidosUS, 2020), <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Erasure-and-Resilience-Latinx-2020-0.pdf>.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.