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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR COMMENTARY

LGBTQ RIGHTS:

Are We Moving Backwards?

Robert Rader

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CABE

Editor's Note: Having written previously on the challenges of having a transgender child, Bob was recently asked his reaction to the Trump Administration's actions concerning the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals. We thought you might want to read what he wrote.

I am not an expert on gay, lesbian or transgender students. I do not have the expertise and knowledge of an official representative of GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) or an officer of any of the PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) chapters around the nation.

However, as a father of a transgender child and the father-in-law of a transgender woman, I have watched with great sadness the recent spate of news reports on the Trump Administration's battle against how LGBT individuals can be treated in our society. Then-Candidate Trump tweeted in June, 2016, "Thank you to the LGBT community!" Trump again tweeted in June 2016: "I will fight for you..."

As President, Trump, has done the opposite.

Lost in the discussion of the President's disdainful statements and comments on immigrants, Mexicans, blacks and others, is what is actually happening to LGBT students and their futures. The Obama-issued Federal Department of Education's Guidance for protecting the rights of transgender students was withdrawn in 2017 by Secretary DeVos. While not dealing with students, the Administration's denial that Title IX's prohibition on discrimination "on the basis of sex", in a case now before the U.S. Supreme Court, belies the President's claim that he will fight for the LGBT community.

Should the Court follow the Administration's reasoning, individuals could be fired from their jobs in states where there is no LGBT protection without any recourse. As Lawrence Hurley wrote in an article in Reuters, Trump's "administration has supported the right of certain businesses to refuse to serve gay people on the basis of religious objections to gay marriage, restricted transgender service members in the military and rescinded protections on bathroom access for transgender students in public schools."

While our concern is for students, now, how does their future look?

The Court's decision on gay marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges* raised expectations in the LGBT community and among its supporters that life would be getting better for them — they finally had the same rights to marry as heterosexuals (cisgen-

der individuals).

They were not asking for *greater* rights, just the *same* rights.

However, now we see progress stopped and reversed.*

While we cannot forecast what the Supreme Court will decide, we can predict that a decision in the President's favor will darken the future of LGBT students and adults.

LGBTQ students and adults have a much higher chance of committing suicide than others. What will be the effect of these further attempts to limit their rights?

Is that the America we want?

My Perspective

My son, Dusty, told us first that he was gay and, later, that he believed he was a man. While I still struggle with pronouns (his are 'he', 'him' and 'his') I am proud of him not *because* he is transgender, but because he is my son and, thanks to the support of family and friends, is able to be proudly out and share his experiences and advice. He speaks to teachers, administrators, school board members and others who need to understand what it was like for him to have grown up and taught in the public schools. He helps create empathy, hope and enriches the lives of the people listening.

Because of his circumstance, he even allows me to write articles like this.

Too many children and, adults, cannot tell the world because they believe the world is not yet ready to accept these differences. The severe psychological strain of not being able to tell classmates, teachers or even parents of their "true identity", leads to all kinds of mental and emotional ills. I have seen 40 and 50-year old men terribly conflicted because they don't know how their parents would react to learning that they were transgender or gay.

Imagine living with such a secret for your whole lives. Imagine not being able to talk about something so central to your life. Imagine feeling that you are not able to count on the support of your friends, coworkers or your family.

Or, your State or Nation.

Now, added to this burden, in many places in our nation being gay or transgender is thought of as being somewhat "less". Taunting, bullying and otherwise shunning students who are thought of as different goes on all the time among children. However, the Court can help those who want to treat them as second class. Too often, it is the adults who do not provide the "code of conduct" that says that this is intolerable.

Now, imagine all of that ratcheted up in the psychological makeup of students who feel ashamed of what their feelings



are.

People tell me that I have courage for speaking out about this issue and being so open about my family. But, I don't see it like that. I believe I have a responsibility to help students who are facing discrimination for gender identity, just as much as I would if they were facing discrimination for another arbitrary reason. I want to celebrate students and adults like my son, because I think **all** people deserve that.

In our society, especially here in liberal Connecticut where we protect the rights of the LGBT community, it doesn't take much courage to say what you believe in. I think most of our citizens understand the need to protect LGBTQ students and adults. However, I would ask those who don't whether, if it was a member of their family that they loved, how could they turn against him or her because of something over which he or she had no control?

Do you hate a child because he was born disabled? Or, because she isn't as naturally smart as her brother?

Do you think this is a choice — that people would actually choose to be gay or transgender and face a lifetime of harassment and discrimination?

Our job in the public schools is to make sure every student is prepared to make the most of their schooling and to leave ready for the future. LGBTQ students deserve this right as much as any other students.

They will succeed, like anyone else, if they are free of intimidation, bullying and harassment and, instead, are supported, loved and safe.

It is the responsibility of boards, superintendents and staff to make sure that this happens in our school districts. We owe no less to all of our students who are different.

No matter what the Supreme Court might say.

*For a list of anti-LGBTQ actions taken by the Trump Administration see <https://www.glaad.org/tap/donald-trump>. GLAAD is an organization that "rewrites the script for LGBT acceptance."