

**Testimony of MKilar Otte
In Opposition to S.B. 76
Before the Committee on Education
Monday, February 10, 2025**

Chairperson Erickson, Vice Chairperson Thomas, and Members of the Committee:

My name is MKilar Otte, and I am a second-year law student at the University of Kansas School of Law. I was born and raised in Kansas, growing up in Hays. I am also a gay man who came out at the age of eleven. My early years were shaped by the realities of living as an openly gay child in a community where such identities were often met with skepticism and hostility. Much like the current discourse surrounding transgender youth, gay children at that time were viewed with suspicion, often dismissed as being too young to understand their own identities.

I was fortunate to have a family that accepted me wholeheartedly, but beyond the walls of my home, acceptance was not always guaranteed. My mother faced criticism for allowing me to live openly, with others insisting that a child could not possibly have such self-awareness. Peers attempted to ridicule me, but over time, the power of their words diminished. When my gayness was no longer something hidden or shameful, their attempts to use it as a weapon lost their sting.

However, what made a profound difference in my life was school. It was a sanctuary. My teachers – especially those in middle school – provided an environment where I felt safe, valued, and seen. Their recognition of my identity and their unwavering support allowed me to thrive personally and academically. For a child navigating an often hostile world, the simple act of acknowledgment can be lifechanging.

Before law school, I worked as an educator, serving middle school students in special education. During that time, I had the privilege of working with many transgender students. The school where I taught had a straightforward yet powerful policy: we called students by their preferred names and pronouns. This was not an act of defiance against parents, nor was it an effort to impose any ideology. It was a recognition of basic human dignity.

The impact of this policy was unmistakable. Students who had previously struggled – academically and socially – began to re-engage with their education. They felt seen. They felt respected. And as a result, they flourished. Grades improved. Confidence grew. The school environment became one of greater kindness and understanding because students model the behavior of the adults around them. When educators demonstrated respect, their peers followed suit, fostering a culture of inclusion rather than exclusion.

This is why S.B. 76 is so deeply concerning. This legislation would not protect students – it would harm them. It would force educators into the impossible position of either complying with the law or upholding their duty to create a safe and supportive learning environment. No teacher enters the profession to cause harm, yet this bill would mandate exactly that.

We know from research, from lived experiences, and from the voices of countless students that identity is not a fleeting choice or a political talking point. It is as fundamental as the color of one's eyes or the freckles on their skin. Forcing children to suppress who they are – particularly in a space where they should feel safe – has devastating consequences. The assertion that affirming a student's gender identity is a "grown-up decision" ignores a harsh reality: denying them that affirmation often leads them to make the gravest decision of all – to end their life. The mental health toll of rejection and invalidation is well-documented.

S.B. 76 will not eliminate transgender children. It will not make schools safer. It will not foster a better learning environment. Instead, it will contribute to greater disengagement at a time when educators are already struggling to keep students connected to their education. It will create fear where there should be acceptance. It will make schools less safe, less supportive, and less effective in their mission to educate and uplift every child.

Kansas has long prided itself on a strong education system, one that nurtures and develops students into well-rounded citizens. Passing this bill would be a disservice to that legacy. I urge the committee to reject S.B. 76 and to prioritize policies that support – not harm – the students of Kansas.

Thank you for your time and consideration.