

March 4, 2025

Chair and Honorable Members of the Health Finance and Policy Committee,

Good afternoon. My name is Christina Barton, and I testify before you today in dedicated support of HF22, a bill that upholds the fundamental rights of parents to be involved in their minor children's healthcare decisions. As a licensed school counselor with extensive training in psychological development and child well-being, I bring a deep understanding of the crucial role that parents play in the health and decision-making of their children. I am also a devoted mother of a son, and my professional background includes a Bachelor's degree in psychology (with a minor in Religion) and a Master's in school counseling. In addition, I hold specialized certifications in Special Needs and Trauma and Crisis Management from the American School Counseling Association (ASCA).

As someone with both personal and professional experience in guiding children through complex emotional and developmental challenges, I am here today to speak with not just support, but conviction. This bill is not simply a matter of policy; it is a matter of fundamental values—values that will protect children, families, and communities. I stand firm in the face of opposition because I know the importance of ensuring that children are never left to navigate life-altering decisions alone, without the critical involvement of their parents, their first and most important advocates.

We must recognize that parents are the primary guardians of their children's well-being, particularly when it comes to healthcare decisions. Children are still developing emotionally and cognitively. The prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain responsible for sound decision-making—is not fully developed until the age of 25. In these formative years, children experience heightened impulsivity, risk-taking behaviors, and a limited capacity to fully understand long-term consequences. We must acknowledge these neurological realities as we craft policies to protect and guide our children in matters of health.

We must be especially cautious when it comes to gender-affirming healthcare for children, including gender transition surgeries and hormone therapies. These are deeply consequential decisions that can affect a child's physical, emotional, and mental health. It is not merely a question of ethics but one of responsibility. Introducing gender identity and transition-related treatments without involving parents could leave children vulnerable, particularly those who may be struggling with mental health challenges. We cannot allow them to navigate these complex and life-altering decisions in isolation.

Some may argue that excluding parents from certain discussions may be necessary to protect children from potential abuse or neglect. However, we must be careful not to undermine the critical role parents play in safeguarding their children. Parents are the first and most important protectors of their children's well-being. We must ensure they are part of the conversation, not excluded from it, because that is how we build trust and ensure that children receive the guidance and care they need.

Federal laws—including the 1st and 14th Amendments, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and the Pupil Protection Rights Act (PPRA)—affirm that parents have the legal right to guide their children’s development. These laws require that parents be notified and give consent before sensitive issues, such as mental health, sexual behavior, and religious beliefs, are discussed with their children. This is not only a matter of law but also a fundamental right. In fact, 75% of parents, according to CRC Research, support being informed and involved in decisions related to their child’s health and safety.

We must ask ourselves: What is the cost of weakening the trust between parents and the educational system or healthcare providers? What resources are being diverted when we isolate students from their families, particularly during critical stages of development? We need elected officials who will stand firm and advocate for policies that include parents in these vital conversations. Policies that will not leave children to face potentially irreversible decisions without the support of their parents. If we design policies without parental input, we risk worsening the mental health crisis, rather than supporting students as they navigate their development.

The ethical standards set by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) emphasize that the well-being of students must always be balanced with parents’ rights to guide their children. A child’s ability to make sound decisions must be considered in the context of their parents’ responsibility to make decisions on their behalf.

Research from the 2023 Trevor Project reveals that 45% of LGBTQIA+ youth have seriously considered suicide in the past year. Supportive, engaged parents have been shown to significantly reduce the risk of suicide and self-harm among LGBTQ+ youth. We cannot afford to undermine the protective role that parents play in their children’s lives.

Moreover, studies from the Search Institute underscore the unparalleled importance of a strong parent-child relationship in fostering emotional and academic development. Across all demographics, parents are eager to strengthen these relationships. Withholding information from them or excluding them from critical conversations will only harm the child and fracture this foundational bond.

Integrity and ethics demand that we do the right thing, even when it is difficult. We must not allow fear of political pressure or blame to overshadow our duty to protect children and families. Excluding parents from their children’s healthcare decisions will only cause harm and create division.

In conclusion, I urge you to support HF22, a bill that upholds parental rights in healthcare decisions for their minor children. This bill stands for the principle that parents, not the state, not the school system, are the best equipped to make the right choices for their children. Let us work together to protect students, empower families, and ensure that parents remain the guiding voice in their children’s lives.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,

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Psychological Research Supporting Parental Involvement in Child Development

Psychological research overwhelmingly supports the indispensable role that parents play in the development of their children. Here are key areas of research demonstrating the importance of parental involvement in a child's growth and future well-being:

1. Attachment Theory

John Bowlby's Attachment Theory highlights the vital role of secure emotional bonds between children and their primary caregivers, particularly parents. Research has shown that children who form secure attachments with their parents develop better emotional regulation, confidence, and social skills, leading to healthier relationships later in life.

- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss: Volume I. Attachment*.

This work established that a child's sense of security, which is shaped by their caregiver, influences their ability to explore the world and develop critical cognitive and social skills.

2. Parental Involvement and Cognitive Development

Developmental psychologists like Lev Vygotsky emphasized the importance of parental involvement in cognitive development. Vygotsky's concept of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) illustrates how parents scaffold their children's learning by providing the right level of support at the right time, facilitating higher cognitive development.

- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.

Vygotsky argued that social interactions, including those with parents, are essential to cognitive development and acquiring higher mental functions.

3. Parenting Styles and Emotional Regulation

Diana Baumrind's research on parenting styles found that authoritative parenting—characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and structure—leads to the best emotional and social outcomes for children. Authoritative parents help their children regulate emotions and develop self-control.

- Baumrind, D. (1966). *Effects of Authoritative Parental Control on Child Behavior*.

This study found that authoritative parenting fosters emotional regulation, positive behavior, and high self-esteem.

4. Parental Influence on Mental Health

Research shows that children with supportive parents experience lower levels of anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems. Parental support plays a significant role in fostering resilience and emotional well-being, particularly in times of stress.

- Bouris, A., et al. (2010). *Parental Support and Suicide Risk in LGBTQ Youth*. This study found that parental acceptance significantly reduces suicide risk and mental health issues among LGBTQ+ youth.

Conclusion

Across multiple fields of psychology, research consistently underscores the critical role of parents in their children's development. From fostering secure emotional bonds to guiding their cognitive, emotional, and social development, parents are their children's most important advocates and supporters. Their involvement is essential for promoting mental health, academic success, and resilience. The evidence is clear: parents are the primary source of guidance and protection for their children. Let us ensure that they remain at the center of decisions that impact their health and future.