

Dept. of Public Instruction: How we can save lives

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Dear Wisconsin,

We need to talk. I want to have a conversation based on fact and lived experience, grounded in reality and with the intention of learning, growing, and supporting the children of our state – *all* the children of our state. Our trans and non-binary kids in Wisconsin are hurting. I see it in the data. I hear it from friends. My colleagues tell me stories; yesterday, one told me about attending a memorial service where there was a pile of backpacks on the floor outside the funeral home because the mourners had walked from school. We have to remember that at the center of all of this are kids. Kids who were wanted by their parents; kids who are cherished by their families, friends, and teachers. Kids who crave belonging and inclusion in all the things kids do. The reality is that our children are hurting, and the anti-trans legislation currently being debated stands to hurt them even more.

In every single category of [the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#), LGBTQ+ youth reported more health challenges (physical and mental) and fewer supportive, mitigating factors (like physical activity, aka sports) than their peers. Trans athletes compete out of a love for the sport, not as a political statement, nor out of sheer compulsion to win at all costs. Their stories are woefully missing from the discussion, and that's not because we shouldn't be listening to them; it's because sharing their stories puts this small population in real danger of attack. And those of us supporting Wisconsin's trans children are doing it out of a belief in support for all kids – again, not as a political or ideological statement. I have no doubt I will also be attacked for this letter. But I'd rather it be me than the kids.

In fact, gender identity is not about ideology at all. It is about identity. The irony is that we all have one — a gender identity, a core self-knowledge of our own selves.

That is not the problem, nor is it radical, it just is. What is radical, what is ideological, and what is dangerous is this identity being used as a weapon in a political war where the losses we stand to witness will be measured in the body count of dead children.

I need to stop talking in future tense. We have already lost children. And we will lose more unless we change. Take a moment. Think of four LGBTQ+ youth. [The data shows that](#), of those four, two of them seriously considered taking their own lives in the previous year, and one of them tried. I'm not willing to lose any of them. And so, yes, I am going to continue supporting policies that support their mental health and physical well-being, not the opposite.

Supporting trans athletes does not threaten girls. Supporting trans kids – including trans student-athletes – supports their physical and mental health. Attacking them in the name of protecting girls harms everyone involved, and lets transphobic policies hide behind people hurling accusations of sexism.

Frankly, I've seen this movie and I know how it ends. Hating people, isolating them, and hurling insults at them because of their identity has never turned out well in our history. So, let's call this anti-trans push for what it is – a dangerous lie – and for what the hate behind it can do – kill children. The fact is, a discussion about what is best for kids has been co-opted by fearmongers posing as saviors, and it's hurting our children and poisoning our communities – both here in Wisconsin and beyond.

The truth is, we do have an ideology as educators – it is the deep-seated belief in the worth and value of our students, in the charge we have to ensure their safety and their growth, in the knowledge they are the future leaders of our world and the hope that we are preparing them well for that role. We teach empathy, and we teach compassion – for ourselves and for others. That is our ideology, one of kindness and fellowship. I don't think that's radical. It's definitely not sexist. Honestly, I think it's rather beautiful.

If anyone is radical, it is the willing peddlers of disinformation and bigotry. We hear it all too often and at too loud a volume right now. This is the reason I'm writing today. Because they might be loud, but we – the kind, the compassionate, the supporters – *are right*.

Sincerely,

Jill Underly, PhD

Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction

NOTE: A related video message [is available on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's YouTube channel.](#) A headshot for publication of State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly [is available on the Wisconsin DPI's website.](#)