

Testimony of Olivia Heim

Hempfield High School – Class of 2022

East Hempfield Township

Hello, my name is Olivia Heim. I live in Lancaster County and currently attend Hempfield High School as a senior. I am a cisgender female athlete for the unified track program at our school and I wholeheartedly support the inclusion of trans girls in athletics.

My whole life, I have felt like I was drifting just out of the orbit of all of my peers. Growing up, I did not fit into what the stereotypical “girl” role dictated that I should be. The bullying I faced because of my differences made me crawl back into my shell. As a result of that, I never joined a sport in elementary school. However, I loved to play in the gym, and was often the kid playing until I had no air left in my lungs. Despite my clear love of sports, I still never felt as if I would have a place on any team, even though I am a cisgender female and at that age any girls’ team would have been obligated to put me on the roster.

That all changed when I arrived at Hempfield High School and found our unified track program. Unified track is a co-ed team composed of special and typical education students, and we compete in a variety of track and field events, including discus, long jump, and relays. As soon as I joined, my life changed for the better. No longer did I feel as I did in the girls’ locker room, where I was questioned about my sexual orientation and if it meant I was preying on other young women, and referred to as homophobic slurs. I was instead celebrated and respected as an equal member of the team. I got to experience the joys of teamwork, relationship building, and group achievement. Nothing is more fulfilling. To me, that’s what sports is about, and that’s what the little girl floating away in orbit wanted to be a part of her whole life.

The best part about our sport is that every single athlete is completely unique. This is a strength, not a weakness or a threat. Our athletes range in height, muscle tone, age, gender, and life experience. We don’t all fit in the same box, but that has no impact on the merit of our game. When some of my teammates have not had the money for private lessons their whole life, I don’t shame them for it, I stand beside them and help them practice as long as they need. When one of my teammates is a foot taller than most of their competitors, and they compete in the long jump, I cheer them on, knowing that this trait they have no control over does not mean they shouldn’t be allowed to play. Nor does it mean they clean swept the competition either, as other jumpers without their height advantage held their own. That’s why it’s so hard for me to understand the narrative that trans girls will automatically overtake cisgender girls in sports. I have thrown javelin against cisgender boys at meets who have had years of private practice, whereas the first time I picked up a javelin was the first day of high school track. There is an indisputable advantage of opportunity present there, but for PIAA, the organizer of track, to deny that boy an opportunity would be wrong. It’s because he did not choose to have parents that could afford those lessons, any more than a trans athlete decides their physical characteristics.

Thousands of those same instances repeat time and again. High school basketball teams do not have a height limit, soccer teams do not have a weight limit, and that's because we understand that the nuanced experiences of athletes do not automatically prove them superior or inferior to their teammates. A prominent example of this would be Michael Phelps' swimmer's build. His double jointedness, wingspan, and lactic acid reproduction all contribute to his ability in the pool. Those advantages are as biological as they come. He still can and should compete, and can stake his claim as one of the best swimmers of all time. There are plenty of male athletes with physical advantages who go on to be celebrated as athletes. Why, when women have such physical advantages, are we not celebrated and applauded for our efforts and talent? Instead, we are regulated, penalized, and even excluded from our own gender categories. As a woman, this doesn't protect us, this holds back women's sports as a whole. Banning all trans girls on the basis that *some* of them *might* have traits that lend well to whatever sport they play is another example of this misogynistic trend.

In a more personal sense, our district has one of the biggest advantages there is, which is adequate funding. Our fields, resources, and equipment are phenomenal, for which I am so grateful. However, when we play teams who are less fortunate than we are, it is undeniable that the fact that they practice in different facilities has an impact on the competition. Because of all of these external factors, it is impossible for me to ever say I played against someone who was my perfect equal in the field, whether that's based on opportunity, height, weight, or other factors. Perfect parity is a false promise. Factors outside of an athlete's control, like all of those listed above including testosterone levels, should not disqualify them from sports. Instead, it should help us all remember what sports is really about. It's about the shared triumphs and challenges of a team that becomes a family.

Perhaps that is what made it most frustrating for me to sit through multiple board meetings where the inclusion of a transgender student on the girls' track and field team was up for public comment. I sat for hours listening to some athletes speak out against their teammate. For as often as they proclaimed to care, love, and respect their teammate in front of an audience, when the cameras weren't recording, those very same girls misgendered and mocked their fellow player just because she is trans. That made it clear to me that their fight was not about fairness at all. This kind of behavior also leads to ostracized adolescents, which is the last thing that should come as a result of being in a team environment. Thankfully, multiple cisgender athletes have had the back of their vulnerable teammate, and have made it very clear the only ones who made them feel threatened in the locker room were those participating in the bullying.

I would like to finish by saying that I will always be grateful to the unified family that accepted me as one of their own, and I hope that trans girls will be as equally accepted by their peers. I believe everyone deserves to feel as though they belong, and as someone who has sought that their whole life, I can tell you acceptance is life changing. This bill does nothing to help cisgender girls, but it would be devastating for trans girls who just want to play sports, feel accepted, and be normal kids. Please do not act to take that experience away from trans girls. Do not support this ban.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Olivia Heim