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Dear Members of the House Education Committee,

It is my privilege to submit this written testimony to you for today's hearing on an issue that I feel needs further, deeper exploration, and clarification. This testimony comes from the perspective of coaching high school sports for over twenty years, as well as serving in capacity as a high school athletic director for 25 years in central Pennsylvania.

For most students in the United States, after-school and extracurricular activities are a large part of their school careers. It is estimated that nationally 83% of students aged 6-17 participate in at least one extracurricular activity during their school career. Most high school students in the US engage in at least one school sponsored extracurricular activity, with varsity sports being the most popular. Extracurricular and after-school activities serve many purposes. Researchers as well as developmentalists and youth advocates argue that organized, structured activities are good for adolescents for a variety of reasons. These include acquiring and practicing specific social, physical and intellectual skills, positively contributing to society, getting the sense of belonging to a group, establishing supportive networks and experiencing and dealing with challenges.

In pursuing my doctorate in education, I came across the topic of transgender students participating in school sports. As a longtime coach and regional sports administrator, this topic was intriguing to me, and I felt this topic needed further research and exploration. I began by learning all I could about gender identity inclusion in school sports, both nationally and here in Pennsylvania. I was fully engulfed in this research for the better part of three years; it changed my thinking on transgender people and was an incredible education on the transgender

community. I would invite all of those involved in the hearing today to read my dissertation, I think you will find it extremely helpful in understanding more about transgender and high school athletics.

One of our problems as humans is that we are intimidated by the unknown. Therefore, one of the goals of this study was to promote further understanding to guide high school administrators, coaches, and policy makers in developing strategies to help better understand the transgender community.

This letter to you highlights many of the major findings I came to understand.

Transgender students face unique challenges in nearly every aspect of school life, and in many cases transgender students face opposition from ill-informed coaches and faculty members. My qualitative, phenomenological case study research explored the experiences of transgender athletes. The purpose of this research was to examine lived experiences of recently graduated transgender students in order to promote understanding and facilitate the development of best practices for making high school campuses and athletic teams more welcoming for transgender students.

In recent years, there has been an epidemic of deaths by suicide surrounding lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people ages 10 to 24, and even more disturbing are the statistics surrounding the LGBTQ community youth. The rate of suicide attempts is four times greater among this group and two times greater for questioning youth than that of straight youth. Suicide attempts by LGBTQ youth are four to six times more likely to result in injury, poisoning or overdose compared to their straight peers. 40% of transgender adults reported having made a suicide attempt, and 92% of this group did so before the age of 25 (Bishop & Casida, 2011). Additionally, one out of every 6 LGBTQ students nationwide in grades 9-12 seriously considered suicide in the past year. The suicide rate coupled with the recent surge of bullying and harassment of this population, particularly among the transgender population in schools,

underscores that this is an epidemic problem that must be addressed. As a teacher, father, coach, and athletic director — as a human being — these facts are both devastating and alarming.

High school is an important environment for LGBTQ youth because they spend so much time there. In addition to the very serious concerns about teen suicide among transgender students, several other negative aspects are associated with their involvement in threatening school environments. For instance, students who are afraid of experiencing verbal and physical harassment at school may believe that their only options are to miss class or drop out of school altogether (Kosciw, 2010). LGBTQ students who miss large portions of their high school career, or who drop out, are likely to face significant challenges when attempting to secure proper employment or obtain higher education. While absenteeism and dropping out of school are not as critical as suicide, they are still serious problems. Even if LGBTQ individuals can "suffer through" high school, they are often unwilling to pursue higher education because of the negative experiences they have had in the educational setting. It is quite clear that transgender athletes in schools routinely encounter homophobia, discrimination, and harassment. Educators need to provide support to LGBTQ individuals to increase their safety and comfort and ensure that the high school experience is a pleasant one. The stakes are too high for transgender youth to ignore; the harm from discrimination, violence, and bans is all real.

Every student has the right to learn in a safe and tolerant school environment. Supporting transgender students gives them the same opportunity as all students. School districts need to be proactive by fostering a school environment that celebrates gender diversity. In the end, it is leadership and not policy that creates a nurturing culture for all students.

Schools should focus on establishing an ethic of connectedness and inclusivity within the school culture and apply fair and consistent policies that are collectively agreed upon and fairly enforced. Schools and school leadership should create trusting relationships among students, teachers, staff, administrators and families to ensure that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school.

Over the past number of years, schools have learned and continue to appreciate the value and obligation of accommodating the interests for a variety of students, including those of color, women, students with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. The calls for fairness and equal access for transgender students deserves similar, serious consideration. Furthermore, as more states and schools add gender identity and expression to their nondiscrimination policies, and as more courts hold that sex discrimination laws protect transgender people, transgender students and their parents are increasingly insisting that school programs accommodate transgender students. Athletic associations and school districts have come to understand the best practices on ensuring equitable and fair access for students.

I urge you not to move forward with a total ban on transgender girls in school sports in Pennsylvania. It's not the action that is being called for by the formal organized athletic community; instead, I would encourage your attention on the many ways to improve girls' sports programs through increased resources and opportunities. All girls, and all students — cisgender and transgender — deserve better.

Sincerely,

Ron Kennedy Ed.D

Kennedy, R. (2018). A Qualitative Inquiry into the Experiences of Transgender Youth On High School Sports Teams (Doctoral dissertation).