

Testimony in Opposition of SB208

Asher J. Wickell, Clinically Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, [asherj@ashwickell.com](mailto:asherj@ashwickell.com)  
Senate Education Committee

Chairperson Baumgardner and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 208, which would prohibit the participation of transgender girls and women in female-specific athletic contexts. As a clinically licensed marriage and family therapist, specializing in the provision of care to transgender patients, I am deeply concerned by the bill's likely outcomes for the mental health and safety of the student athletes it impacts. In my view, SB208 is both flawed in its basic premises, and extraordinarily dangerous to the individuals it purports to protect.

As apparent justification for its intrusive and generalized intervention, SB208 offers a handful of citations regarding adult or late-adolescent physiological variation, in individuals who have undergone male-typical puberty. Curiously, in light of long-standing participation by transgender athletes at the Olympic level, in multiple professional athletic associations, and in the NCAA—the bill excludes any address of transgender performance in competitive contexts. Particularly given such minimal pretexts, SB208 concerns itself with a surprisingly broad and inflexibly defined category of student-athletes. No rationale is offered or, on the bill's own terms, even appears possible, for its exclusion of pre-adolescent transgender girls from the athletic participation appropriate to their gender. The bill also omits any address of the physiological outcomes of the many transgender adolescents and young women whose use of puberty-delaying treatment will ensure that they never experience male-typical puberty, at all.

More alarmingly, SB208 seems to rely on the specious assumption that transgender young people are universally known or recognizable—that any transgender student-athlete can be identified as such, simply by looking. The idea that a “dispute” as to a student's sex will be automatically triggered, as needed to enforce the bill, however, is not in keeping with the wide variation that actually exists, in the experiences and bodies of transgender people. Many transgender girls and women have lived, simply, as girls and women, throughout their early lives and academic careers. By requiring these student athletes to compete on male teams, or not at all, SB208 risks their privacy and their safety. It also subjects girls and women who are not transgender to the probability that if they appear particularly strong or skilled as competitors, their own

genders will be subjected to scrutiny, in exactly the staggeringly invasive terms specified by the bill.

Of most concern to me, however, SB208 presents a particular threat to the mental health and, indeed, the basic survival of transgender children and young adults. Both statistically and anecdotally, within the context of professional practice, transgender young people are at alarmingly high risk for adverse outcomes including depression and anxiety, experiences of trauma, bullying, school avoidance and dropping out, substance abuse, running away from home, trading sex for survival necessities, and self-harming and suicidal behavior.<sup>1,2</sup> In the last case, recent research indicates that 34% of transgender adolescents have experienced suicidal ideation in the last year.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of their lives, to date, 85% of transgender adolescents report having been suicidal at least once; while 50% have actually attempted suicide.<sup>4</sup>

Key protective factors for transgender young people relate to their access to spaces where their persons and genders are taken seriously, and where they are meaningfully cared for. Safety increases, for transgender adolescents, with each context where they can use a name that matches their identity<sup>5</sup>—but diminishes as they are excluded from settings that correspond with their identified gender<sup>6</sup>. SB208, if implemented as law, would compel the school faculty and administrators who could keep students safer—instead, to undermine their senses of themselves, and of their schools as safe environments. It is worth noting, moreover, that the particular means by which it would do so is likely to be especially damaging: an important risk factor specific to suicide attempts in transgender youth is bodily attribution—that is, how a transgender

---

<sup>1</sup> Michelle Marie Johns et al, “Protective Factors Among Transgender and Gender Variant Youth: A Systematic Review by Socioecological Level,” *The Journal of Primary Prevention* 39, 263-301 (2018)

<sup>2</sup> Sandy E. James et al, *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*, Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality (2016)

<sup>3</sup> Amaya Perez-Brumer et al, “Prevalence and correlates of suicidal ideation among transgender youth in California: findings from a representative, population-based sample of high school students,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 56, 739-746 (2017)

<sup>4</sup> Brian C. Thoma et al, “Suicidal Disparities Between Transgender and Cisgender Adolescents,” *Pediatrics* 144, e20191183 (2019)

<sup>5</sup> Stephen T. Russell et al, “Chosen Name Use is Linked to Reduced Depressive Symptoms, Suicidal Ideation and Behavior among Transgender Youth,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 63, 503-505 (2018)

<sup>6</sup> Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN. “Separation and Stigma: Transgender Youth & School Facilities,” <http://lgbtmap.org/transgender-youth-school> (2017)

adolescent perceives others to view and respond to her body as, for instance, when such an appraisal might lead to a “dispute” about her gender<sup>8</sup>. In light of these considerations, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that SB208 would, in all probability, be a direct contributing factor in attempted and completed suicides for transgender children and adolescents in the state of Kansas.

SB208, despite the value of its stated goals, represents an approach whose failures are already known and comprehensively documented. It offers conjecture, and questionably relevant research, to speculate that the well-being of Kansas’ students will be harmed, if transgender girls and women are not universally banned from participation on sports teams appropriate to their gender—but fails to identify any adverse outcomes, in the many contexts where transgender athletes have competed openly for years. Meanwhile, it imperils the privacy and bodily autonomy of female student athletes of all ages and gendered histories. It amplifies known and acute risk, up to and including death, while reducing the supportive resources available to our state’s most vulnerable children and young adults. For these reasons, I must respectfully, but emphatically offer my opposition to SB208.

Thank you for your time.

Asher J. Wickell, LCMFT

Clinically Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist  
Owner, Choosing Wholeness: Individual, Relational, and Family Therapy