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Dispatches from the Overdose Crisis: Suffer the children

The outcome of passing HB 616 in Ohio, a state with soaring overdose rates, will likely be even more overdose deaths

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When two Ohio representatives introduced House Bill 616, Myles Stickle, director of mental health and recovery services at Equitas Health, the only LGBTQ+ focused provider in Ohio, told me that because of similar bills around the country, his organization already had been seeing an uptick in referrals.

“We’re seeing an increase in [drug] use, an increase in overdosing,” Stickle said. “We’re making assumptions, but this is coming from somewhere, and then comparing that to what we see and hear from patients in treatment— we know that these are issues that we were not talking about even a year ago.”

Proposed by Republican Reps. Jean Schmidt (Loveland) and Mike Loychik (Bazetta), HB 616 would bar discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity from kindergarten to third grade, and it also would demand that teachers avoid concepts that state the Board of Education defines as “divisive or inherently racist” — and they include *The 1619 Project* on their list. Violators could lose their teaching licenses and school districts could lose state funding.

In a state with one of the highest overdose rates in the U.S., it’s a dangerous proposal, given that it will have a profound effect on the LGBTQ+ community, a group at great risk of death by suicide or overdose.

Indeed, it already has, and Equitas is partnering with other organizations to try to address the surge with public funding targeting the LGBTQ+ community.

Stickle said that young people, especially in rural parts of Ohio, are hearing things from adults, parents, grandparents and church leaders. Many are of a generation that felt safe in

their identities but are now anxious and afraid.

The outcomes for LGBTQ+ people who feel this way are not surprising.

Research from the Department of Public Health at University of North Florida points to the impact of social and cultural pressures on high rates of deaths of despair among non-cisgender LGBTQ+ people — higher rates of suicide when compared to cisgender and hetero peers; high rates of mental illness; and higher rates of illicit substance use. Almost one quarter of 12- to 14-year-olds who died by suicide identified as LGBT.

In other words, stigmatizing behaviors can kill. HB 616 would create a structure that says we should not support, encourage, or recognize the complexities of human life and biology and even the discussion of it signals to some young people that they are worth less than other young people.

In an interview with James Pilcher on WKRC-TV in Cincinnati, Schmidt said elementary school teachers shouldn't focus on questions of sexuality or gender. "Why do we have to get into all of those little weeds at the age of 5, 6, 7 or 8," she said. "Kids don't understand it at that level."

But actually, children do understand those "little weeds" and need to explore them and learn in school with their peers that it's OK to be who they are.

Teachers can affirm the humanity of our children and validate their feelings. They can comfort them when they are struggling. For many young people, schools are the only safe space — the teacher who includes queer-affirming literature, the counselor with the rainbow flag in their office, the coach who values a young person for who they are.

Yes, Stickle said, some will learn how to survive the moment. "But the long-term impact of being inauthentic is that it messes with your brain — you don't know what to do with what's going on inside. You become disconnected with the things you're feeling and experiencing," he said. "That lays the foundation for why my community has some of the highest rates of use of any other community. We were taught as little kids to be dishonest, to be inauthentic."

And, he said, many people use drugs to medicate uncomfortable emotions, past traumas.

The drivers of overdose and of substance-use disorder aren't the same for everyone, for sure, but we do know with certainty that people who are on the margins are more likely to overdose and are at greater risk for substance-use disorder.

The outcome of this bill in a state with soaring overdose rates will likely be more overdose deaths. (Ohio overdose deaths are expected to be a record of more than 5,200 lives lost for 2021.)

This is a bill that telegraphs stigma, harm, and cruelty to young people.

But that cruelty doesn't define what I love about Ohio. We're bigger than that.

I told Stickle about going to Newark Pride last summer and seeing a father, decked out in fishing camo and a Bass Pro hat, holding hands with his purple-haired child as they walked from booth to booth. Maybe he was tired from fishing that morning, but he had the time to affirm his child.

“That story!” Stickle said. “This noise right now is covering that up — all the great people around Ohio who support their kids.”

The Trevor Lifeline is a free resource available to support LGBTQ+ youth and is available 24/7 at 1-866-488-7386. In Columbus, Kaleidoscope Youth Center offers a safe and affirming space for Queer youth ages 12-20. Equitas Health can be reached at 614-299-2437 — they have resources around the state. Naloxone is available through Harm Reduction Ohio, Central Ohio Harm Reduction, Franklin County Health Department, Columbus Public Health and Safepoint, a program of Equitas. Support services are also available through Never Use Alone, Brave and Safepoint.