



DREW ANGERER

Politics

Anti-Trans Laws Are Making Trans Youth Feel Unsafe

Miseducation is a column that chronicles what it's like to be a student in the modern United States.

BY MARY RETTA

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Zara has been having a difficult school year. Though the Arkansas eighth-grader's parents were able to get her name legally changed on her birth certificate so that she is never **dead-named** by her teachers, Zara still seldom feels safe on campus as a Black transgender student, and is only out to a few friends at school. Now, with the

recent passage of HB1570, a law in Arkansas that prohibits transgender youth's access to gender-affirming medical care, Zara is even more stressed for the future of her education and safety.

"I'll miss my doctor," Zara, who preferred not to use her last name, told *Teen Vogue*. "Besides my parents, she has been one of the only people trusting me with what I say I need. This law is excluding me from having the support I need and could mean that my family has to leave Arkansas. I was born and raised here. All the cisgender people around me aren't treated [differently], but I am. I'm used to this in many ways because I'm Black, and Arkansas is very anti-Black, but this feels hard in a different way. It'll make living in my actual body frightening and hard."

Zara is one of countless transgender students across the country who is worried about the future of their health, education, and livelihood. This year, more than 100 bills have been introduced across the country targeting the rights of transgender people, making 2021 a record year for transphobic policy, according to the Human Rights Campaign. Many of the bills specifically target the rights and privileges of trans youth and young trans students. Some bills, like HB1570, prohibit or even criminalize the provision of trans health care. Others prohibit teaching in schools about trans people and related topics, or mandate that educators disclose a child's "symptoms of gender dysphoria" or "gender nonconformity" to their parents or guardians seemingly without the child's consent. Additionally, about half of the bills forbid or even criminalize trans youth's participation in school sports based on their gender identity, despite the fact that lawmakers cannot cite a single instance in which allowing a trans student on the sports team of their choice led to an unfair competition. Even before 2021, many young trans people felt unsafe in school. In a 2015 survey from the National Center for Transgender Equality, 77% of trans people surveyed reported some form of mistreatment in K-12 schools; nearly a quarter of trans people reported being physically, verbally, or sexually harassed at school; and 13% reported being sexually assaulted. Many transgender students told *Teen Vogue* that they are concerned these bills will make school feel even more unsafe for them.

In response to the mounting legislation discriminating against trans students, many educators are fighting back. On April 3, during the week of action to commemorate the annual International Trans Day of Visibility, more than 17,300 educators and

educational scholars **sent an open letter** to President Joe Biden, calling on the federal government to uphold the rights and dignity of trans youth. Among the letter's demands were requests that public schools increase access to health care for transgender students and employees, implement policy for the full inclusion of transgender athletes in K-12 sports, and only use sex markers where completely necessary, ensuring that these markers match transgender students' gender preferences whenever used.

Harper Keenan, assistant professor at the University of British Columbia and a co-author of the letter, told *Teen Vogue* that he sees the issues of health care, mental health, and education as intricately linked, and all of these areas must be improved for trans youth. "As educators, we should all be asking: What are ways we can support transgender students **without increasing school punishment systems?**" Keenan explained. "We are interested in abolition-compatible strategies. We want to see the erosion of the school punishment system, comprehensive sexual education, and better mental health resources — all of these things are critical for trans people to not only have a better experience in school, but a better quality of life."

Health care is being prohibited and criminalized for trans youth both and in and outside of schools. **Under Arkansas's HB1570**, health-care professionals are prohibited from providing or even referring trans youth for medically necessary health care; state funds cannot be allocated for gender-affirming health care for trans people under 18; private insurers can refuse to cover gender-affirming care for people of any age; and doctors who provide medically necessary care to trans youth would risk losing their licenses and be subject to lawsuits by individuals and the state. According to **recent reporting from Mother Jones**, at least 18 other states have considered similar bills this year. These bills do not coincide with the values of most Americans or medical professionals: recent **polls** found the majority of voters, even registered Republicans, think trans people should be able to live openly and with health-care access. The vast majority of medical experts, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Family Medicine, also support access to gender-affirming health care for children.

Access to puberty blockers and other gender-affirming medical care is **often crucial to the well-being of trans youth**. A **recent study** from the official journal of the American

Academy of Pediatrics, which followed trans youth from their early teens through young adulthood, showed that young trans people who received **puberty blockers**, gender-affirming surgeries, and counseling benefited from excellent psychosocial outcomes and had no reported negative medical consequences. **Another study** of more than 20,000 transgender adults showed that those who received puberty-blocking treatment as adolescents were less likely to contemplate suicide than those without access to the medication. Despite the proven benefit of gender-affirming health care, transgender youth have long faced discrimination in medical settings. A **2020 report from the National LGBTQ Task Force** found that nearly one in five transgender and non-binary youth reported being refused care because of their gender, and that 28% of respondents received some form of harassment in medical settings.

To combat this discrimination, Luca Borah, a transgender student living in Michigan, has decided to go to medical school. “I was drawn to medicine to help other queer and trans people feel a sense of belonging in our bodies, in our communities, and in our health care,” Borah, a first-year student at the University of Michigan Medical School, told *Teen Vogue*. “As a trans patient, medical student, and future physician, it is horrifying to witness the criminalization of gender-affirming medical care. We know this care is safe, medically necessary, and lifesaving. Looking back, it’s hard to imagine how different my childhood would have been if I had the words to describe my transness and access to puberty blockers. It brings me a deep sense of grief for kids who have already done the hard and tender work of understanding their identities, and who have bravely opened up to their families and physicians, only to be attacked by their elected representatives and be cut off from any health care.”

Alexis, an eighth grader in Massachusetts who asked to use a pseudonym, has been put in this exact position. Though Alexis said that his home state has not stopped him from medically transitioning or pursuing hormone therapy, he is worried about his lack of access to a different kind of health care. “It’s been hard for me to focus on my school,” Alexis told *Teen Vogue*. “As more and more of these bills pass, I can only imagine that it will continue to affect my mental health, and consequently education, as they already have. Over the past week, I’ve cried twice about it with my parents,

who are very supportive, but I don't know if they fully understand the impact of these attacks on trans kids' mental health."

Like Alexis, many transgender students and young people suffer from anxiety, **depression, suicidal ideation** as well as other mental illnesses at higher rates than their cisgender peers, and they are often unable to receive counseling in school from professionals who are well-versed in gender identity. In fact, several trans students told *Teen Vogue* that some of their teachers bullied, harassed, or otherwise made them feel uncomfortable about their gender. This was the case for Zara, who recalled that one former teacher "refused to use my appropriate pronouns." Said Zara, "She misgendered me often and was very aggressive. She would argue with me and would tell me that I was not a girl. She would separate the class by gender for activities and would force me to go to the boys' side. The experience I had with her really made me not want to ever be [openly trans] in school. So when I went to a new school, I decided to be stealth [**cis passing**]."

Experiences like Zara's illustrate how issues like better access to mental health services and LGBTQ-inclusive sex education are crucial for ensuring that trans students have good experiences in school. Keenan, who used to be a kindergarten teacher and would often alter the framing of children's books to be more gender-inclusive for his students, told *Teen Vogue* that all teachers must work to be the best ally possible for trans students. "Teachers should be asking themselves, 'How much of an ally can I be without losing my job?'" Keenan said. "This can be difficult when teachers are often fired for being inclusive of LGBTQ curriculums, and allyship can be determined on a case-by-case basis. This also points to the strength of **teachers' unions**."

Z Nicolazzo, an associate professor at the University of Arizona and a co-author of the letter to the Biden administration, pointed out that some populations will be more affected by these bills than others: **many of these bills specifically target trans girls**, for example, and Black trans youth like Zara are often more at risk for being targeted by school punishment systems than their white counterparts. "We see the fight for trans equality in schools in partnership with struggles against gun violence, **the Fight for 15**, and all other struggles for equality," Z told *Teen Vogue*. "We believe

that education can be a site of play and exploration for students of all identities. Everyone deserves to feel safe at school.”

In response to growing transphobic legislation, many trans students are taking matters into their own hands. Jae Moyer, a community college student in Kansas — a state in which **multiple anti-trans bills are currently being considered** — told *Teen Vogue* that they have joined an advocacy group called Equity Kansas that is fighting anti-discriminatory legislation in Topeka. “This legislation is a step backwards,” said Jae. “It not only opens the door to direct harm for trans kids just trying to exist as their true selves, but it also sets a narrative that it’s okay to discriminate against LGBTQ+ folks, particularly trans folks.” Jae said the laws are a culture-war ploy for “right-wing legislators to win popularity, get money, and ultimately be re-elected.”

“It is hard living in a world where people hate you just because we don’t comply with the gender spectrum,” said Zara. “I want people to trust and honor my needs as a transgender girl who knows who she is. I love being Black and being trans, and I will still be Black and trans even if they keep taking away my rights.”

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