

February 16, 2022

To the Members of the Senate Education Committee:

I am a called and ordained clergy person in the United Church of Christ. I am also a responsible adult. As such, I take seriously the call to protect and advocate for the most vulnerable among us. I am reminded of how the writer of Psalm 82 calls God to "defend the weak and the parentless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed." Certainly such a call is not simply meant to concern God alone. It is meant to be a concern of God's people as well.

To be sure, our sacred texts speak plainly about the way in which we are to treat one another. We are to love one another as ourselves, we are to recognize the image of the Divine in one another, and we are to protect the most vulnerable among us. Our trans and non-binary youth and young adults are some of the most vulnerable amongs us in the state of Iowa. I am writing in hope that you will join me in protecting them from the damaging details and provisions that comprise SSB 3146.

According to January 2022 data from The Trevor Project, 85% of trans and non-binary young people reported that following recent news about issues that impact the transgender community has negatively impacted their mental health. If it is true that participation in sports can and does have a positive impact on the self-esteem and mental health of young people, why would the focus be on limiting or eliminating participation for such a vulnerable population? Trans and non-binary young people are effectively denied the opportunity to participate in school sports at all just as soon as you deny them the opportunity to play on sports teams that align with their gender identity. Which, of course, means that they are also denied the positive impacts mentioned above. Meanwhile, cisgender young people continue to enjoy the positive impacts of participation in sports.

Beyond all of the statistics and the quoted scripture, one thing remains sure: For generations we have been discriminating against vulnerable and marginalized people, and for generations we have been getting it wrong. First it was preventing Black people from full participation in sports, then it was women, and then it was gay and lesbian athletes. We continue to be content to discriminate and damage the most vulnerable among us based on a fear or a lack of understanding of the differences that exist in humanity as well as the notion that difference, when included, spoils the experience for others. My siblings, this cannot continue to be so.

As a pastor, as a responsible adult, and as a fellow human being, I implore this Senate Education committee to focus its attention on Iowa's slipping educational ranking and its under-funded public schools. I implore this committee to remember the call to love one another as you love yourselves. I implore you to protect some of the most vulnerable among us by refusing to send SSB 3146 beyond your committee for a vote.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rev. Melissa R. Sternhagen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rev. Melissa R. Sternhagen
Pastor, St. Paul Congregational United Church of Christ
Oskaloosa, IA