

“Parental Rights’ Is Not a License to Erase Other People’s Children”

By Adria Booth-Tyler, Des Moines

Iowa State Senator Sandy Salmon claims her latest anti-LGBTQ legislation is about “parental rights.” It isn’t. It is about using state power to impose one narrow ideological and religious worldview on public education, at the expense of other people’s children.

Parents in Iowa already have extraordinary control over their children’s education. That reality alone makes Senator Salmon’s argument collapse under scrutiny.

For decades, parents who object to sex education in public schools have had the right to opt their children out. No family is forced to participate in instruction that conflicts with their beliefs. That option exists now and has long been respected.

Beyond that, Iowa has significantly expanded homeschooling rights. Families who want complete control over curriculum can homeschool with minimal interference. And families seeking religiously aligned instruction can now use public funds to enroll their children in private religious schools through school-choice programs.

Given these facts, the claim that public schools must be legally barred from acknowledging LGBTQ people in order to protect parental choice is simply false. Parents already have ample tools to guide their own children’s education. What this legislation does instead is strip choice away from other families.

This bill does not empower parents. It mandates censorship.

Public schools serve everyone. They are not private religious institutions. Teaching students that LGBTQ people exist, that different families exist, and that classmates may live different realities is not sexual indoctrination. It is basic literacy about the world students already inhabit.

A child does not become gay or transgender by exposure to information about LGBTQ families. Sexual orientation is rooted in neurodevelopmental processes that are not mediated by the brain’s executive or decision-making systems, and recognition of that reality in schools is not indoctrination.

Silence is not neutrality. When schools are forbidden from acknowledging LGBTQ people, silence sends a clear message: that some students are inappropriate, unmentionable, or shameful. LGBTQ students hear that message. Children of LGBTQ parents hear it too. Silence is not protection. It is harm.

Supporters of this legislation often insist it is narrowly tailored, but that claim does not withstand examination. The bills Senator Salmon has championed go far beyond opt-out rights. They ban discussion, instruction, or acknowledgment across broad grade levels and subject areas, creating a chilling effect on educators who fear penalties for even incidental references.

That is not parental choice. That is state-mandated erasure.

This pattern mirrors legislation across the country that uses “parental rights” language as cover for excluding LGBTQ people from public life. Legal scholars and civil rights organizations have repeatedly warned that such laws are less about empowering families and more about enforcing ideological conformity.

And this does not stop with LGBTQ people. It never does. This kind of legislation rarely stops with one targeted group. History shows that once the state begins policing which families are acceptable to acknowledge, the circle of exclusion only widens. This is not about protecting children. It is about policing who belongs.

That is why this legislation aligns so closely with Christian nationalism, the belief that the government should enforce one religious interpretation as law. That belief runs directly counter to the founding principles of this country, which guarantee freedom of religion, not government-imposed religion.

The United States does not belong to one theology. Iowa does not belong to one ideology. And public schools do not exist to mirror the personal discomfort of a subset of parents who already have multiple alternatives available to them.

No parent has the right to demand that other people’s children be kept ignorant so they can feel morally comfortable. No lawmaker has the right to erase marginalized students under the guise of choice.

The real-world consequences of these policies are well documented: increased isolation, higher rates of bullying, and worse mental-health outcomes for LGBTQ youth. Educators are forced to self-censor. Students are taught that some lives are acceptable to discuss and others are not.

That is not leadership. It is governance by fear.

Iowans are paying attention. Families are paying attention. Many of us, across faiths, political identities, and generations, are tired of lawmakers who divide communities instead of strengthening them.

This legislation does not protect children. It harms them. And it is time we said so clearly, publicly, and without apology.