

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

To The Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee,

I write to tell my story in light of the debate surrounding whether religious schools should be able to discriminate against LGBTQIA+ staff and students, allowing them to be expelled and excluded from studying and working in a religious school.

I grew up in Tasmania's North, I studied in a Catholic school in Launceston and while I thoroughly enjoyed my Catholic education, the loneliest time of my life came in high school when I realised I was gay and felt I could not reach out to anyone for fear of being rejected and discriminated against.

It is the fear of exclusion and vitriol that kept me, as a young, gay man, closeted, afraid and alone throughout my education, a time when I most needed the support in coming to terms with who I was and in learning to accept myself and my sexuality. I felt that if I discussed my sexuality with anyone within my school I would be shunned and excluded, as I knew that many people within the Catholic education system conformed to conservative Christian beliefs and would not approve of my sexuality.

This exclusion left me to deal with my sexuality alone. I considered suicide, I considered somehow masking my sexuality for the duration of my life, I distanced myself from my family and friends as I tried to figure out how to survive as a young, gay person. It was the fear of exclusion that kept me quiet. It was the fear of exclusion that made me contemplate suicide. It was the fear of exclusion that led a 15 year boy to walk the hardest journey, totally alone, confused, and scared.

The right of religious schools to discriminate against LGBTQIA+ students and staff is not a religious freedom, it is blatant discrimination. Being gay is not contagious, my gay teachers never taught me to be gay, they taught the syllabus and were some of the best and most empathetic teachers I have ever had.

If religious schools continue to be allowed to discriminate against LGTBQIA+ people, it sends a clear message to young queer people like I was, that you are not accepted, not welcome, and you are somehow wrong for being who you are. None of these are true, but it is what I felt growing up and it is what a lot of students and staff feel on a daily basis in religious schools.

If we want to address inclusion, mental health, and suicide rates in youth and in particular LGBTQIA+ people, we must consider where the issues lie. For me and for many others, the

issue lies in being made to feel so ashamed of who you are, that you feel you have to hide for eternity and never be true to yourself.

Members of parliament have a duty to protect Australians and serve in their best interest. Religious schools gain nothing from being able to discriminate against LGBTQIA+ people. If anything, they lose out too. They lose dedicated staff, intelligent and amazing students, and they lose touch with the true meaning of Christianity and the teachings of Jesus; to love one another and to make this world a better place for all.

I write to encourage this parliament to protect students, to protect staff, and to stand up against discrimination and hatred. It is okay to be gay. It took me years to learn this on a lonely and cold journey, please help our students learn this with the support and love they deserve.

The legislative exemptions that allow religious schools to discriminate against students and staff on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity must be removed from the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*.

We cannot continue to disguise discrimination as religious freedom.

We must care for our children.

Kind Regards,

Benjamin Dudman