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**Young Utahns are speaking out against the Legislature’s transgender athletes ban. Will their protests have an impact?**

Middle and high school students are demonstrating in support of transgender rights

Deseret News - Apr 27, 2022, 6:47pm MDT

By Bridger Beal-Cvetko

Thousands of students at East and West high schools in Salt Lake City staged walkouts earlier this month in protest of the Utah Legislature’s ban on transgender girls in high school athletics. Other schools have followed, with hundreds of middle schoolers becoming the latest to join the fray last week.

Braving torrential rain, more than 200 Clayton Middle School students walked out on Friday afternoon, chanting “Let them play” and “Trans rights are human rights.” To 13-year-old Caroline Drake, who helped organize the demonstration, the downpour highlighted how sincerely the students felt about showing solidarity with their transgender peers.

“A lot of people came out and then got soaked and had to go back and try to dry off. But a lot of people stuck with it,” she said, staying outside for over an hour. “I was really proud of all of the people there. I think the rain just shows how important (trans rights) are to us.”

‘A lightbulb just went off in my mind’

In an interview with the Deseret News, Drake described Clayton Middle School as “very supportive” of LGBTQ students, with regular after-school V.I.B.E. (Everyone is Validated, Included and Belongs) group meetings for students. Clayton has a “very large trans community,” she said, and many of her friends are open about their gender identity.

So, when she first heard about HB11, Drake said she was “shook.”

“We could not believe that our Legislature just doesn’t support so many kids,” she said. “The stupid thing is, is that it only affects these four kids in the entire state, because there are only four kids that play on their school sports teams that are trans. And so we were all just kind of dumbfounded by how crazy they must be to have to pass this bill that bans these kids from doing what they love.”

In explaining his initial veto of HB11, Gov. Spencer Cox said there are only four transgender students who participate in high school athletics — only one of whom plays girls sports. Cox’s veto was later overturned by the Legislature in a special session.

Caroline’s mother, Katie Drake, also spoke of how welcoming the school is, saying she feels “very safe having my daughter come to school here.” She added, “We actually have quite a few trans kids here who are out at Clayton, which I think is awesome.”

When her daughter approached her, frustrated that Clayton wasn’t following in the footsteps of West High and East High, Katie pointed out that the schools themselves hadn’t planned the walkouts — it would take a student to make something happen.

“A lightbulb just went off in my mind, and I was like, ‘I am doing this,’” Drake said.

Drake immediately recruited a friend to help. They emailed the school principal for permission, then got to work spreading the word via printed flyers, Instagram and Discord. Although she was a bit nervous about organizing the walkout, Drake said she felt it was important to show solidarity.

“It’s always scary, putting yourself out there like that, because you never know who will judge you based on what you believe in — which shouldn’t even be a thing,” she said. “We should not have to judge people based on their beliefs, because it’s their own opinion. We were out there protesting so that everyone can do what they want to do and have their own thing. So, even for those people that disagree with us, we were still out there fighting for them, too. Because even if their opinion is different than ours, we still want them to be able to do what they love.”

**What impact will the protests have?**

As a student, Drake acknowledged that she can’t change policy, but she said Utah’s government has failed to set an example of being inclusive.

“I feel embarrassed for the Legislature, because they’re adults ... and I think that us being kids is what makes it so much more powerful, because we’re showing that we are more supportive than the people that are supposed to be supporting us,” she said. “We’re showing the adults that even though we’re young, we still have a voice, and that voice will not be silenced.”

Already, Drake is noticing changes in attitude at her school. In the days since the walkout, she has seen more posters around Clayton promoting women’s rights and anti-racism, and says more people are talking about civil rights causes that are important to them.

Critics of the Legislature’s ban say that the law places unnecessary scrutiny on transgender kids — who already face higher rates of suicide than their straight, cisgender peers. Even if the protests don’t have an immediate impact on policy in the state, LGBTQ advocates say they send a strong message to trans kids that they are not alone.

“One of the biggest issues in our community is the suicide rate and the thoughts of suicide that occur,” said Jessica Dummar, co-CEO of the Utah Pride Center. “I think one huge thing is being accepted, being loved and supported. When you’re told you’re supposed to fit in a cookie-cutter shape, and you don’t actually fit there, there’s not true belonging. So this is creating a feeling of true belonging among children.”

“The thing that gives me hope, in this time of unprecedented political attacks on transgender and nonbinary youth, is the youth themselves,” Sam Ames, director of advocacy and government affairs for The Trevor Project, said in a statement. “Students are walking out of school, showing up outside state houses, testifying at hearings to defend themselves and the people they love. They are learning civics in a way no young person should have to — and they are reshaping it. The Trevor Project’s research has found that trans and nonbinary youth who report feeling accepted and affirmed by adults and peers — as well as their school communities — report lower rates of attempting suicide. Beyond offering inspiration, the brave students speaking up are offering a sense of validation and support that can be lifesaving.”

Dummar argued that while the direct implications of the ban impacts only a small number of individuals, the larger implications further “oppression and continued dehumanization of people,” by “saying this small group of people doesn’t matter.”

“When there are much larger issues at play in our society, why is it important for (the Legislature) to spend time and legislation lobbying a bill that’s relatively insignificant?” she said.

Noting that young people are more likely to oppose banning transgender kids from girls sports, Dummar is optimistic about attitudes changing in the future.

“I think understanding people’s humanity without gender is something that young people are still connected to. ... We’re seeing people determine for themselves what to believe, and I think that we’ll see kids making a lot of difference in the future,” she said.

**Do women’s sports need ‘protecting’?**

During discussion of HB11, supporters said the bill is meant to protect female athletics, by preventing biological males from trying to gain an advantage by competing as a woman.

Bill sponsor Rep. Kera Birkeland, R-Morgan, said the bill is “purely” about “preserving women’s sports.” Sen. Dan McCay, R-Riverton — who promoted the outright ban in a last-minute Senate version of the bill — said, “I’ve got to protect them,” referring to his four daughters who have participated in sports.

Dummar is skeptical that male athletes would actually try to gain an edge by playing women’s sports, and doesn’t think that women’s sports need protecting. During the Jim Crow era, she said, protecting white women was often used to justify lynchings and segregation.

“You can see that white women and white girls were used to increase the fear of Black men. You have Emmett Till, who was murdered because a white woman falsely accused him,” Dummar said. “Now we’re seeing the continuation of women and girls as pawns.”

Dummar said women’s sports are already being hurt by the false perception that “women’s bodies are not as capable as men’s bodies.” She argued that separating sports by gender diminishes the visibility and importance of women’s sports as a whole.

“Professional sports play out by showing us this microcosm of our social issues. White men typically own the team, Black men typically play, and women are on the sidelines, getting paid hardly anything for cheerleading,” she said.

When Dummar was in the military, trainees were divided not by gender, but by ability, something she advocates for in sports. Ability-based athletic programs would be more inclusive for cisgender men and women, and transgender men and women alike, because “a lot of women can roll with men,” she said.

“Ability groups make a lot of sense, in that we can create this equitable space where we don’t remove girls from boys,” Dummar said. “Because we’re all one — we’re human — and we don’t sexualize one gender above another gender, and we don’t infantilize one gender above another.”

**Questions:**

* **Why do you think transgender issues are such a hot topic all across America?**
* **Explain what you think this statement means: ”Ability-based athletic programs would be more inclusive”.**
* **How does legislation like Utah HB11 demonstrate a lack of concern for the kids of Utah? Use evidence from this text to support your answer.**
* **Is it worth it to protest? Explain your answer.**