

My name is Mary Heeringa and I am a Williamsport resident with a middle school student in the Washington County Public Schools. At last month's board meeting, a few people spoke using transphobic language and hate speech directed at members of the LGBTQ community. I wanted to speak tonight to let the members of the LGBTQ community know that there are many more people in Washington County who support you. Those few people from the previous meeting do not speak for all of us, they just spoke louder. Their comments were insulting, uninformed and dangerous. According to a 2021 national survey on school culture 81.8% of LGBTQ students reported feeling unsafe in school, leading to those students avoiding school activities and missing entire school days. 4 out of 10 LGBTQ students most commonly avoided bathrooms, locker rooms, and gym class because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. 83.1% of LGBTQ students reported experiencing in-person harassment or assault based on personal characteristics, including sexual orientation, and gender. 83.1%. 61.5% of those cases were not reported to school staff. In a 2022 national survey, 45% of LGBTQ students reported they had seriously considered committing suicide within the past year. Homophobic and transphobic comments are dangerous. The role of the school district is to educate and support ALL students. I applaud WCPS for the steps they have taken to make sure this is happening. I was a first grade teacher for 10 years. One thing I always wanted my students to learn was that you don't have to agree with everyone and you don't have to be friends with everyone but you do have to show everyone kindness and respect. Instead of attempting to divide communities, maybe the focus should be on making sure all students receive the education they deserve, making schools places where children thrive, and where students of all genders and orientations have the freedom to learn without fear or intimidation.