

Good Morning, and thank you for inviting Outright to provide testimony today about what's real and alive for LGBTQ+ youth in Vermont today. I'll start with a pre-emptive thank you to the committee for knowing the importance of making sure our schools meet the needs of all Vermonters, especially young folks, who, by no fault of their own, face disproportionate risks compared to their peers.

My name is Dana Kaplan, I use he/him pronouns, and I am the Executive Director of Outright Vermont.

Outright is Vermont's LGBTQ+ youth organization - working statewide to build hope, equity, and power, so youth - their families, and communities - gain skills and find belonging in a world that never designed for them to succeed.

I'd like to start by giving you a window into what this group of students navigates on the daily; and first, it's important that we are all clear:

According to Minority Stress Theory, the increased risk of mental health distress faced by LGBTQ+ folks is due to the increased environmental stress of navigating a world with prejudice toward your very identity. The increased rates of depression, substance use, and suicidal ideation are **not inherent OR inevitable to LGBTQ+ identities.**

It's the outsized amount of stigma, rejection, and exposure to structural and interpersonal discrimination that have devastating impacts on the overall physical and mental health of marginalized people, including the LGBTQ community.

So let's look at those impacts on Vermont's youth.

As you likely know, Vermont's Youth Risk Behavior Survey data (YRBS), is collected every two years from middle and high school students across the state. It estimates that 14% of our states' youth¹ identify as LGBTQ+, and clearly underscores the risks across the board.

We've provided for you two handouts that show in more depth both the disproportionate risks - and protective factors - that impact LGBTQ+ youth compared to their cisgender/heterosexual peers. I'll share a few of those data points now.

According to 2019 results:

50% of LGBT youth self harmed, compared with 13% of their cisgender, heterosexual peers.

36% made a suicide plan in last 12 months, compared to 9% of their peers

19% of LGBTQ youth attempted suicide in the last 12 months, compared to 4% of their peers. Put a different way: LGBTQ+ youth were five times as likely to have attempted suicide in that year than their cisgender/heterosexual peers.

The Current Environment

We must keep in mind, that data is from before the pandemic, which only served to amplify the isolation LGBTQ+ youth experience daily.

Today, we find ourselves at the intersection of decades of systemic harm, amplified by a global pandemic, and overlaid with an unprecedented level of coordinated trans-phobic and homophobic efforts across the nation.

These hate campaigns are targeting trans youth, stripping them of their rights to gender affirming health care, participation in school sports, and access to school curriculum, facilities, and systems that reflect the truth of their lived experiences.

An NPR analysis of this fast-changing landscape found that over the past two years, state lawmakers introduced at least 306 bills targeting trans people, more than in any previous period. A majority of this legislation, 86%, focuses on trans youth.

While not every proposal has succeeded — about 15% of the bills have become law — the surge of legislative activity reflects an increasingly hostile environment for LGBTQ rights across the country. It's a phenomenon we fear will have disastrous consequences for trans youth in particular, and here's why:

A January poll from the Trevor Project, an organization that provides crisis support for the LGBTQ community, found that 85% of trans and nonbinary youth said their mental health was negatively affected by these laws. A subsequent poll found that more than half of trans and nonbinary youth "seriously considered" suicide in the past year.

We must connect the dots to the ways our political climate has real life consequences on youth's daily lives. And one of those connections is to LGBTQ+ youth and their daily experience of - and lack of - safety.

Each year, GLSEN releases a national school climate survey - the results show that:

45% of LGBTQ students said they commonly avoid the bathroom at school, and 43% avoid locker rooms at school because they feel unsafe.

76% experienced in-person verbal harassment

81% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe in school.

And here in Vermont, compared to their heterosexual, cisgender peers, LGBTQ+ youth in Vermont are:

More than twice as likely to have been threatened w/ a weapon on school property within the past year (13% vs. 6%)

Significantly less likely to have at least one adult or teacher in the school they could turn to if they had a problem (72% vs 79%) *(70% vs 79% for students of color vs. white students) and in 2017 this was *76% ...so we are trending worse.

Significantly less likely to feel like they matter to people in their community (37% vs 62%) *39% in 2017* ...so also trending worse now.

I'll be direct: LGBTQ youth are the ones who are unsafe in school. There is zero evidence of danger to any other student for allowing trans kids to be themselves and have access to the same things we all need - to be our authentic selves, to find our people, to be connected and engaged. All of this - decades of structural inequities, a pandemic, a national climate where hate speech and violence becomes more and more normalized daily - is aligning to create a massive public health crisis.

The focus on trans students underscores the extent to which schools, perhaps more than any other area of American life, have emerged as the front line for restrictions on trans rights.

And more pressingly - these aren't problems in other states. National hate groups are here - today - in our beloved Vermont schools, towns, and communities. Their goal is to create fracture and disruption that's near impossible to recover from.

It's impossible to thrive where homophobia, transphobia, racism, are alive and well.

Just ask the kids in Randolph, or Winooski, or Rutland. I can guarantee you their ability to learn and engage in typical school life - sports, field trips, classes, and extra curriculars, has been severely compromised by toxic learning environments.

How else is this showing up in Vermont? You asked for our insights on Act 1 Equity Standards. Through our networks and partnerships, we have a real pulse on the broadest picture of what is - and isn't - happening in school districts across the state.

It's safe to say that, generally speaking, the majority of schools (independent, private, public) are not fully, if at all, doing the work of Act 1.

And these days, equity standards are being co-opted, weaponized, and manipulated as a tool for political divide. Staff and faculty remark about the real entrenchment of anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and white supremacy culture within their districts.

In a recent training Outright held with a Northeast Kingdom school, it was clear that even among their own team, there was doubt that the work of Act 1 was being held well.

When we asked what the biggest challenges to LGBTQ youth support would be, they said things like:

"Resistance from staff and students who feel this is a political agenda and they have nothing to learn or contribute."

"I believe changing the community mindset from intolerance to acceptance is an ongoing challenge in this region."

"There is a vocal group of conservative folks - both staff and students - who strongly feel this is a political agenda and say we should not be forcing a liberal agenda and CRT topics into this setting."

When we do not have standards that course-correct for centuries of harm and systemic inequity being enforced, and if we give independent and/or private schools exemptions from these standards, we remove oversight and accountability to the youth they're serving.

What's true is that overwhelmingly, youth themselves are actively calling for these changes to be implemented. We must remember in no uncertain terms that there is simply no agenda to equity beyond giving each and every person a chance to live!

Unequal application of Act 1 within private settings simply allows families, faculty, and staff with a stake in maintaining the status quo to turn to private institutions to continue those patterns, with an overall goal of defunding public schools.

Private education, while private for many reasons, functions very much outside visibility within communities. It's not enough to assume schools will do right by their students - they just don't have the capacity,

resources, or in some cases, leadership, that can set the stage for those priorities to come through.

That's not to say there aren't some independent and/or private schools doing exceptional work - in fact, we are actively working with many of those schools now, either through GSA support, policy consultation, staff trainings, or event-planning. Schools like Burr and Burton have been on the frontlines, creatively using resources to support other youth in across Vermont. We have close working relationships with the likes of Rockpoint School, the Putney School, Lyndon Institute, and Long Trail, to name a few.

But it's sloppy, and in many cases simply dangerous, to leave it to the whim of administrators to reach out for support when we know by design youth are struggling to succeed.

The question we must posit is why schools would advocate to remove their adherence to Act 1? If you are doing the work, you'd welcome these standards as a means of accountability and transparency. You'd want to model best practices, sharing how you've been successful in implementation for others to follow.

When we lead with our values of safe and welcoming schools for all, we have every reason to align with and support Act 1. Simply put, youth can't afford exemptions to be granted.

So this is the moment in which we find ourselves. Let's ground ourselves back in context - everything we are describing here impacts at least 14% of our Vermont students. That's probably closer to 20% by now; that's how many youth are out as LGBTQ+ nation-wide.

If we aren't providing safe schools for LGBTQ+ youth, we aren't providing safe schools at all. Anything less than coordinated, intentional and robust efforts to ensure safe and equitable schools for all youth just won't do.

Outright Vermont's Role

Teachers and administrators need us. They share the desperation they feel when they don't have the knowledge or skills to support their students. They ask us daily for more in-depth trainings, resources, and curriculum development.

And that's where Outright comes in. We are here to help provide the tools and expertise educators, administrators, and leaders need to make it happen.

On paper, we have the leadership of the State as the background for all of this work to unfold. With the Agency of Education by our side, we authored the trailblazing Best Practices Guide for Supporting Trans Students in Schools. And the legislature added Gender Identity to our anti-discrimination laws.

Today, we must work to hold schools and school boards accountable to these best practices, and ensure that there are resources and guidance that set all students up for success.

At Outright we support schools in myriad ways to build connections and supports for their students. The combination of multiple strategies together creates affirming and inclusive environments. This includes:

Supporting the foundation and operation of Gender and Sexuality Alliance Clubs. These school-based social and advocacy spaces are critical hubs of safety for young people. They diminish the social isolation rural youth face by fostering connection with supportive peers and adults.

Research shows, youth who had a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) in school were less likely to report feeling unsafe because of their sexual and gender identity, (51.7% vs 67.3% /41.3% vs 48.2%), and less likely to miss school (28.7% vs 37.7%) than youth who did not have a GSA.

Creating a Network of GSAs. Especially in rural Vermont, a GSA alone may not be enough to overcome isolation. We provide a constellation of activities that allow both youth and advisors to connect with one another: for support, leadership opportunities, and sometimes simply for fun.

Teacher and Administrator Training. We can't expect our school personnel to arrive to the job with the tools and knowledge they need to change decades of inequity. Education is key for all of us, not just students. We make sure that everyone is resourced for the work ahead.

Tackling Structural Inequities. We guide schools and districts in turning that knowledge into action. Properly informed and well-supported, school leaders in all forms - students to school boards - can undertake the hard work of changing the policies and procedures that create othering and harm for LGBTQ+ students.

When we all do this work well, LGBTQ+ youth feel they matter to their community. They experience significant decreases in suicide attempts compared to youth who do not.

Youth with one supportive adult they can turn to with problems have improved outcomes.

What's at the heart of protective factors is supportive people, adults and peers. Having your correct name and pronouns used, getting to be an active participant in school sports, clubs, and classes, wearing the correct uniform that aligns with your gender - it's not that complicated, but it is life-saving. This is about creating pathways for youth to feel a sense of connection and belonging. And hands down, belonging is suicide prevention.

There is NO backup or alternative plan coming from the state for the life-saving services that Outright provides. We are here for it, and the needs are massive.

AOE Partnership and Funding

Outright Vermont is the only entity across the state providing specific training, consultation, resource development, and support programs for LGBTQ+ youth, educators, and administrators. The pass through funding we've received from the Agency of Education has been not only an endorsement of the vitality and relevance of what we do - it has been the State's primary way of meeting LGBTQ+ students' needs .

AOE has been responsive and increased funds from \$20k to \$37k to \$60k, a clear honoring of work they know is important and don't have

the capacity to implement themselves. It's also a small pool of money given the scope of our role and our work's importance to the state, and compared with the amount of other state funding we receive to undo the harm that youth are experiencing - much of it centered in schools. You'll see a handout that shows this funding breakdown.

In Vermont we lead. Other states, looking down the barrel of hate legislation, are looking to us to set the precedent. Right now, I'm just not seeing the Vermont we need to be.

We implore state leaders like yourselves, and our state agency of education to continue to champion safety for all through the legislative bills - and monetary resources - you pass. You set the precedent. You are our north star.

It's on all of us to create the conditions that allow LGBTQ+ youth to see and believe in a future worth living. It starts with ensuring access to the people, places, and programs that celebrate them - not in spite of, but because of - exactly as they are.

It's hard being a young person in the best of circumstances. And these days, well, we are a far cry from anything resembling ideal.

I implore you to take every opportunity you have as changemakers - that could in some way, large or small, rectify the very real, lived impact of ignorance, hate, and harassment on a policy level. We are so grateful for the hard work and resounding support that resulted from the House on the patient provider shield bill. H.89.

And as it should be - we continue to set precedent for other states on what community care, resilience, and equity look like in action. It's 2023

- and we are Vermont. Let's continue to get out in front like the leaders we are.

We know that schools that meet a minimum standard for the well-being of our most marginalized youth are the standards we need.

Thank you for your clear, bold action to support policies and provisions that give the people most affected by systemic failures a chance to live.