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FOR LGBTQ+ YOUTH

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Re: Policies and Funding to Support LGBTQ+ Youth in Schools

Dear Chair Lanpher and Members of the House Appropriations Committee,

Vermont supports LGBTQ+ rights and strives for inclusion and equity, but data shows that LGBTQ+ youth in our state face the effects of a climate that is increasingly hostile to them. Our Agency of Education (AOE) needs funding to create the capacity and infrastructure to support LGBTQ+ youth in schools. In State Fiscal Year 2024, AOE funded this work with \$60,000. Across the 82,901¹ K-12 students in Vermont, that works out to \$0.72 in funding per student *per year* for vital LGBTQ+ programs.

SUMMARY OF REQUEST

A base appropriation of \$500,000 in state fiscal year 2025 provides the resources needed to better respond to current harm and develop LGBTQ+ affirming policies. This groundwork is desperately needed. In future fiscal years, AOE will need funding to expand training, support, and advocacy in Vermont schools.

STATEMENT OF NEED

Vermont's 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)² data reveals the truth about the experience of LGBTQ+ students compared to their cisgender/heterosexual peers. And this isn't a small slice of our students. **2021 YRBS data shows that a full third of Vermont high school (29%) and middle school (32%) students identify as LGBTQ+.**

In high school, LGBTQ+ youth were:

- 3.5 times more likely to purposefully hurt themselves in the last month (46% vs. 13%)
- Over 3.5 times more likely to have made a suicide plan in the past month (29% vs. 8%)

¹<https://education.vermont.gov/data-and-reporting/vermont-education-dashboard/vermont-education-dashboard-enrollment>

²

In middle school, LGBTQ+ students were:

- More than 3 times as likely to have ever hurt themselves on purpose (37% vs. 11%)
- More than 3 times as likely to have made a suicide plan in the last 12 months (27% vs. 8%)

The combined reality of this harrowing data and youth and educator stories speaks the truth loud and clear: based on systemic and cultural exclusion, schools can be a place of tremendous anxiety and fear for many LGBTQ+ youth. We must underscore that the increased rates of depression, substance use, and suicidal ideation are not inherent nor inevitable to LGBTQ+ identities. Rather, Minority Stress Theory purports that the increased risk of mental health distress faced by our communities is due to the ongoing environmental stress of navigating a world with prejudice toward our very identities.

Outright and AOE are reaching toward a shared goal to create strong and supportive schools. At present, AOE has no capacity nor infrastructure to hold, let alone expand this critical work. Particularly in our present climate of increasing antagonism and attacks on LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools, resources are desperately needed. In the past year alone, we've seen 3 Vermont school districts targeted on the national stage. In 2023 there were more material challenges in school districts than we've seen in the past 10 years, and Vermont schools are being sued and threatened with lawsuits for their inclusive practices.

The current reality and risks LGBTQ+ students face does not need to continue. There are protective factors for youth, including ongoing trainings, inclusive policies, and school-based Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs). GSAs benefit all students who are experiencing bullying based on their identities, not just LGBTQ+ kids. At schools with GSAs, students' reports of multiple forms of bias-based bullying were lower, reducing adverse health outcomes like stress, sleep problems, and depression.³

But the current need is far greater than our state's ability to meet it. Outright Vermont alone receives about 75 requests each year to partner with schools. We respond with resources to all requests we receive, but currently only have the capacity to work closely with 10 schools each year for long-term, continual training.

RECOMMENDED SCOPE OF ACTION

³ Lessard, et al. (2020). Gay Straight Alliances A Mechanism of Health Risk Reduction Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Adolescents

Outright is advocating for the following funding and policy recommendations in State Fiscal Year 2025:

- 1. Put robust resources behind the Act 1 Working Group's Education Quality Standards manual recommendations and IRIS Ethnic Studies Standards Framework.** Changing systems and structures is challenging, and sending a policy out to schools to interpret and follow is not enough. A diverse, cross-sector workgroup has worked for more than two years to build educational standards and frameworks that will bolster schools, partners, and systems to successfully implement the policy across Vermont's schools, but resources are needed to ensure the policy succeeds.
- 2. Create and implement a model policy for schools in Vermont to actively support queer and trans youth.** The last policy that the State developed was back in 2017.⁴ Given the increasing attacks on LGBTQ+ youth within and outside of Vermont, this policy needs to be updated to reflect current best practices, align with youth needs, and truly meet the moment for youth in Vermont schools. A dedicated workgroup to develop the policy is needed to ensure that this work engages affected communities and aligns with best practices. As with the work described in bullet #1, robust resources will then be needed to move the new model from policy to practice.
- 3. Strategically plan for the anti-LGBTQ+ pushback schools are facing and provide legal support for Vermont schools that are being sued for protecting LGBTQ+ youth rights.** Challenges to LGBTQ+ affirming policies are on the rise. These lawsuits have a chilling effect on gains LGBTQ+ youth are making, and schools need support to counter them.

After this groundwork is established, Outright advocates for the continuation of funding to support activities, including:

- Create a youth advisory group to AOE that has power and agency to track how policy changes are implemented and keep adults and systems accountable.** Students in schools are directly affected by policy changes every day. Yet, they have little say in how policies are implemented or what happens when harm occurs. A youth-led advisory group in AOE will bring new youth voices to the conversation. It will also ensure that youth participating in

⁴<https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-best-practices-transgender-and-gnc.pdf>

Outright programs are not the only youth asked to speak out when harm happens.

- **Fund training and new positions within the school system dedicated to hazing, harassment, and bullying (HHB) response.** Hiring and funding staff who are trained in restorative practices and accountability models is a protective factor for LGBTQ+ youth - and all youth affected by HHB - when harm does occur. This requires better and mandated training for school counselors and mental health staff.
- **Build support for school boards that are being asked to ban books and to discriminate against queer and trans youth.** School boards are under intense pressure to balance youth needs with so-called parental rights to ban books and prevent queer and trans youth from accessing sports, health care, and even bathrooms. School boards need support to develop structures and policies that support youth whose basic rights and needs are being politicized.
- **Support storytelling projects to help everyone in Vermont understand the effects of hazing, harassment, and bullying (HHB).** Trained staff can gather stories while respecting youth privacy. Stories in the public sphere help Vermonters understand and relate to youth experience and can inform system changes inside school systems, as well as inform public opinion about the impacts of HHB on LGBTQ+ youth.
- **Conduct a study to identify which school districts in Vermont are safe for LGBTQ+ youth and make the results publicly available.** There is a story that all of Vermont is safe for LGBTQ+ youth, and that's simply not the case. Outright hears firsthand from youth and adults that harm happens in Vermont schools. Youth and their caregivers need clear data that shows which districts are safest for LGBTQ+ youth so that they can make informed choices about where to attend school.
- **Provide access to inclusive schools for youth and implement programming to make schools safer.** Youth who are marginalized have a right to safe and affirming schools. AOE needs to provide access and transportation to schools that are both inclusive and welcoming. Schools that are not welcoming need programming and resources to stop harm from happening.

- **Develop LGBTQ+ informed sex education curriculum.** Vermont needs a comprehensive sexual health education curriculum so that Vermont youth of all genders and orientations have access to accurate, inclusive, and shame-free information. This area of work will expand the Essential Topics in Health Education Guide⁵ into a fully-fledged curriculum to include LGBTQ+ inclusive toolkits, lesson plans, and sexual healthcare resources.
- **Mandate inclusive sex ed training and require sex ed teachers to offer training in Vermont schools.** Health educators need mandated training to be able to offer equitable and inclusive curriculum to all youth across the state.

Outright Vermont would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and to provide testimony on this matter. Thank you for considering this request and for standing in support of LGBTQ+ youth.

Sincerely,



Dana Kaplan (he/him)
Executive Director, Outright Vermont

⁵https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/CYF_EssentialTopicsinSexualHealthEducation.pdf