

Remarks from Outright Vermont for the House Committee on Education regarding H.3 to Committee Chair, Rep. Kate Webb and the committee members,

Thank you all for taking time this morning to hear our testimony. I am Amanda Rohdenburg, the Director of Advocacy - and I am Mara Iverson, the Director of Education at Outright Vermont.

Outright Vermont is the LGBTQ youth-serving organization in our state. Since 1989, Outright Vermont has provided comprehensive statewide initiatives that improve the lives of LGBTQ youth, with a specific focus on developing self and peer connections, strengthening families, and transforming schools, communities, and systems. Our education is a critical component of making Vermont safer and more welcoming for all.

According to the 2017 YRBS (Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data), LGBTQ youth in Vermont are 4.5 times more likely to have attempted suicide in the last 12 months than their heterosexual/cisgender peers, 3 times more likely to have skipped school because they felt unsafe on route or at school in the past 30 days, and 2 times more likely to be bullied. In addition, LGBTQ youth face high rates of bullying, harassment, anxiety, depression, body image issues, low self-esteem, and other adverse childhood experiences.

LGBTQ Youth face the challenges of coming out, often to mixed or hostile results; of having limited access to other LGBTQ-identified peers; and of school climates where safety can dramatically differ between schools. Developing a healthy sense of self and fending off negative feedback can be all-consuming. A culture of exclusion, an inability to identify allies or adult role models, and a lack of family support contribute to youth feeling isolated and alone.

National data shows us that students achieve greater academic success and feel safer when they feel connected to their school (CDC, 2009, "School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth").

SCOPE OF EDUCATION WORK

Each year, Outright serves over 2,100 LGBTQ youth and their families, and nearly 5,000 educators and service providers in every county in Vermont. Our goals are always to increase protective factors, improve school climates, and provide role models and sources of support to help youth thrive.

Outright Vermont provides comprehensive assistance to school districts statewide. Specific initiatives incorporate the following:

Trainings, Workshops & Consultations

Provided to teachers, administrators, counselors, and students in a variety of settings. Visiting classes, faculty meetings, assemblies, in-service days, as well as conducting audits of LGBTQ affirming spaces and policies, and providing recommendations for access and inclusion.

Social Support and Community

Mentoring and supporting students and educators through the Vermont GSA (Gender and Sexuality Alliance) Network, which currently houses over 70 schools statewide. We work with elementary, middle, and high schools to start or sustain these social, support, and advocacy groups. We offer technical assistance and regional networking to GSA's statewide, and help youth develop and deliver supplemental curriculum. GSA's help mitigate the risks of isolation associated with LGBTQ identities in favor of safety and inclusion.

Statewide learning opportunities and network building:

Annual events, including the GSA Conference and the Queer & Allied Youth Summit, as well as our online Youth Leadership Council, provide youth leaders with opportunities to develop peer connections, build skills, and create shared goals.

We are so grateful to see this renewed effort behind ethnic and social equity in education from the Vermont State House. H.3 is a necessary step forward toward the direction of equity in Vermont schools. Support from the legislature demonstrates the state's vested interest in having a more diverse narrative in public education. The planned advisory working group ensures that any proposal reflects the views of those most impacted by the gaps in education, seeking to restore some balance of power in the lessons taught.

Teaching a broad array of perspectives and contributions will bring school curricula closer to the truth of history, which in turn will better prepare students for being informed, participating citizens. LGBTQ+ people exist. Native people exist. People of color exist. To not learn in school about the unique cultures and contributions of these groups is to limit Vermont youth as they grapple with a more complex world than they were prepared for.

To neglect these perspectives is also an implicit authorization of the historical context that has undervalued and erased the contributions of ethnic and social minority groups. What educators say and what is included in lessons is imbued with validity and importance. The implication is that people decided what was necessary for people to learn in the limited instructional time available. We have a legacy of neglecting, erasing, and denying contributions from people who are not straight, cisgender, white, well-resourced men. That perpetual practice has contributed to a Vermont with critical inequities. As we seek to shift equity and access in Vermont, we must include education in the plan. This bill seeks to offer schools a guide for what equity skills and information may be useful to Vermont students so that they can function more fluidly in the world as it exists and begin to treat one another and be treated with inherent worth and dignity.

At Outright, we use a grounding anecdote of mirrors, windows, and doors: The idea is that it is essential for youth to see themselves reflected in the curricula they are taught in school, for youth to be able to see a world view that differs from their own, and to have access to ways of being in the world that they may not have even imagined possible.

For the past two years, LGBTQ youth from every corner of Vermont have voiced the necessity for representation in schools as one of their top three priorities. They spoke to us about the impact it would have on their experiences in schools, their overall sense of well-being. We know from Youth Risk Behavior Survey data that LGBTQ Vermont youth are consistently more likely to skip school because they don't feel safe, and that students are safer and more likely to succeed academically when they feel connected to their school.

That need is reflected in nation-wide research. GLSEN's Safe Space Kit, a guide to supporting LGBTQ+ students in schools demonstrates that "inclusive curriculum that

provides positive representations of LGBTQ+ people, history and events helps to create a tone of acceptance...and increase awareness of LGBTQ+ related issues, resulting in a more supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students.” We know youth need to see themselves reflected in their curriculum in order to feel like they belong.

According to the [2015 GLSEN National School Climate Survey](#):

Only 22.4% of LGBTQ students were taught positive representations about LGBT people, history, or events in their schools;

17.9% had been taught negative content about LGBT topics.

Less than half (42.4%) of students reported that they could find information about LGBT-related issues in their school library.

Less than half of students (49.1%) with Internet access at school reported being able to access LGBT related information online via school computers. Such information is often flagged as ‘inappropriate content’ even if the information sought is not even remotely sexually explicit. We set youth up for increased risk of poor outcomes and risky behaviors if they do not have access to the necessary information for safe, healthy, supported choices.

In contrast,

LGBTQ students in schools with an inclusive curriculum:

Were less likely to hear “gay” used in a negative way often or frequently--by nearly 30% (49.7% compared to 72.6% of other students);

Were less likely to hear homophobic remarks such as “fag” or “dyke” often or frequently (40.6% vs. 64.1%); Were less likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression and transgender people often or frequently (gender expression: 50.7% vs. 66.6%; transgender people: 26.8% vs. 44.5%);

Were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation (40.4% vs. 62.6%);

Were half as likely to miss school in the past month compared to cisgender/hetero students (18.6% of students with an inclusive curriculum missed school in past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable compared to 35.6% of other students);

Were ¼ less likely to say they might not graduate high school (1.4% vs. 4.1%) and more likely to plan on pursuing post-secondary education (5.1% vs. 7.0%).

Students in schools with an inclusive curriculum were more likely to report that their classmates were somewhat or very accepting of LGBTQ people (75.8% vs. 41.6%); and felt more connected to their school community.

Representation matters.

Telling a more complete narrative matters. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about the danger of a single story dominating the perspective. H.3 seeks to shift the single story in Vermont schools. This is the work of empathy building. Of culture shift. Of social change. This is Vermont's work.