



August 28, 2020

Good morning members of the House Education Committee. My name is Dana Kaplan, I use he and him pronouns, and I am the Executive Director of Outright Vermont. I am joined today by Mara Iverson, our Director of Education.

We are here today with a clear ask: please recommend full restoration of the \$60k Legislative appropriation to Outright Vermont, so that LGBTQ+ youth have a chance to live. Make no mistake about it, the stakes are that high.

Over the past many years we have worked incredibly hard to move from scrappy to mighty, knowing the stakes were too high to be anything but resourced and available. Through tireless advocacy efforts at the statehouse, by building relationships with individuals, corporations, and private philanthropic foundations, we have made sure our financial footing is strong so we can be well positioned to meet the needs of Vermont communities. I assure you, we could have 5 people doing the work Mara does, and there would still be an unmet need.

We know firsthand the desperation teachers and administrators feel when they don't have the knowledge or skills to support their students. We also hear time and again just how relieved and successful they are when they do. Study after study has shown that the best way a government can spend money is on education. It has the highest rate of return in the long run.

Our overall education budget for our FY20 (calendar year) is \$163,469 - that's direct costs that allow us not just to execute trainings, but to be ready and able to provide resources for educators year-round. A \$40,000 cut to that budget - money we were told as of July to count on - would be detrimental to our services. It's a reduction of nearly 25%. We've budgeted our costs, expanded programs, and applied for other foundation money based on our understanding of our state funding; it will be many months before some of those opportunities arise again.

\$60,000 covers most of what it costs to have one educator on our team, and one person providing these services amounts to hundreds of resourced adults, schools, and youth. Conversely, we have seen just how much it costs a district when they fail to meet the needs of their students - just last year Burlington was sued by the Department of Justice for failing to provide affirming treatment of trans students. Know what they are mandated to do now? District-wide training!

Without this money, we lose our stability - and as the only entity in this state providing specific training, consultation, resource development, and support programs for LGBTQ+ youth, educators, and administrators, *we must remain steady and available to the people we serve.*

Our overall organizational budget is \$700,948, which covers the entirety of our statewide work with youth, families, and communities. For years, the money from AOE has been a keystone as we approached new organizations to invest in expanding our work in Vermont's schools. They have seen the state's support as an endorsement of the vitality and relevance of what we do.

This funding has provided a solid base from which other individuals and private contributions see how they can help complete our funding picture. And while we've worked hard to diversify our funding streams, Covid has created some additional challenges. We've already seen the impact of the economic crisis on our revenue streams, unable to rely on the level of contributions in a year over year comparison. For example, the first fundraiser we did online this year saw a 60% decrease from the same event in 2019.

This \$60k is an investment in all of our futures, so we can keep the worst from happening. And that was pre Covid....

At a time when the pandemic reveals the depths of our reliance on schools and educators to do so much more than teach, and though our schools are burdened by the extra costs of operating safely in the COVID world, we can't afford to take a shortsighted approach. We must continue to invest in teacher training, school supports, and programs that set us all up for brighter days ahead. Outright is a pivotal part of this constellation.

Educators and administrators are navigating enough as is it, trying to get up to speed on how to teach in this new world. We are here and at the ready to provide useful suggestions, coping strategies, and curriculum ideas as needed. Think one-stop shopping for all things supporting LGBTQ+ youth.

For our data people in the room, here is a snapshot of our reach...

In 2019 our work spanned:

- All 14 Counties in Vermont
- 104 Towns (that we know of – likely higher, as schools like U-32 serve multiple towns)
- 83 Gender and Sexuality Alliances in schools

We trained:

- 1341 Youth, 2674 Adults
- And provided a total of 111 trainings and workshops, or a total of 250 hours in actual training and workshop delivery time – mind you, that does not include prep time, time scheduling, or follow-up, so that number is low.

In terms of our statewide annual events, we had:

- 130 Youth, 30 educators participate in our GSA Conference
- 106 Youth, 26 Adults at our Leadership Day at the Statehouse
- And 134 Youth, 30 Adults attended our end of year Summit.

All of these instances provide youth and adults opportunities to see bright futures that are possible - in other words, a critical and hopeful counter-narrative to what they typically see and feel.

You have been critical to championing these efforts, taking testimony from educators and administrators, youth and parents, listening to your constituents and increasing your understanding of the harsh realities that LGBTQ+ youth face.

Let me turn now to provide a quick refresh of how we got to this point in terms of the appropriation:

In 2019 we came before you to share the very real need for schools across Vermont to better support their LGBTQ+ youth. You acted with care and dedication for some of our most vulnerable youth, recommending a \$60,000 Appropriation to the AOE base as a PASS THROUGH GRANT to ORVT, expressly for the purpose of funding our work to create safer schools.

That the AOE would attempt to cut this relatively small-for-them amount of funding that directly supports the sustainability of these efforts through funding the salary of our Director of Education is beyond disheartening and honestly, scary.

I know you have all seen the YRBS data that we sent earlier in the week. Those numbers - those are real youth, those are the lived experiences of our kids in our schools who are suffering; isolated in their remote towns, living with rejecting family members, being bullied in their classes and left out in their curriculum. In fact, they are ultimately navigating poor health outcomes across every risk category we know of, all based on having to navigate a world - and in our case, a state - that is still largely unaccepting, often times violent, and hateful towards them.

I want to speak to a few points I have heard the Secretary of Education make over the last week.

This \$60k is not an anomaly. To paint it as such is downright inaccurate. You can see a slice of the picture when you look at the PDF of AOE Payments, and specifically the Agreement Amount.

While this chart ends in 2019, therefore not depicting the FY20 \$60,000 Appropriation, you can clearly see that those funds increased from \$20k to \$37,000 to \$60,000. And thank goodness they did! This was the AOE being responsive to the critical needs of their students, and specifically based on feedback and advocacy from educators across the state desperate for more in-depth trainings, resource and curriculum development, and consultation time so as to boost their capacity to support struggling kids.

I stepped into the helm as our ED in 2017, but prior to that I was our Director of Education, so while Secretary French acknowledges not being around then, I was. And I was working very closely with both the AOE and our school districts across Vermont.

The rationale to cut this money is essentially to "spread the pain around." But if we apply an equitable lens to how we look at budget changes, that makes no sense. LGBTQ+ youth can not tolerate any more pain. It's a death sentence we do not want any part of. And what kind of message does that send to queer and trans youth who are already struggling in schools?

In Vermont we lead. And in the past we have done so with the Agency of Education by our side - trailblazing with the authoring of the Best Practices Guide for Supporting Trans Students in Schools. Including Gender Identity in our anti-discrimination laws. Other states look to us, but right now, with this proposed cut, I'm not seeing the Vermont we need to be.

In closing, let me say this:

Calling out this money from the base is dangerous, and puts youth at further risk of failing at the hands of our education system.

What's at the heart of protective factors is supportive people, adults and peers. Not having to bear the burden of being the one to educate your class on how to use your correct name and pronouns, getting to be an active participant in school sports, clubs, and classes - it's about belonging. And belonging is suicide prevention.

With NO backup or alternative plan for the life-saving services that this money funds, it means the cut isn't just a cut to Outright. It's a cut to LGBTQ support work in schools, period. And that's just something we can NOT afford.

If there is any silver lining to this wretched pandemic, it's that more of us see how our fates are intertwined.

Thank you for your consideration of restoring these funds so we can all get back to necessary work that's ahead of us.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dana". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Dana Kaplan

Executive Director
Outright Vermont