



April 16, 2019

To the Senate Committee on Appropriations,

Thank you for your time this afternoon. My name is Dana Kaplan, and I am the Executive Director of Outright Vermont. With me is Mara Iverson, our Director of Education.

When you move through the world 'an only,' it's impossible to know you belong. A culture of exclusion and hate, an inability to identify healthy adult role models, and a pervasive lack of inclusive information, all within a rural landscape, contribute to many young Vermonters being set-up for failure. Quite frankly, many struggle to get by.

According to the 2017 YRBS, LGBTQ youth in Vermont do not feel safe and secure. They are 4.5 times more likely to have attempted suicide in the last 12 months; 3 times more likely to have skipped school in the past 30 days; and 2 times more likely to be bullied than their heterosexual/cisgender peers. It's hard enough to be a kid in the best of circumstances....

An educator from Lamoille County shared: *"For my students whose identities are outside of majority, living in a rural community in Northern Vermont presents significant challenges. Geographical and cultural isolation create very real physical and emotional harm. I simply cannot emphasize the importance of having [Outright Vermont] support in creating safe and inclusive spaces, providing resources, and connecting youth together to provide mutual support."*

We know that young people achieve greater academic success and are safer overall when they feel connected to their school (CDC, 2009, "School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth"). And while we can likely all agree that schools *want* to be the best they possibly can, that doesn't mean they know *how* to get there. In fact, we know that standards of awareness, policy development, and protocol implementation differ dramatically between staff, schools, districts, and counties.

For the last decade, we have been fortunate to have the leadership and dedication of the Agency of Education acknowledging the influential role schools play in setting precedent and modeling best practices. While the Agency itself has not had the capacity or expertise on staff to directly provide schools with supportive services, they have always contracted with Outright Vermont to deliver that content, as they have always recognized the need to prioritize inclusive and affirming schools.

As the former Secretary Rebecca Holcombe wrote in a letter, *"All students need a safe and supportive school environment to progress academically and developmentally, and our schools must be proactive in creating a school culture that respects and values all students... the work Outright Vermont has done and continues to do in Vermont schools and with Vermont students has been critical to our efforts to ensure all students feel safe and supported."*

Developing and facilitating comprehensive school-based supports is the sole purpose of Outrights' Education department. And thanks to essential funding through the Agency of Education, we have been able to work with school districts and supervisory unions statewide to fill a critical gap in knowledge, and what remains an unmet pervasive need in VT schools.

SCOPE OF EDUCATION WORK

The Agency of Education has supported our education work for the last five years. Unfortunately, there is no money in the Agency's FY20 budget to support this work.

We deliver services to school districts in all 14 counties of the state. That amounts to roughly 5,000 teachers and providers each year - well over 100 schools.

Since the start of the 2018/19 school year, our Director of Education has conducted over 78 trainings to elementary, middle, and high schools - and is literally the only professional in the state providing this specific expertise. As it is, with more youth coming out earlier, coupled with an uptick in widespread hate, increased requests from schools has left us unable to say yes to all the demand.

A \$60,000 appropriation to the Agency of Education secures life-saving capacity-building for school districts statewide. In no uncertain terms, without the Agency having secure funds to provide these essential services, Vermont has zero resources focused on:

- K-12 LGBTQ+ competency;
- Professional development,
- Site visits, phone consults and curriculum creation guidance.

A central Vermont educator said, "As teachers, role models, and humans, we cannot be open and inclusive if we don't understand, even if we mean well. Outright services help us to understand by providing unique exposure to ideas, and very concrete examples of how to help students feel seen and validated."

This is our moment to be out in front, to send a clear message from Newport to Bennington, that safe and inclusive schools are in fact a priority. These funds have the power to ensure that educators, administrators, and students have what they so desperately need to do their jobs. Believe me when I say there is too much at stake to have it any other way.

Thank you in advance for your leadership.

Best,

Dana Kaplan

Executive Director

Outright Vermont