

Good afternoon, and thank you for inviting Outright to speak with ya'll today about what's real and alive for LGBTQ+ youth in Vermont. 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 never designed for them to succeed.

I'll start by thanking each of you 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.

It's important that we are crystal 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. Rather, 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' youth<sup>1</sup> identify as LGBTQ+, and clearly underscores the risks across the board.

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.

In 2023, according to a trans legislation tracker, which track legislation seeking to block trans people from receiving basic healthcare, education, legal recognition, and the right to publicly exist., there have been 483 bills introduced in 46 states.

A majority of this legislation focuses on trans youth.

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.

- **Efforts are escalating to undermine intellectual freedom in libraries.**
  - [The American Library Association](#) (ALA) data in March reveals 1,269 demands to censor library books and resources in 2022.
    - This is the highest number of attempted book bans the ALA has recorded in more than 20 years.
    - It's nearly double the 729 challenges reported in 2021.
- **Youth, LGBTQ+ folks, and people of color are being targeted directly and bear the brunt of the consequences.**
  - Of the challenged titles, the vast majority were written by or about members of the LGBTQIA+ community and people of color.
  - The majority of 2022 censorship attempts (58%) targeted information that is accessible to youth: books and materials in school libraries, classroom libraries or school curricula.
- **This is not about specific books - this is about freedom of thought and expression.** These are attempts to not just censor the content of a single book, but to erase an entire idea from the public sphere.
  - In 2022, 90% of the overall # of books challenged were part of attempts to censor multiple titles. 40% were in cases involving 100 or more books.
  - Prior to 2021, the vast majority of challenges to library resources only sought to remove or restrict access to a single book.

What we know to be true is that under Vermont law, all youth have the right to learn and exist free from the threat of harm.

- Yet even here in Vermont, there is a continuous barrage of messages that target LGBTQ+ youth, telling them they're not valued, cared for, or allowed to exist. The idea that books where their identities are represented are obscene, pornographic, and inappropriate for school contributes to a culture of shame that puts all youth at risk.

- You know what helps? Affirming schools – schools where youth feel safe and validated being open about their gender and sexual identities. Wherein youth have at least one supportive adult in their lives, social safe havens like Gender and Sexuality Alliance Clubs, and inclusive curriculum and policies, positive health outcomes are possible. In fact, we are talking about significant protective factor against suicide attempts for LGBTQ+ youth. According to 2020 data from the Trevor Project, LGBTQ+ youth in schools that were not affirming of their identity were nearly twice as likely to have attempted suicide in the past year compared to those whose schools were affirming.
- But safety isn't guaranteed, and ongoing training and policy guidance is critical. Schools need consistent and actionable guidance from agencies like the Department of Education and VT Dept of Libraries so they can be creating cultures and conditions where all youth thrive. They also need continued resources and support to know how to prevent discrimination, harassment, and bullying.
- Just ask any shy 10 year old where they find solace! Libraries are typically a hub for youth who otherwise can't find places of safety and connection. School libraries can continue to be key partners in a myriad of efforts to ensure safety for all..

According to the American Association of School Libraries, "Intellectual Freedom is every learner's right."

- In order to develop essential life skills like empathy and critical thinking, youth need access to a wealth of information and perspectives, and the guidance of trusted advisors.
- It is critical not only for LGBTQ+ youth to see themselves reflected in the materials available to them, but also for youth who are not LGBTQ+ to engage perspectives that are different from their own.

## Learning can and should be joyful.

- In a rural state, isolation can run deep, separating youth from each other while making access to information and resources impossible. Inclusive curriculum in the classroom is essential – but libraries are where youth can go to exercise curiosity and pursue learning for its own sake. Libraries should have the resources and support needed to meet youth where they are, with a robust and challenging collection of materials.
- Furthermore, as we can all appreciate, Psychological safety is a prerequisite for any and all learning, full stop. Materials and programs that reflect a wide variety of identities and experiences, most especially those of youth on the margins, like BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth are pivotal for young people to see possibilities for themselves into the future. We all need places where we belong. Programs like Drag Queen Story Hour ensure youth come to know libraries as safe, creative places where their joy and truth are welcome and celebrated.

So this is the moment in which we find ourselves. 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 is 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.

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.

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. 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.

- This is the Vermont we need to keep working towards, every day.