



September 1, 2020

Good afternoon members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for inviting us here today. My name is Dana Kaplan, I use he and him pronouns, and I am Outright Vermont's Executive Director. I am joined today by our Director of Education, Mara Iverson.

We are here today with a clear ask: please recommend full restoration of the \$60k Legislative appropriation to Outright Vermont, so that we can continue to build safer schools for everyone, and so that LGBTQ+ youth have a chance to live.

Let me be blunt: The stakes are that high.

Over the past many years Outright has worked hard to move from scrappy to mighty, knowing that the needs of our communities across VT were too dire to be anything but resourced and available.

Through tireless advocacy efforts at the statehouse, and by building relationships with individuals, corporations, and foundations, we have made sure our financial footing is strong so as to be well-positioned to meet the needs of Vermont youth and youth-facing professionals statewide.

Our overall FY20 budget (calendar year) for our Education program 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 - is nearly 25%, and would be detrimental to our services.

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 stable ground - and as the only entity in this state providing specific training, consultation, resource development, and support programs for LGBTQ+ youth, educators, and administrators, when I say “we” I mean Vermont. *We must remain steady and available to the people we serve.*

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.

For years, our relationship with AOE has been pivotal - as we've 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 our evidence-based programs do.

In addition, 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, and are unable to rely on the level of contributions in a year over year comparison. For example, our first of two fundraisers we did online this year saw a 60% decrease compared to 2019.

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. While educators and administrators are 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 enhancements.

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.

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 this 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'd like to speak to a few points I've heard the Secretary of Education make over the last week.

This \$60k is not an anomaly and 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.

## Summary of AOE Agreements and Payments to Outright VT

2/26/2019

Agreement with AOE	Start Date	End Date	Agreement Amount
FY 2014 Grant	7/1/2013	6/30/2014	18,000
FY 2015	7/1/2014	6/30/2015	20,000
Contract # 30549	12/23/2015	7/31/2016	20,000
Amendment #1	8/1/2016	7/31/2017	37,394
Amendment #2	8/1/2017	7/31/2018	37,000
Contract # 37230	10/16/2018	12/31/2018	23,662

While this chart ends in 2019, therefore not depicting the FY20 \$60,000 Legislative Appropriation, you can see that funds from AOE increased from \$20k to \$37,000 to \$60,000. This was the AOE responding to the critical needs of school districts, based feedback and advocacy from educators desperate for more in-depth trainings, resource and curriculum development, and consultation time to boost their capacity to support struggling kids.

Upon direct questioning, Secretary French shared that 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, and no other plans in the works to support schools around LGBTQ+ competence, I'm not seeing the Vermont we need to be.

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

Protective factors are supportive 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