



Thank you, Chairwoman Maloney, Ranking Member Comer, and Members of the Committee, for your time and attention.

My name is Dr. Jessie Pocock (she/her). It is the honor of my life to be executive director and CEO of Inside Out Youth Services. Where, since 1990, we have built access, equity, and power with LGBTQ+ youth. While not testifying on behalf of, I am also a state commissioner on suicide prevention, and an advisory board member for the Colorado Behavioral Health Administration.

On November 20th, at 12:45 a.m. A message on my phone reads: "Jessie, it's Joe. I just wanted to call and let you know that I'm safe. There was just a shooting at Club Q. I was literally there 5-10 minutes beforehand dropping off a friend. But I'm safe."

We lost so much that morning. We don't know how many Inside Out alumni were at Club Q, but we know that one of them was killed, a volunteer was shot. And the individual Joe dropped off was just released from the hospital after multiple surgeries for two gunshot wounds.

One of the things I find myself doing in my job is reminding my staff, colleagues, and youth that this is not okay. This is not normal. And while several helpful public servants have reiterated that sadly this isn't the first time this has happened, I remind them too that this isn't okay. LGBTQ+ extremism and violence shouldn't be expected as the norm. And we can't go on like it is.

I expect that no matter what we value, we can all agree that we want the same thing for youth in our communities: We want them to be healthy and have opportunities to develop skills for a meaningful and productive adulthood. We want them to feel loved and included in their schools, on the sports field, in their places of worship, and in their homes. We want them to not only survive adolescence, but we also want them to thrive during and after adolescence.

Experts agree that there are a few things that create the conditions for a thriving adolescence: access to a prosocial environment where youth can connect and have positive experiences with other youth, connection to a trusted adult who they can go to with the struggles and challenges they face, opportunities to grow in leadership, and social environments where they feel included. We call these protective factors because they protect youth from corresponding risk factors. Risk factors include suicide, illicit substance use, violence, school truancy, and other risky behaviors such as impaired driving.

Data and research show that LGBTQ+ youth have additional critical protective factors and, in many areas, including those listed above, that increase their risk for negative health outcomes.





LGBTQ+ youth who have family and community acceptance, access to others who share similar lived experiences and history, and connection to role models who have similar identities are less likely to attempt suicide, experience negative behavioral health outcomes, use illicit substances, and engage in risky behavior.

Bottom line, inclusion, acceptance, access saves lives. And that is why Inside Out Youth Services has ensured that we model all our programs around these protective factors and risks, that we track outcomes to ensure our programs are in fact reducing negative outcomes including substance use, increasing trusted adult connection, reducing violence, and increasing school engagement.

Here's how we see this operating in our community center:

By the numbers:

In our center in 2021:

- **256** unique individuals served at our community center
- **186** new youth
- LGBTQ+ students attended from **80** schools across the county

In our advocacy, policy, and education work in 2021:

- **1,508** adults were trained on how to better support and resource LGBTQ+ people
- These trainings impacted **8,961** LGBTQ+ youth
- Our anti-violence work, co-led by LGBTQ+ students, increased safety for **31,000** young people in the Pikes Peak region

Work with parents:

- **123** active members in our TransParenting support and advocacy group (almost a **60%** increase from 2020)

By the stories:

**Names of specific youth have been changed for the sake of their privacy.*

Sam* goes out of their way to introduce themselves to new youth with, "Hey, I'm Sam, my pronouns are they/them. I'm your friend now. Welcome."

LGBTQ+ elders lead LGBTQ+ identity groups so that youth can connect with trusted adults who share similar struggles and celebrations.

Lidia, a young transgender girl who could only express herself fully at Inside Out, finally she felt ready to come out to her family. Now, she wears the clothes that make her





comfortable, and she's loved and accepted. She doesn't have to hide, and she can focus on the important issues facing her like school, work, and her health.

Our trained peer advisors connect struggling youth with trusted adults who can support and resource them.

Kelly started a mental health support group at her school, inspired by the healing sense of community she experienced at Inside Out.

Rachel asked us for tips on grassroots organizing, then organized a march and protest against hate speech.

Countless youth have testified at local school board meetings, state legislative sessions, and our local city council meetings because they are committed to our nation's future and the future of their peers.

Our therapist provides free therapy to forty youth and their families.

All of this goes to show: We see hope, impact, and growth at Inside Out.

But we also see the impact of anti-LGBTQ+ extremism and violence. One third of our youth is houseless, often due to family rejection. I knew one who was only 13, living in a camp on the street, because it felt safer than their home. Multiple times a week, our staff sit with youth experiencing suicidal thoughts because of the isolation they feel due to stigma, bullying, and hate in their communities, schools, and places of worship. We have young adults who would rather sleep on the streets than access the faith-based local shelters who make it clear their religion isn't accepting of who they are.

LGBTQ+ youth are being pushed out of their public schools due to bullying, harmful and targeted rhetoric, and discrimination from their peers, teachers, and school board members. And we see the impact of discrimination and stigma against our LGBTQ+ youth who are Black, indigenous, and youth of color who are experiencing the highest health disparities of all the youth in our community.

In February, two board of education members of a local district shared transphobic memes on social media. (Attached below.) More than 1,200 people signed an open letter condemning these actions, with one student in that district saying: "As a closeted trans student, I want to be able to feel safe to be myself at school. In the current state of things, I really don't. Every day I have to hear transphobic comments from students, and every day it gets harder to bear. Knowing that those at the very top of the district are against people like me really doesn't help. I want to be free, and I'm tired of not being able to at school. The comments and posts from the board members contribute to an already horrible atmosphere of transphobia and something must be done. I'm tired of being scared."





A parent advocacy group recently asked school board members to segregate LGBTQ+ students to a different school. In yet another district, a transgender girl was kicked out of her homecoming dance for wearing a dress. Across town, a school board member told a trans student that they needed to accept Jesus in order to be happy, that LGBTQ+ youth wouldn't struggle with suicide if they realized there were only two genders and suggested banning rainbow flags and other symbols of safety from classrooms at an official school board meeting.

I need to emphasize here: It is not the fact that these youth are LGBTQ+ that puts them at risk. It is the way our culture views LGBTQ+ people. Their mental health is impacted when politicians legislate away their rights, when youth witness unmitigated hate speech on social media, when youth are bullied by peers who don't understand them because their families view "diversity" as some sneaky way to advance a "gay agenda," rather than a fact of life. Lack of education, fear, and hate are all connected.

Inside Out offers trainings on LGBTQ+ identities and support because so many adults want to be trusted allies for these youth. Unfortunately, especially considering recent anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, we are being shut out of the places that need this education the most – schools, hospitals, and youth-serving organizations.

We work directly with students who have been targeted by bullies, ensuring they have support when reporting bullying to their schools, and addressing any other school-based discrimination that comes up. Sometimes, this involves helping them find resources to file a formal complaint. Sometimes, we just sit in the room with them while they talk to their principal.

Whatever the young person needs is what we aim to provide. Many of these youth cannot rely on other adults. By simply existing as an LGBTQ+ resource, we are doing upstream suicide prevention.

We aim not only to be reactive – to respond to emerging needs – but to be proactive. Our work in policy consultation and advocacy impacts around 31,000 people a year in our region and statewide. We consult with school districts, primarily, around policies on pronoun use, student confidentiality, and access to all-gender restrooms. This, too, is upstream suicide prevention. Violence prevention. Not only for LGBTQ+ students, but for all students, research shows.

However, discussing "taboo" topics, even as they relate to prevention, is considered dangerous. Politicians and school boards would, in many cases, rather exacerbate hateful speech and refuse to implement best health practices and positive youth development than learn about the issues facing our kids.





When we continue to fear these important conversations breeds fear and hate toward the LGBTQ+ community as the “other.” Our identities are sexualized by politicians and pundits, to the point that we cannot simply exist as humans without parent groups calling us “groomers” and “predators” while we are doing life-saving work for youth who have been cast aside. The reality, that many of you know well, is that LGBTQ+ people are just people. We are diverse and have no “agenda” beyond living our lives. At the very least, *living*.

But even that is too much to ask, it seems. Between suicide and violence, too many members of the LGBTQ+ community are taken each year. These are our friends, our family, our partners, our colleagues -- sometimes the youth we work with.

We need everyone to be the champions for LGBTQ+ young people that Inside Out is.

Scared. Since the shooting at Club Q, that word keeps coming up: Scared. We had so few spaces where we could be ourselves. Play. Dance. Make art. Without the fear of violence. Some of our youths are asking for us to be more incognito, less obviously LGBTQ+. Because they're scared. Their parents are scared.

To be honest, so am I.

I should not have to budget for private security in order to provide our services. I should not have to research programs to erase myself from the internet in order to share our story with you today. A youth services organization should not have to organize remembrance vigils while trying to provide direct service to people in turmoil -- while existing in turmoil ourselves. We should not have to squeeze in brief moments to grieve and mourn between media interviews that too often seek to sensationalize our story. We should not have to hide our staff pages on our website, meet in pre-planned and unpublicized places just so young people can gather. But this has been our work in the month since the shooting.

LGBTQ+ people are forged from flames. But we shouldn't have to be. We have worked for decades to make the world safer, kinder, more loving and inclusive for our youth. Elected leaders should be learning from our work, rather than tearing us down.

We need you to humanize us. Hold others accountable for dehumanizing us. Ask yourself what it would be like for you if people with rifles and in full camouflage attire showed up at your place of business, your social gathering spots, where your children go to listen to stories. To us, it feels like we are being hunted.

I implore you: Start legislating the real problems: commercialized bigotry, racism, hatred, and mass murderers with unlimited access to guns.

The rhetoric that causes violence doesn't just come from elected officials and from conversations around anti-trans legislation. Echo chambers like Twitter and anti-LGBTQ+





Facebook groups are creating a false narrative that too many people believe: asserting that LGBTQ+ people are dangerous. Those who buy into this false narrative believe they are in the right when they hunt us down, because they are inundated by messaging that paints us as dangerous.

Hate speech on social media must be regulated. Online, militarized and terrorist hate groups must be disbanded. Because of social media, they have been able to organize in ways that are wholly unprecedented in our history, and we see the results of that organization at our school board meetings, when groups of people who have no stake in the district, or even in Colorado Springs, show up to testify against LGBTQ+ inclusion, against teaching accurate history.

Today I am asking you to protect these youth at a national level. Protect their human rights, so concerted efforts that seek to harm them will no longer have the power to do so. Protect their rights to public accommodations like restrooms and locker rooms; protect their rights to play sports; protect their rights to dress in accordance with their gender. Protect their rights to gather, celebrate, dance – without keeping one eye on the exits, just in case.

I have another request, even simpler than legislation: Treat us as humans, not as “others.” LGBTQ+ people are humans who love, who have families, and tragically, who bleed. Before you post on social media or discuss our rights, think about who could read your words, and the impact of them. Words can harm, make a young person feel unloved. But words can also spread compassion and condemn those who speak and act out of hate.

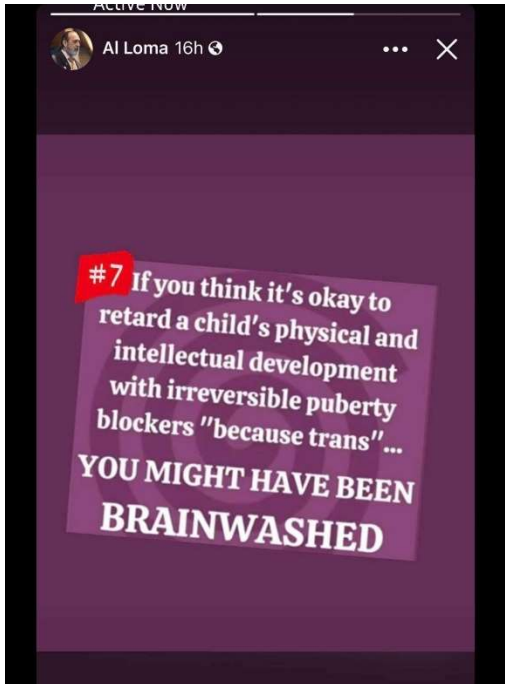
One of the youth’s messages that I keep close to my heart: In our all-gender restroom, there’s a little sticky note by the mirror that says, “We notice when you’re gone.”

I am asking you today to notice who is gone. Ashley Paugh, Raymond Green Vance, Daniel Aston, Derrick Rump, and Kelly Loving. Notice whether your public service is in honor of their names, or whether it is in service of hate. Notice that we are being hunted. And hold *real*/predators accountable through legislation and prevention.

You must not be silent. We notice when you are gone.

Our youth know the power of words, and at Inside Out we are sure to learn from them and help others learn from them as well. All over the walls at Inside Out, youth post affirmations to each other, staff, and volunteers. I’d like to share these messages with you so that we all can share the kindness and empathy that our LGBTQ+ teenagers model. And I’d also like to share with you the messages that our local officials model so that you can see the difference.

Messages from elected officials and others in power

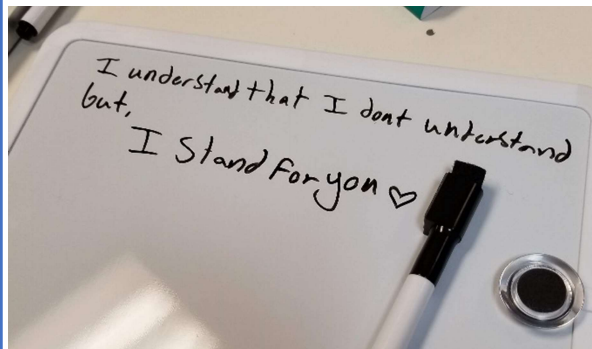


From the Facebook stories of D11 Board Member Al Loma.

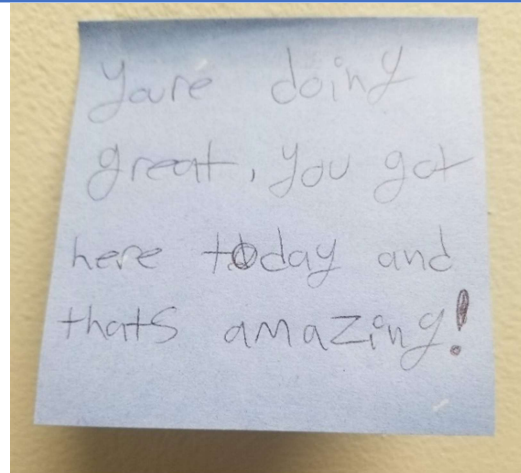


From the Facebook stories of D11 Board Member Jason Jorgenson

Messages from LGBTQ+ youth



“When someone fully understands who they are in Christ, then they will know they are valued and will be able to overcome depression and thoughts of suicide. They will know that there are only two genders and that there is absolute truth that comes from the Word of God.” – **D49 BOE member Jamilynn D’Avola, to a transgender 5th grade student**



From: Brian Moody
To: Tom Granger
Subject: Follow up
Date: Friday, November 11, 2022 11:53:57 AM

This email came from outside Academy District 20. Do not open attachments, click on links or reply if you do not recognize the sender.

Hey Tom

I'm just following up from our last meeting together. Specifically on the issue of transgender bathroom you articulated that your policy as superintendent was:

1. Parent involvement will be requested of the student when a gender identity change is expressed
2. A request to use the staff bathroom is made of the student
3. A written record is made of the student's new identity and which bathroom will be used.
4. No bathroom or locker room usage will be allowed different than a birth gender unless a statement of written record exists for the student in question choosing to use a bathroom or locker room different than their birth gender.
5. The student will receive some guidance about the potential ramifications of transitioning and using opposite gender bathrooms, even the risk of exposure to opposite sex adult coach staff, lawsuits and sexual assault.

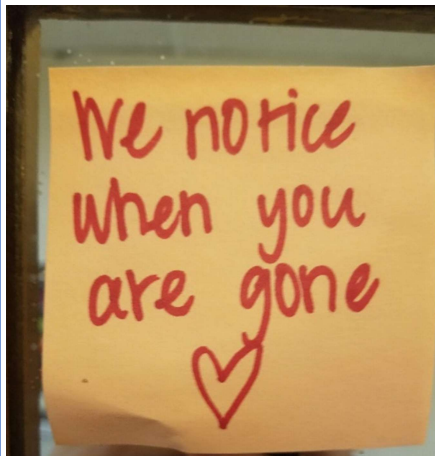
You further indicated that you had articulated this policy to principals and administrators and that you would again emphasize this policy at a district wide training. Were you able to do this?

Given that this is your stated public position, would it be possible for you to send this to us writing? Also, is it approved by you for us to state publicly that this is the D20 official pol

Thanks
Brian
Advocates for D20 Kids



An email from a parent advocacy group to the superintendent of D20

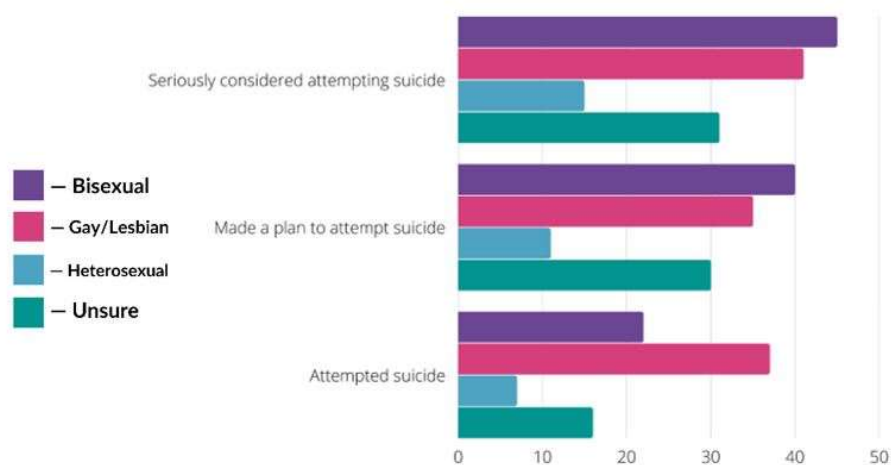


APPENDIX : El Paso County Colorado data on LGBTQ health outcomes

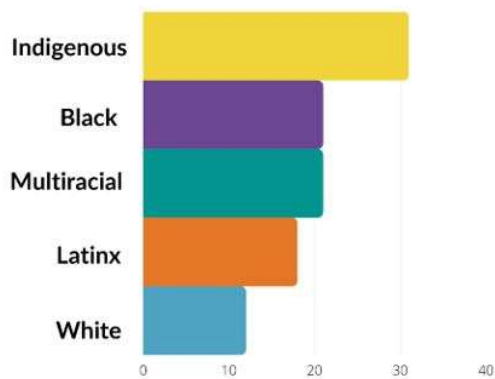
Source: Healthy Kids Colorado Survey data for region 4 (El Paso County), 2019

According to 2019 results from [El Paso County's Healthy Kids Colorado Survey](#) (a bi-annual survey given to youth in middle and high school, which individuals and entire schools may opt-out of), LGB (Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual) youth, and those who are unsure of their sexual orientation or gender identity, are more likely than their peers to consider attempting suicide, make a plan to attempt suicide, and attempt suicide. (Data are incomplete for transgender youth in each of these categories, but national data show trans people are at even higher risk than their LGB peers.)

Percentage of El Paso County youth who...



Percentage of LGBTQIA2+ youth who have attempted suicide



- Native and Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit) youth (31%) attempted suicide at over twice the rate of their white peers (12%)

- Black LGBTQIA+ youth (21%), multiracial LGBTQIA2S+ youth (21%), and Latinx LGBTQIA+ youth (18%) all attempted suicide significantly more than white LGBTQIA+ youth.

- Over 50% of Native and Indigenous LGBTQIA2S+ youth had contemplated suicide.

In addition to higher rates of attempting suicide:



- LGB youth are **less likely to feel safe at school, two times as likely to be bullied at school, and two times as likely to have been bullied in the last year.**
- **60 percent reported they “Often or almost always hate being at school”** compared to 40 percent heterosexual peers.
- **LGB youth are less likely to have a trusted adult** to go to with problems and less likely to feel like they can go to their parents with a problem.

Further context:

The data above were collected before the pandemic. We don't know the mental health toll the pandemic took on our local youth because El Paso County schools chose overwhelmingly not to offer the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey in 2021 (the most recent year the survey was conducted). Our county doesn't have significant data.

This survey informs our work and the work of countless organizations throughout the state, yet a growing movement for “parental rights” has sowed so much fear that local schools often decline to participate. In 2021, a small but vocal movement of parents objected to the fact that the middle school version of the survey would include questions about sexual violence and health, which they considered “inappropriate.” What those parents, and the schools who listened to them, failed to realize is that middle schoolers are in fact dealing with these issues. We see that nationwide. By refusing to acknowledge and study those issues, and by believing our youth are developmentally incapable of handling them, we are doing a huge disservice to youth, and to future violence prevention efforts.

