

Hi, my name is Claire Harkola and I am a queer and trans educator who has been working in schools throughout the Rogue Valley for the past 5 years. I am writing to you today to urge you to support the funding of Senate Bill 52 that would put necessary funding behind the implementation of Oregon's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Two-Spirit, Intersex, & Asexual (LGBTQ2SIA) Student Success Plan.

Over my teaching career working with students in southern Oregon, I've seen trans student teachers pushed out of teaching placements, I've heard first-hand accounts of high school students being sexually harassed and assaulted because of their queerness or transness, GSAs have been completely shut down due to harassment, and now there are educators in Grants Pass fighting to pass policies attacking the LGBTQ2SIA Student Success Plan and that would create a hostile environment for their trans students. I love living in southern Oregon and I know that it has the potential to be an amazing place to live for queer and trans young people and adults alike, but that is just not our current reality.

In response to the closing of our region's only LGBTQ-specific organizations, Lotus Rising Project and Rainbow Elders, the Rogue Action Center created the LGBTQ+ Listening Project. Last year we conducted a survey reaching over 700+ LGBTQ+ people in Jackson and Josephine counties to begin to map the assets and needs of our diverse community. What we found was not surprising, but nonetheless gutwrenching: overall it is extremely challenging to thrive in Southern Oregon as an LGBTQ+ person, particularly if you're trans, BIPOC, or youth. Notable statistics from our survey:

-79% of LGBTQ+ youth have experienced harassment/bullying because of gender, sexuality or appearance

-91% of trans folks and 83% of all respondents reported feeling that they needed to hide/change sexuality/gender/appearance to avoid harassment or discrimination

-86% of respondents under 25 have had the feeling they had to move out of area to meet needs or have a good life. (compared to 76% overall)

-50% of respondents aged 13-17 have had difficulty finding/accessing stable housing.

-38% of LGBTQ+ youth have experienced food insecurity at least once.

-32% of LGBTQ+ youth have been threatened with/experienced physical violence because of their sexuality, gender, or appearance.

Our LGBTQ+ young people in Southern Oregon are experiencing an unacceptable level of violence perpetrated by the culture and behaviors they experience in their schools, by their peers, and adults in their lives. And it is also true that our region is brimming with spectacular, caring, and passionate educators, school staff, and adults that want to make our communities better for LGBTQ+ young people, but are unable due to a lack of proper funding, resources, and/or institutional support. The resources and initiatives funded by SB 52 would provide crucial support for our teachers and school staff to create LGBTQ+ affirming school communities that would allow queer and trans students to just be kids and learners without constantly fighting discrimination and harassment.

Show our LGBTQ2SIA students that they belong and that their state, their home, is willing to put real power behind making their lives better. Thank you so much for listening.