

Jax Greenwald, Elana Ordower, Luca Fernandes-Rivera, and Tylon Werkheiser

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## LGBTQIA+ Rights Speech

Jax

Hello. Our names are Luca Fernandes-Rivera, he/him, Jax Greenwald, they/he, Elana Ordower, she/they, and Tylon Werkheiser, he/they. We are here on behalf of URJ 6 Points SciTech Academy in Byfield, Massachusetts. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us. We would like to discuss bullying prevention for students of the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalized groups.

Elana

There is no federal law that explicitly and consistently protects against sexual orientation and gender identity in many areas, including in education. Like all children in America, LGBTQIA+ students are legally required to attend some form of formal education, many families opt for a traditional school environment for a plethora of reasons individual to each of their unique situations. Students are entitled to a learning environment that is inclusive, conducive to their learning, and most importantly: safe and secure. 68% of LGBTQIA+ students, however, from a survey by Pew Research Center, have reported feeling unsafe in their school environment, and unfortunately, for entirely valid reasons. According to the GLSEN 2021 National School Climate Survey 76.1 percent of LGBTQIA+ students face verbal harassment, 53.7 percent are harassed sexually, 31.2 undergo physical harassment, and 12.5 are physically assaulted by their peers in their schools. 84 percent of LGBTQIA+ youth have reported to the Trevor Project that they have actively expressed a desire for mental health care and 50 percent of them are unable to receive it. This overwhelming harassment, and lack of access to proper care,

has led 39 percent of these children to seriously contemplate taking their own lives, and 15 percent to take an attempt at it.

Jax

From our position as Jews, we are morally and ethically responsible for the ensurance of the humanity of all people. Jewish tradition makes it so we must fully support all members of the LGBTQ+ community, because it teaches that we are all created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's own image, and are therefore deserving of dignity and respect. Not a single person should have to live in fear of prosecution, harassment, or discrimination, no matter their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. This is made clear in many Jewish teachings, such as "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a), and "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feeling of the stranger, having yourself been strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 39:9). As we have been taught the value and importance of accepting those around us, whether or not they differ from us, we must work to fight against any hatred or bigotry that may be inflicted upon them.

Tylon

I have known I was trans since I was 11. But, in some ways I have always known; I never fit in; I hated my body and my life and there was nothing I could do to change that. This led me to come out when I was thirteen. I did not have a choice in coming out. I feared that I would not make it out alive if I did not. If I had not cut off my hair and changed the way I dressed, I would not have made it past 13. I cannot and will not hide my queerness because it is crucial to my existence

I would not choose to be trans. That feels wrong to say but I did not choose this. And I would not choose to be bullied and harassed by society or hate my body and mind for something

so far out of my control. But I am, despite my wants, so I will live in whatever way makes me want to live past 18.

In the same way I cannot go back into the closet nor choose to be cis, many fellow LGBTQIA+ students cannot hide their queerness. This often makes them subject to bullying at their place of learning. This bullying is not fair and often results in suicidal ideation and suicide among queer youth. Whether these deaths are a result of hiding in the closet out of fear or directly from the bullying, their deaths and struggle can be prevented by instituting support and safety within their schools, no matter what they identify as.

Elana

The Safe Schools Improvement Act (S.3105/H.R. 6031) will protect students of all backgrounds and identities from bullying by requiring that every school which receives federal funding adopt and implement an anti-bullying policy. Every school anti-bullying policy would have to include language that specifically protects students from being bullied on the basis of their race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religion. The Safe Schools Improvement Act would also require that the Department of Education must conduct regular reports on programs and policies to combat bullying and harassment in schools. Thank you for voting for the Safe Schools Improvement Act (S.3105/H.R. 6031) in the previous Congress. Please cosponsor this bill when it is reintroduced in the 119th Congress, and urge your colleagues to do the same.

Jax

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. We greatly appreciate it.