February 22, 2024

Margaret Coates  
Superintendent  
Owasso Public Schools  
Sent electronically to margaret.coates@owassops.org

Dear Dr. Coates,

I am reaching out following the heartbreaking death of Nex Benedict, a student in your school district who was harassed and brutally assaulted in a school bathroom. The entire school community is undoubtedly shaken and saddened by this incident, by the loss of such a young soul. Since Nex’s death, other accounts of bullying and harassment in Owasso schools have surfaced from both current and former students, making clear that this is a systemic problem. Schools have an obligation to prevent harm to students and there are steps that should be taken to prevent the brutal attack on Nex, and the bullying and harassment they endured leading up to that moment. You may be wondering what you can do—and asking yourself what you could have done differently to prevent this incident in the first place. We can help, and that is why I am writing today.

While we await the technical answers to some of the questions related to Nex’s death, we can agree that immediate action is needed to ensure that no other student in your district is victimized based on their LGBTQ+ identity, their race, culture, or ethnicity, or any other characteristic. Our schools must be safe and affirming for all students, and today in classrooms, hallways, and bathrooms of Owasso schools, queer kids, trans and non-binary kids, and other kids who are made to feel unsafe and unwelcome are terrified to just be – to learn, to play, to be kids. The school community, the broader Owasso community, and people across the country are watching and waiting to see what you will do to protect your students. Over the years, we have seen in multiple jurisdictions that when cases involving harassment and other forms of discrimination move through the courts, school districts ultimately are held accountable and are mandated to implement programs like the Human Rights Campaign Foundation’s Welcoming Schools program. Your students need action right now.

Our Welcoming Schools Program is nationally recognized for our comprehensive approach to helping educators and other school personnel build the skills, competencies, and confidence to address bias-based bullying— including anti-LGBTQ+ bullying, through professional development and coaching, lesson plans, and whole-school activities. Our professional development is
data-driven and delivered by educators to educators. We are offering to bring our Welcoming Schools experts to your district immediately, to provide the following services and supports:

- Work collaboratively with your leadership team to establish enumerated policies that ensure the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ students.
- Provide professional development to your educators to gain the competency and confidence to provide safe and affirming learning environments for ALL students.
- Provide proactive steps for educators and administrators to take in preventing bias-based bullying incidents from occurring and data-driven reactive measures to take when bullying does occur.
- Provide coaching and guidance to your leadership team as you build your internal capacity for improving the school climate for all students.

For full transparency, as the nation’s largest LGBTQ+ civil rights organization, the Human Rights Campaign is committed to telling Nex’s story and pointing to the impact of anti-transgender legislation, anti-transgender rhetoric, and attempts to ban and censor LGBTQ+ material. As such, we have called on the U.S. Department of Education to fully investigate the circumstances around Nex’s death, and our outreach to you with the offer to train your district employees will be public as well. All school leaders need to know that these horrific incidents are preventable, and that schools cannot turn their backs or bury their heads in the sand when lives are at stake, no matter what their personal beliefs. We eagerly await your response and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Kelley Robinson
President, Human Rights Campaign

cc: Oklahoma State Department of Education Superintendent Ryan Walters via ryan.walters@sde.ok.gov