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## **Kaleidoscope Youth Center partners with Columbus City Schools to promote safer spaces for LGBTQIA+ Students**

**COLUMBUS** – As leaders in supporting affirming and inclusive schools for LGBTQIA+ students and adults, Kaleidoscope Youth Center (KYC) and Columbus City Schools (CCS) have partnered to develop new inclusive training for staff, safe opportunities for high school students to engage and express their feelings and identities, and new policy language that again places our city's school district at the forefront of ensuring equal rights and defending against discrimination.

KYC is the largest and longest standing organization in Ohio to serve and support LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults, ages 12 - 24. The organization provides safe(r) and affirming spaces through their Drop-in Center, supporting youth exploring their identity, navigating family discord, mental health problems, and/or the challenges of adolescence; and provides case management, housing, outpatient counseling, and serves as the hub for the Ohio GSA Network. KYC additionally supports professional development and CEU training for youth-serving providers, organizations, and community professionals.

Columbus City Schools was one of the first public employers in Ohio to offer domestic partner benefits. The Board of Education was an early adopter of protections in the workplace and in the schools on sexual orientation and gender identity (added to the district's non-discrimination policy long before many other organizations). CCS staff, students, families, and allies have been part of the annual Stonewall Columbus Pride Parade in growing numbers, inclusive of students and staff from neighboring districts who felt they couldn't stand alone. Under the leadership of Dr. Talisa Dixon, the District continues to increase its focus on equity for all students and families.

Through this partnership, KYC and CCS leaders have been working on professional development training for administrators, teachers, and staff designed to create and reinforce environments of affirmation and belonging. The partners have also worked together with student leaders to

create more opportunities for school-based groups - such as Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs, or Gay-Straight Alliances) - to give LGBTQIA+ youth and allies a safe space to share, protect students from harassment, and improve school climates for all students. Longer-term, KYC and CCS leaders worked collaboratively on language for a new Equity Policy to be approved by the Board of Education.

“In Columbus City Schools, we celebrate our diversity. We educate our young people not just with the knowledge of content, but most importantly on diversity, inclusiveness, and humanity. Our students, their families, and all of our staff are fortunate to live in a forward-looking community where all are welcome. We continue to address bullying and harassment in our classrooms - no matter if they are in-person or online - so that every student has a nurturing environment in which to learn and grow. And we continue to work toward a future in which every Columbus student and family knows that their community and their city’s schools support them, are proud of them, and have a place for them exactly as they are,” said Alesia Gillison, CCS’s Chief Engagement Officer.

“This is an important next step for KYC in our continued expansion to meet the needs of our young people. Our youth need to know that there is a community that is here for them with resources and care. We’re very excited for what’s possible for our youth as we continue in partnership with Columbus City Schools,” said KYC Executive Director Erin Upchurch, MSSA, LISW-S.

“It’s important that each student we educate experience authentic engagement and genuine care from their teachers, school administrators, peers and others around them. As the largest district in the state, we can help lead the way in Ohio to ensuring that all students have a model for creating safe and equitable access to quality education and programming,” said Dr. Dionne Blue, the district’s new Chief Equity Officer.

### **About Kaleidoscope Youth Center**

Since 1994, KYC has been a leader and expert in meeting the needs of and supporting LGBTQIA+ young people in the community. KYC includes a drop in center, community education and training, advocacy and civic engagement, health and wellness, and housing opportunities.

### **About Columbus City Schools**

Columbus City Schools is Ohio’s largest school district, serving nearly 50,000 students across 110 school buildings with more than 9,000 teachers and staff.

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