

# KATHRYN OKESON

Virginia Uribe Memorial Award for Creative Leadership  
in Human Rights

An art teacher for more than 20 years, Kathryn (Kate) Okeson is the president of the Rumson-Fair Haven Regional Education Association and the co-founder and program director of Make It Better for Youth (MIB4Y): The Monmouth County Consortium for LGBTQ Youth in New Jersey.

Kate, a proud NJEA and NEA member is known as a powerful, compassionate and skilled advocate. At Rumson-Fair Haven Regional High School, Kate facilitated the founding of Spectrum, the school's Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) club and has served as its advisor for more than 15 years. She also hosts "A Day Without Art" at the school which is a visibility campaign to commemorate World AIDS Day. In addition, she and her students have been robust supporters of New Jersey's annual GSA Forum.

In coordination with MIB4Y, Kate and her students organize youth social gatherings, such as GAYLA, an annual inclusive prom for students from Monmouth County and beyond. The event was launched 13 years ago at the Two River Theater in Red Bank, New Jersey, and has since been hosted at area high schools.

Calmness, clarity, advocacy, professionalism, compassion, and a genuine feel for young peoples' needs and concerns are words to describe Kate's approach to her mission as an educator and advocate. Empathy and expertise are the hallmarks of how she assists her colleagues statewide as they endeavor to implement New Jersey's LGBTQ education and inclusion mandate—a 2019 mandate for which Kate vigorously lobbied passage in the state legislature and for which she subsequently took a lead role in developing model curricula and delivering professional development to ensure its thoughtful and intentional implementation.

Kate builds coalitions and partnerships with other advocates and is the glue that holds them together. Through her work with MIB4Y and the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), particularly through the NJEA Consortium, Kate's work has influenced how LGBTQIA+ education and inclusion is addressed in classrooms, hallways, lavatories, libraries, and countless other spaces in schools across New Jersey.

Through MIB4Y, Kate hosted summits to develop curricula to meet the LGBTQ education mandate. These summits included education professionals from kindergarten through higher education. Through her affiliation with MIB4Y, Kate organizes and presents trainings to families, schools, and students on the impact of discrimination. These presentations serve as a vehicle for discussion and thought; aid her audiences in celebrating differences; and lead to a deeper understanding of the need to advocate for inclusive education. These efforts led to MIB4Y and Garden State Equality coordinating the pilot implementation of LGBTQ inclusive curricula in 12 New Jersey school districts, beginning in 2020. Kate's central role in the pilot was emphasized in reporting by various media outlets, including NBC News.

Kate's support for students navigating all the struggles of being LGBTQIA+ youth are matched by her leadership in a wide variety of civic, educational, and legal endeavors. She currently works to ensure that the New Jersey state Department of Education's Transgender Student Guidance is codified into law.

Kathryn's work to build welcoming and inclusive school environments for all students is a model to us all.

