



Rural School- and Community-Based Programs Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth

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Key Findings

- Support for LGBTQ+ youth and young adults, including those who reside in rural areas, is critical for their health and well-being.
- This case series profiles four organizations that are school-based and/or focused on youth in their communities: two high school clubs, one university center, and one Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) organization.
- Despite challenges of community acceptance and limited resources, these programs have also received encouraging support and have seen their work improve inclusivity in their communities.

Purpose

The purpose of this case series is to highlight youth-focused and school- and community-based organizations that affirm and support LGBTQ+ individuals in their rural communities. These may serve as examples to others considering this work.

Background and Policy Context

In-school discrimination, bullying, and harassment faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) youth has been associated with many negative health outcomes, including higher rates of depression, substance use, and suicidality.¹ For LGBTQ+ youth living in rural areas, these issues may be compounded by less visibility and fewer resources specifically for LGBTQ+ residents. Prior research has found that LGBTQ+ students in rural areas report overall more hostile school climates than their suburban or urban counterparts, including biased language, harassment and violence, and anti-LGBTQ+ discriminatory school policies and practices.²

Social connection is an important determinant of health,³ and, particularly for youth, having an organized and safe space to connect with other LGBTQ+ youth can be an important component of living a healthy life. School-based clubs such as Genders and Sexualities Alliances or Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are one such resource that can be a safe and affirming space for LGBTQ+ students while also providing opportunities for students to advocate for change within their school and help foster a more inclusive school environment.^{2,4} Having a GSA has also been associated with many positive outcomes for LGBTQ+ students, including students reporting a higher sense of school belonging, being less likely to report feeling unsafe or being victimized because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and being more likely to have interventions from staff when hearing derogatory remarks.⁴ However, LGBTQ+ students in rural areas are much less likely to have a GSA at their school, with only 24% of rural students reporting having a GSA in 2021 compared with 42% of suburban and 36% of urban students.² Ru-

ral LGBTQ+ youth may also seek groups outside their school to find community, but unfortunately rural students are also less likely to report living in a community with such support.⁴

This case series highlights examples of four school- and community-based organizations supporting LGBTQ+ youth, including two high school GSAs, one university LGBTQ+ center, and one community-based organization.

Approach

We identified rural organizations focused on supporting LGBTQ+ youth and young adults, based in a school or broader community. This was done by a combination of an online environmental scan of existing programs and contacting rural organizations of whom we had existing knowledge to ask about any local youth organizations.

Primary data were collected through interviews with organizational representatives, conducted via Zoom in January through April 2022. We analyzed each case study individually to identify key themes, including challenges and opportunities related to supporting the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth and young adults in rural areas.

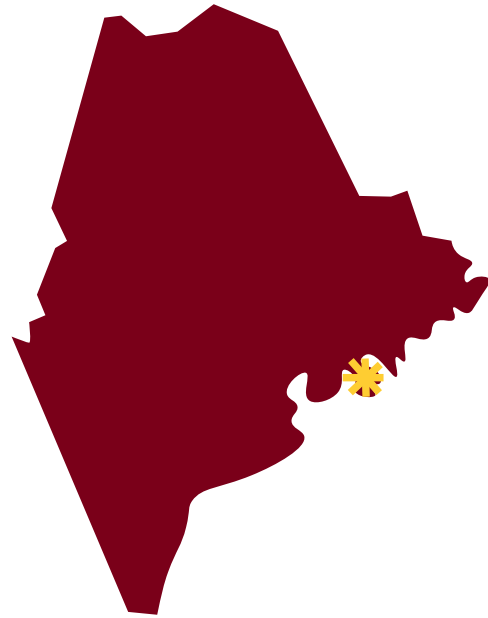
Case #1: SAGA, Mount Desert Island High School, Bar Harbor, ME

Rural Community Context

Bar Harbor is a largely resort town nestled on Mount Desert Island in Hancock County, which sits along the Midcoast of Maine.⁵ Hancock County is home to 55,088 Mainers and is ranked as a moderately healthy county in the state with comparable health outcomes but worse health behaviors including higher rates of excessive drinking and alcohol-impaired driving deaths, and access to care measures compared to state averages.⁶ Bar Harbor's largest employers are The Jackson Laboratory (a biomedical mammalian research institution and National Cancer Institute Cancer Center) and the various resorts around Mount Desert Island.⁷ Bar Harbor houses two colleges, much of Acadia National Park, and a large system of parks. Hancock County is listed as a dental care shortage area, while Bar Harbor has one critical access hospital with 25 beds.⁷

We spoke with Jocelyn Verrill, a student and active member of the Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA) at Mount Desert Island High School, who consented to share their name and responses.

Figure 1: Map of Maine showing Bar Harbor, ME



Organizational Overview

Mount Desert Island High School (MDIHS) in Bar Harbor, Maine was the first high school in the state to establish a Gay-Straight Alliance in 1997.⁸ The club, now called Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA), aims to provide a safe space for everyone at the school, including but not limited to LGBTQ+ students. The club meets twice weekly during the school's "flex" hour, which is a 40-minute block between classes where students can sign up for activities, get help with coursework, or attend club meetings. Typically, 15-20 students attend SAGA meetings, out of roughly 540 total students.

Key Features

In addition to serving as a safe space for LGBTQ+ students and allies, members of SAGA take on additional projects and activities to expand their reach. One example of a past project was getting their own display case in the school, which was used to display artwork from SAGA students and information about the club and other LGBTQ+ resources. Potential future projects include painting a mural and painting a rainbow road in order to increase visual representation of LGBTQ+ inclusion on the school grounds. The club receives funding from the school's administration to support these activities.

Challenges and Opportunities

Moving from ideas to action has been a challenge for SAGA. At the time of our interview, the group had

recently begun more intentional conversations about what the club means for them and what they want to work toward. In addition to the projects mentioned above, the club wants to make their club more widely known in the school, with one of their main goals being to “spread awareness that there are places out there you can go to get information or be open.” Verrill said there were a lot of good ideas discussed in the group, and now it was just a matter of doing them with adequate time, institutional support, and resources.

Verrill expressed immense appreciation for the safe space SAGA provides to students, saying that a lot of students come there just to decompress and have a space where they can relax. In a previous school she attended, Verrill said it was very taboo to talk about LGBTQ+ people or issues, whereas MDIHS has done a good job of creating an open and accepting space. “And that’s what I love so much about here... it’s kind of normalized and that, while it might be a little different it’s not seen as bad or weird.”



A staff member leads a SAGA club meeting in front of the club’s display case. Photo courtesy of Jocelyn Verrill.

Case #2: STARS, Lakeview High School, Cottonwood, MN

Rural Community Context

Cottonwood is a growing community in Southwest Minnesota and is named after the cottonwood trees that grow along the shores of Cottonwood Lake, for which the community is located.⁹ Cottonwood is a city in Northeast Lyon County, which is home to 25,271 Minnesotans.¹⁰ Lyon County is ranked as a moderately healthy county in Minnesota with a higher percentage of residents rating their health as “poor” or “fair”, higher average number of physically unhealthy days, and comparable health behaviors compared to state averages.¹⁰ Agriculture, oil, and insurance are the primary industries in Cottonwood and where the Minnesota Rural Health Cooperative is based.¹¹ Cottonwood’s largest employers are North Star Mutual Insurance, Lakeview Public Schools, Cottonwood Coop Oil Co, and Famers Coop Elevator Co.¹²

We spoke with Lacie Truwe, a Lakeview High School staff member and advisor for the STARS (Safe, Trust, Acceptance, Respect, and Support) Program.

Figure 2: Map of Minnesota showing Cottonwood, MN



Organizational Overview

The STARS Program began as students at Lakeview High School returned to school in-person after the COVID-19 pandemic had moved school online. Lakeview staff member Lacie Truwe was approached by a student who was hoping to start a GSA (gay-straight

alliance) at the school and needed an advisor to oversee it. Truwe realized that it takes a lot for a young person to ask the principal to start such an organization and later to ask herself to be the advisor. Additionally, Truwe knew many of the students interested in starting the alliance. She agreed to become the group's advisor. Truwe researched online how to develop a mission statement and group guidelines, and talked with the LGBTQ+ Center at Southwest Minnesota State University in nearby Marshall, MN as well as other similar organizations in Minnesota high schools.

The first meeting of the STARS Program was held in October 2021. Currently, meetings mostly focus on members getting to know each other and opening up about the things they would like to talk about. As the members grow closer, Truwe hopes the STARS Program will also work to educate peers and the community on topics most important to members.

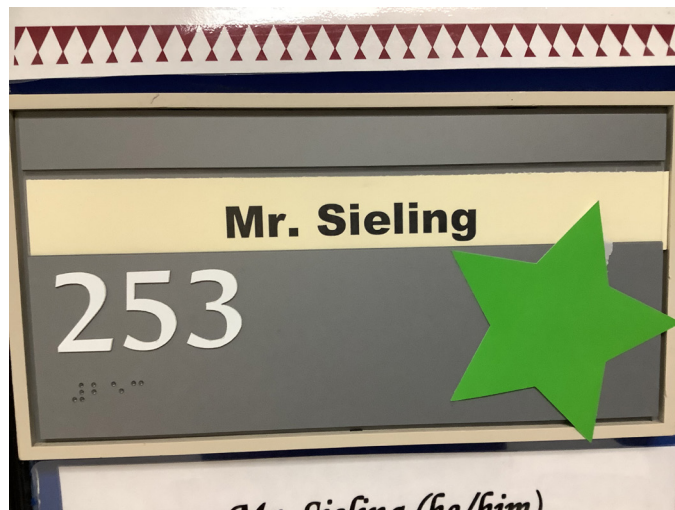
Guidelines for STARS were developed by Truwe and founding students to determine how the group was to work, what was going to be allowed, what was going to be prohibited, and how other students would join. It was decided that religion and politics are the two conversation topics that the group will stay away from. Truwe explains, however, "there are topics in politics that we allow like the recent laws in Florida, things like that, but as far as going head-to-head on politics we stay away from that."

The STARS Program is open to anyone in the LGBTQ+ community to join as well as what they call "true allies," or people that have shown ongoing support to Lakeview's students and classmates. Staff members were also identified to support the club.

When a student is interested in joining, they are asked to fill out a confidentiality form that states that the student agrees that what is discussed in the group, stays in the group. This is especially important as many of the STARS members are not out as being LGBTQ+ to their family or friends. New members also fill out an online questionnaire for what topics they are interested in discussing, their pronouns, name, what questions they are uncomfortable with, anything they would like to talk one-on-one with an adult or other student about, what topics they think should be addressed, and ideas for conversation starters.

The STARS Program does not currently receive any funding but plans to fundraise by working concession stands as well as a potential "shadow concert" in which performers would sing, dance, or perform behind a white sheet hanging in front of the stage that is back lit so the audience can only see the shadow of the per-

former. A major barrier to fundraising is that members are eager to participate but also fearful of being outed within their broader community. The "shadow concert" idea would allow students to remain anonymous but requires initial funding to come to fruition.



A green star on a Lakeview teacher's classroom indicates their support for LGBTQ+ students and staff. Photo courtesy of Lacie Truwe.

Key Features

The goal of the STARS Program "is not only to support LGBTQ+ students and staff (of which there are four who are publicly out) at the school, but to provide educational pieces for students, staff, and the community." This education of the community is an ongoing conversation that comes with its own challenges, given limited resources for and visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals within the broader community.

A major accomplishment for the STARS Program in its founding year is its recruitment and involvement from members. Since the STARS Program first started meeting, there are 14 supporting staff members, and more than 30 high school students are active in the program. This is out of a total school enrollment of approximately 670 students in grades K-12.

Lakeview High School teachers and staff supporters are given a green star sticker to put in their classroom or on their name tags outside their doors to indicate that a teacher (and their classroom) is a safe space. This is subtle a way for students to know what to look for when they need support or someone to talk to.

Another success for the STARS Program is the many one-on-one conversations with students. Many students in the program talk with their peers and recruit their classmates to join. Truwe and some of the

students have talked with school staff to engage in the program as well. Additionally, the school counselor has been helpful in guiding students who may benefit from the STARS Program to join.

Lakeview High School has four staff members who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, including the STARS Program advisor. Truwe explains that “pretty much everybody at the school knows who we are. And yeah, there’s always the one or two that are against it...but for the most part all our staff are pretty welcoming. I’ve had conversations with the [students] and I’m like, ‘okay if you’re not comfortable talking to (teachers’ names), there’s me, there’s (names)...we have a little bit more insight available for you.’ Students can stop anybody in the hall and talk to them or ask to meet them somewhere. So, I think that’s a big thing too just knowing that we have LGBTQ staff members and they’re wholeheartedly, 100% with these students as well.”

Challenges and Opportunities

A major challenge for the STARS Program is the lack of funding to do many of the bonding events (bowling, movie nights, hang outs, etc.) the club is eager to hold. Given the large size of the membership, Truwe explains that for external activities they would need a bus, which adds additional costs on top of the funding needed to do the activity. Truwe concludes that “you can have plenty of students involved but if you don’t have any money to do anything, your hands are kind of tied in terms of what you can do and how much involvement you can get.”

Another challenge for the STARS Program is limited awareness of LGBTQ+ issues within the broader community. Truwe explains of community members that “it’s not that they’re not accepting of [LGBTQ+ relationships], they’re not educated on it. And that’s what the students have said a lot, too. It’s between people not being educated, not being forward thinking as far as asking the right questions.” Additionally, Truwe recounts that “Students have come to me who have come out to their parents, I mean these are 13–16-year-old kids and their parents comment to them is, ‘well how do you know you’re gay? You don’t know that yet.’ And...I tell them it’s an education thing. If they would actually think back to when they started being attracted to another person, it’s at a pretty young age. But they don’t see that... I think if we had more education for the community, it may help a lot.” Truwe concludes that Cottonwood has a “pretty good-sized” LGBTQ

community, but it is just not visible.

A major opportunity for the STARS Program is the amount of support and passion among the students and staff that have stepped up to engage in the program. Knowing that the support is there, Truwe foresees the group carrying out its mission to educate and continue to make a safe space for LGBTQ+ students and staff to foster community. With many students and staff involved in the organization, they hope to shift the group’s focus to more actionable items.

Another opportunity the STARS Program is pursuing is a partnership with the community’s elementary school (which is within the same building as the high school). The program hopes to support elementary students on an individual basis by allowing students from the high school and elementary school to connect, feel comfortable, and know there is a community for them in Cottonwood. The Program also hopes to bring larger educational interactions with the elementary school that are developmentally appropriate for each age group. Overall, Truwe expressed hope for the future of STARS and these outreach opportunities.

Case #3: LGBTQ+ Center, Southwest Minnesota State University, Marshall, MN

Rural Community Context

Marshall is a regional center in Southwest Minnesota that serves as the county seat of Lyon County (the same county as in Case Study #2).¹³ Approximately 13,600 Minnesotans call Marshall home, and it is the site of Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU).^{13,14} Please see Case Study #2 Rural Community Context for a description of the health of this county and its comparative health ranking in the state. SMSU is one of the primary employers in Marshall. Additionally, Schwan Food Company is also headquartered in Marshall.¹⁵

We spoke with Julie Walker, a professor at SMSU and director for the Women’s Center and the LGBTQ+ Center on campus.

Organizational Overview

At the time of our interview, the LGBTQ+ Center was in its third year in their physical space, and second year of funding. Prior to having the Center, the school had had an LGBTQ+ club for many years. Walker explained that there had formally been a women’s center on campus for a long time. They wrote “Women’s

Center and LGBTQ+ Center” on the door of the space long enough that the LGBTQ+ Center became officially recognized by the school.

Figure 3: Map of Minnesota showing Marshall, MN



Key Features

The LGBTQ+ Center aims to provide a safe space and support for LGBTQ+ students. At the time of our interview, the main focus was on rebuilding the club and space as students return to campus after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Walker said the Center was trying to make sure their name was out in community-based spaces and online to broaden their visibility and try to reach folks who may be looking for spaces or resources. The Center also does outreach to local area high schools to offer additional support and resources.

The LGBTQ+ Center receives funding from the Minnesota State University system, which increased in its second year but is dependent on the school's budget and may fluctuate each year. The funds are shared across the Women's Center and LGBTQ+ Center, with additional funding for the LGBTQIA+ Club through student fees. Funds are also supplemented by community donations and support from other campus clubs if they have a budget surplus.

In an effort to collect more data on the LGBTQ+ Center's impact, Walker began tracking how many community members, students, and professors reach out for help. At the time of our interview, there had been inquiries from 18 community members, six stu-

dents, and four professors. She said questions covered a wide range of topics, but some examples were asking how to talk with students, help ensuring paperwork is filled out correctly, and asking how to access training about LGBTQ+ issues for colleagues. Walker said a key goal of the Center is to make sure that people have a place to go when they have questions or are in a tough situation, and these metrics demonstrate the crucial role the Center has played in being a resource for students, faculty, and the broader community.

In Spring 2022, the LGBTQ+ Center held its first queer prom, which was a resounding success. Queer prom was held on campus and was open to college students as well as area high school students age 16+. Over 50 people attended, and the organizers took specific steps to make the event inclusive and safe. In order to respect and protect students' anonymity, attendees could wear a specific-colored bracelet to indicate they were okay with their photo being on Facebook or other social media. If they didn't have a bracelet or the bracelet wasn't visible in the photo, people were asked to not post their picture. Walker said everyone seemed to take that seriously, and attendees also took care of each other by inviting others into different groups and making sure everyone had someone to connect with if they came by themselves. The event also had a sensory friendly room, which was helpful for a lot of students. Walker said they hope to continue holding a queer prom annually after the success seen this year.

Challenges and Opportunities

One of the biggest challenges for the LGBTQ+ Center at SMSU is pushback and resistance from the broader community. Walker noted that there is a sizable number of community members that are vocally anti-LGBTQ+, and at SMSU there are some teachers that are not supportive of LGBTQ+ students. Students have also expressed to Walker that they feel safe on campus but less so in the larger community. For example, one student who was a main organizer for the queer prom did not feel safe to be interviewed or have their picture taken for the event because they were concerned about their employer finding out.

Walker expressed particular concern about a lack of gender-affirming health care in the area and throughout the country. She said she does not know of any providers locally for hormone replacement therapy or other gender affirming care. The closest larger cities that may have more affirming care are 2-3 hours away, which is a significant cost for Marshall residents and students. Walker also said there is much more training

that is needed for sexual education in high schools and colleges, especially adding in LGBTQ+ components that are missing in most curricula.

In terms of opportunities, Walker said she is hopeful about the strong support they get from many community members, despite the opposition. For example, she put up a post to find a DJ for queer prom and had three interested people message her within 10 minutes. Similarly, she had to turn away volunteer chaperones because so many people volunteered. She also noted that there are more people in positions of power in the community that are LGBTQ+ themselves or allies, which can play a major role in increasing visibility, supporting SMSU events such as the queer prom, and broader policy change.



LGBTQ+ Center, SMSU, photo found here: <https://www.smsu.edu/campuslife/lgbtqcenter/index.html>

Case #4: East Central Minnesota PFLAG, Cambridge, MN

Rural Community Context

Cambridge is a town in east-central Minnesota located on the banks of the Rum River.¹⁶ It is home to approximately 9,300 Minnesotans and is the county seat of Isanti County (pop. 41,906).^{16,17} Cambridge boasts an array of amenities for residents and tourists alike, including many public parks and trails, a performing arts center, and a large hospital system.¹⁸ Isanti is one of the less healthy counties in the state, ranking in the lower middle quartile, with higher rates of premature deaths and worse health behaviors including higher rates of smoking and lower access to exercise opportunities compared to state averages.¹⁹ Surrounding Isanti County, the five-county central Minnesota region is home to 171,703 Minnesotans and includes Pine County

(pop. 29,302), Chisago (pop. 57,469), Kanabec (pop. 16,159), and Mille Lacs (pop. 26,867) Counties.²⁰

We spoke with Phil Schroeder and Julie Redpath, founding members of East Central Minnesota Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (ECMN PFLAG) and leaders in local LGBTQ+ support and advocacy in the five county east central region.

Figure 4: Map of Minnesota showing Cambridge, MN



Organizational Overview

ECMN PFLAG is a volunteer-run organization that exists to promote the health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ persons, their families and friends through support, education, and advocacy.²¹ ECMN PFLAG is a 501(c)(3) and branch of the national PFLAG organization.²² Their target audience includes parents, friends, advocates, and relatives of LGBTQ+ people in the five county east central region. The group formed in 2008 as a way to support LGBTQ+ youth in the community, including Schroeder's (at the time) ninth grader. Schroeder noted that the group has grown over time, with core members staying consistent, and others coming and going as was useful to them. "Right now we're hearing a lot from parents of transgender or nonbinary kids," he said. However, he reiterates that it is broader than a parents' group, "it's a place for anybody that's either LGBTQ+ or knows somebody who is and has a question, wants to go somewhere to meet like-minded people and get support." Redpath sees this as her reason for being in the group, so that "parents or others who show up know that there's support for them from the gay community, too."

Key Features

The major functions of ECMN PFLAG fall under the categories of support, education, and advocacy. For example, a decade ago, they were active in the statewide fight for marriage equality in Minnesota; a proposed constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage was defeated in November 2012, and then-Governor Dayton signed legislation legalizing same-sex marriage in May 2013.²³ More recently, educational opportunities included a presentation held this past summer at the local library. Slated to be about PFLAG broadly, it ended up as a community discussion on what it means to be nonbinary. Participants included PFLAG members, parents and children of LGBTQ+ people, interested citizens, clergy, and a trans woman.

Perhaps the most all-encompassing function of ECMN PFLAG is support. This takes a variety of forms, from holding regular meetings at Common Ground, a local LGBTQ+ affirming church, to helping sponsor the annual East Central Minnesota Pride celebration,²⁴ to the scholarship program they have for LGBTQ+ high school students in the region. Schroeder recounted the journey from zero applicants the first year of the scholarship, to the excitement when they finally received their first applicant, to having eight in a single year. He thinks this shows kids are increasingly comfortable to be fully themselves, and that the scholarship enables them to be supported, even celebrated for this. Redpath remembered a young recipient wanted to receive her scholarship on stage at that year's Pride event. "That was huge," she said, "because we found that quite a few of the young people who are applying aren't yet out to their families." That dynamic – managing discretion and recognition – is one they consistently navigate.

ECMN PFLAG is funded largely by the generosity and support of the local community. Their main source of funding used to be selling popcorn at local events, but more recently, they sell locally made holiday wreaths. In addition to these fundraising efforts, the organization collects community donations, inviting people to contribute to the scholarship program. Whether small change or a check for several hundred dollars, it all adds up.

Challenges and Opportunities

The biggest challenge ECMN PFLAG identified on an organizational level was succession planning. As the core members of the group age, they hope to pass responsibilities to the next generation of LGBTQ+ community members and allies. They also noted that, while social media has in many ways helped them expand their



Popcorn sales at local events have long been a primary source of funding for ECMN PFLAG. Photo courtesy of Phil Schroeder.

reach, the breadth and depth of information available online has changed the perceived need for PFLAGs. Schroeder mentioned that, while someone might gain answers to their initial questions through an online search, they could miss the "community of gathering around the table together" that occurs as part of the support that PFLAG offers.

More broadly, Redpath pointed out the challenge of maintaining morale amidst opposition and adversity. Schroeder added the specific attacks targeting transgender individuals and that these forces are harder to fight against in isolated areas. Redpath said that is why "it is more important than ever to keep reminding people of why we do this." They want LGBTQ+ people to know that there is, indeed, support and affirmation for them in east central Minnesota.

ECMN PFLAG members keep finding reasons to remain hopeful. This hope comes in many forms, including the young people receiving scholarships and the possibility of reaching more people with their message of education. Schroeder shared a story in a local newspaper that highlighted him as the father of a transgender daughter.²⁵ Initially reluctant to do the story, he was encouraged by fellow PFLAG members who thought this could be a good opportunity to educate and raise awareness. The reception they received after it was published was much more positive than negative. Said Schroeder, "it showed that the community is a lot smarter than the haters that are out there." People expressed appreciation for the story, and some even shared it with family members who were wrestling with their own sexual orientation or gender identity.

Conclusion

School- and community-based programs for LGBTQ+ youth in rural areas are important providers of resources and safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth to connect with one another. These programs can also help increase visibility of LGBTQ+ youth in their schools and broader communities. From visual displays such as art murals and performances, to a queer prom for high school and college students, to the quieter work of offering individual support and resources, these organizations have had a significant positive impact in their schools and communities. These case studies can serve as examples for other rural communities striving to better support and involve their LGBTQ+ youth.

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