



Texas Panhandle Schools as Sites of Opportunity and Exclusion for LGBTQ+ Youth

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• WHY THE PANHANDLE?

- Recent work has drawn attention to the relative gap in the study of LGBTQ life in the South and Midwest as well as “ordinary cities” and rural areas (Stone 2018, Robinson 2006). This study seeks to contribute to closing that gap while exploring the critical role of schools and the experience of secondary education for rural LGBTQ youth.

• WHY SCHOOLS?

- As a social institution, schools play a critical role in the socialization of young people into future citizens, whether inside or outside the classroom. Increasingly, schools have become responsible for more and more of the work previously done by families, religious and social organizations, and the state.
- One in four adults in this region lacks a high school diploma, one in three in rural areas, and only one in five have a bachelors degree. Higher educational attainment and retention predicts economic growth in the region, so losing these populations has multiple costs.

• WHY LGBTQ+?

- There are **15,000-22,000 LGBTQ+** individuals living in the Texas panhandle. This number, if it were its own city, would be the second largest city behind Amarillo.
- The Williams Institute finds a positive correlation between an area’s protection of LGBTQ residents and higher economic output; discrimination towards queer people diminished economic output at the micro level (Badgett et al, 2014).
- More striking, a Wells Fargo analysis found that average gross state product (GSP) growth rates in 2010-2019 are positively correlated with a state’s rate of business formation as well as per capita rates of patent grants, which researchers used as a proxy for innovation (Bryson & Cervi, 2023).

• DATA

- Relying on in-depth interviews with 20 individuals who graduated from small, rural high schools between 1987-2022, this study explores the educational experiences of LGBTQ+ students in the Texas panhandle, a notably religious and politically conservative part of the state despite the oft-ignored diversity of the region.
- All respondents held at least some college experience

• RESULTS

- MASKING** Respondents often masked their sexuality by relying on other high-status identities like academic achievement or athletic prowess.
- AVOIDANCE** Respondents largely employ avoidance strategies and detailed awareness of safe/dangerous groups within their respective schools, and few report openly identifying as gay while in high school.
- GENDER POLICING** Male respondents in particular noted the ways in which male gender expression was officially and unofficially policed.
- TEACHERS/PRINCIPALS AS ALLIES** Several respondents noted the significance of teachers who spoke up on behalf of LGBT students experiencing abuse.
- LEAVING** We found that respondents often planned to leave the area in hopes of finding education and careers among populations that were more accepting of them.

• CONCLUSIONS

- To avoid losing the valuable human resources of our young LGBT+ people in the panhandle, schools must both acknowledge and incorporate diversities of all kinds into their educational repertoires.