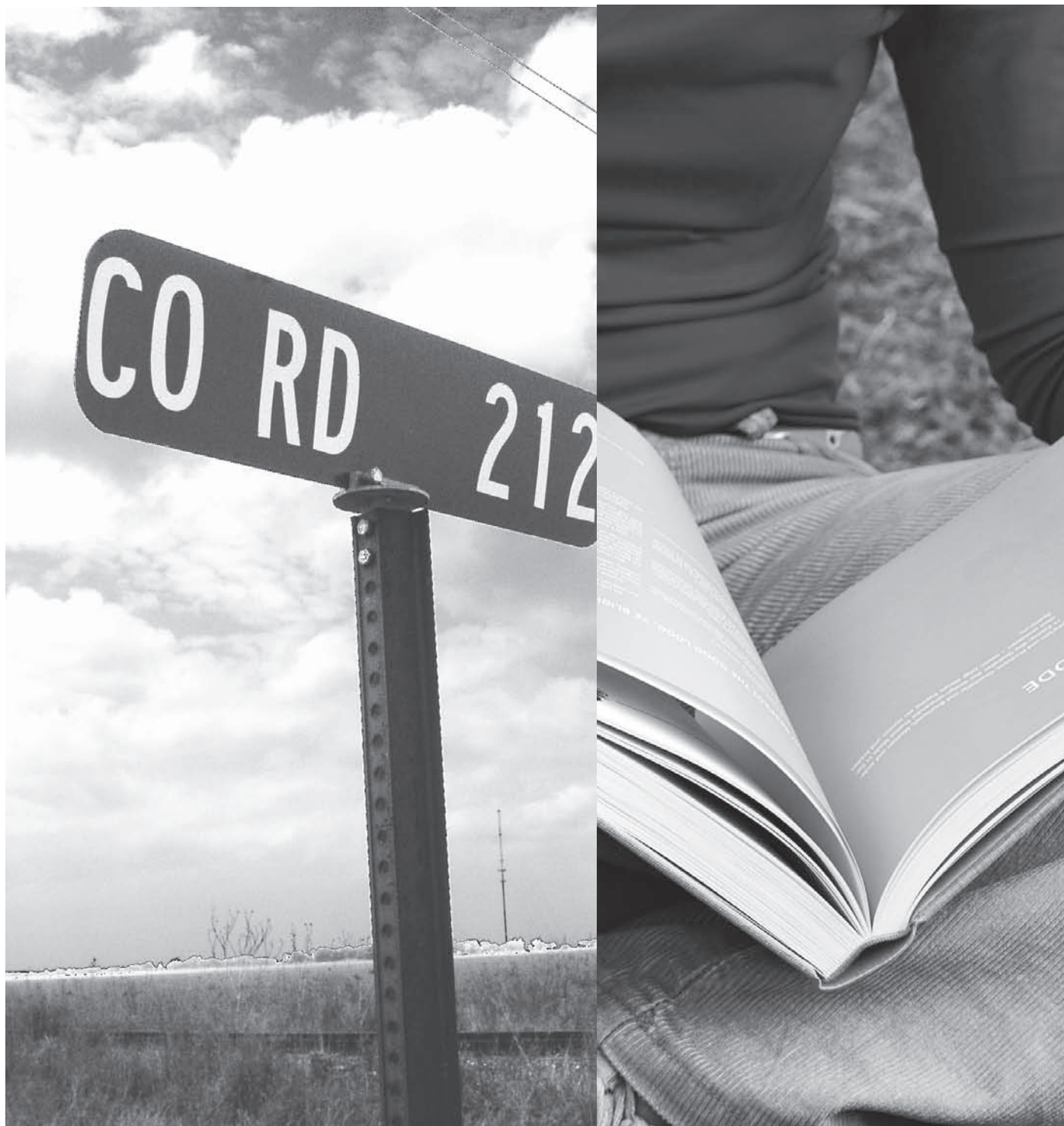


No Longer Alone

A Resource Manual for Rural Sexual Minority Youth and the Adults Who Serve Them.



Christopher J. Stapel

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About the Author

Christopher J. Stapel is an openly gay high school math teacher and advisor at the Boston Community Leadership Academy, a pilot high school of the Boston Public Schools. He holds an Ed.M. in Education Policy and Management from the Harvard Graduate School of Education where he was a Conant Fellow. His research interests include rural college access, rural sexualities, and race and class inequalities in schools. A former student of rural public schools in west-central Illinois, Chris can be reached at cstapel@post.harvard.edu.



www.ruralgayyouth.com



Table of Contents

4	INTRODUCTION Why GLTB Students? Why Rural Students? So What? Who Benefits From This Resource Manual?
7	STUDENTS You Are Not Alone What Other Students Say Multiple Minorities: Gay Students of Color
10	TEACHERS You Can Make a Difference In Their Own Words What You Can Do (Without Getting Fired) A Principal's Story
13	SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS You Might Be All They've Got How to Create a Successful Program Model Programs
17	RESOURCES Your Connection to the Community Organizations Faith-Based Organizations Books Curricula Multimedia Articles

Introduction

Sexual minority youth live in virtually every city, town and village in the nation. Nearly every school serves gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) children and every teacher guides and instructs them. While some underlying assumptions about sexuality and gender are implicit in these assertions, these statements indeed reflect the reality that thousands of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people spend their childhoods, and often adulthoods, in rural communities. The 2000 Census reveals that same-sex couples live in over 99% of United States counties. Gay and lesbian people are not alone in rural communities. This being the case, it is peculiar that the vast majority of programs for GLBT young people are in metropolitan areas. While all gay and lesbian students face tremendous challenges, rural students go noticeably underserved. The purpose of this resource manual is to assist concerned adults in creating safe environments for rural gay youth.

Why GLTB Students?

The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) reports in their most recent *National School Climate Survey* that:

- Over 80% of GLBT students are verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation.
- Over 80% of GLBT students have teachers who rarely intervene when homophobic remarks are made.
- Nearly 4 in 10 GLBT students are physically harassed because of their sexual orientation.
- Almost 2/3 of GLBT students feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and over 1/4 have missed school as a result.

Not only do most GLBT young people face threatening school environments, many lack support from their family, friends, and communities. The needs of GLBT students must be addressed.

Why Rural Students?

The same GLSEN survey reveals that, in relation to their urban and suburban peers, rural gay students are more likely to:

- Be verbally harassed in school.
- Have rumors or lies spread about them in school.
- Feel unsafe in school.
- Know of no GLBT-friendly school staff members.
- Lack access to GLBT resources.

Because of their geographic isolation, these at-risk rural students are extremely difficult to reach. The Finance Project, in *Finding Resources to Support Rural Out-of-School Time Initiatives*, identifies the absence of private partners, unique transportation issues, limited access to technology, and personnel shortages as barriers to creating effective youth programming in rural America. At present rural students lack the information, services, and connections so very critical to their well being.

GLOSSARY

An important first step in serving sexual minority youth is using sensitive language preferred by members of the gay and lesbian community. By avoiding slang, and confidently opting for the more appropriate terms defined in this glossary, adults can create safe environments for sexual minority students.

BISEXUAL: A person who is sexually attracted to both men and women.

COME OUT/COME OUT OF THE CLOSET: To publicly identify oneself as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

GENDER IDENTITY: The gender with which a person internally identifies that may or may not be one's biological gender.

GAY: A male who is sexually attracted to other men; often describes a person of any gender who is attracted to a person of the same sex.

HETEROSEXISM: The belief that heterosexuality is normative behavior and superior to other forms of sexuality.

HETEROSEXUAL/STRAIGHT: A person who is sexually attracted to the opposite gender.

HOMOPHOBIA: Fear or hatred of gays and lesbians or people perceived as being gay.

LESBIAN: A woman who is sexually attracted to other women.

QUEER: A person whose sexual identity or gender identity does not match societal norms.

TRANSGENDER/GENDER VARIANT: One whose gender identity differs from that typically associated with their physical sex.

So What?

- Gay and lesbian youth are at higher risk of suicide and depression than others.
- The 2003 National School Climate Survey reveals that GLBT students who experience harassment have lower GPAs and are less likely to have post-secondary college plans than those who have more desirable school experiences.
- Gay teens report higher levels of tobacco, alcohol, and drug use than straight teens.
- Thirty to forty percent of the adolescent homeless population identifies as gay or lesbian.
- Rural teens display more risk factors in tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drug abuse than their peers in other locales.
- Rural remoteness is a risk factor for youth suicide.

Who Benefits From This Resource Manual?

Rural students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, rural students who do not conform to dominant gender roles, and rural students who are unsure of their sexual orientation or gender identity benefit from the first “student” section of the manual.

The second “teacher” section of the resource manual is designed to educate and equip **rural teachers**, administrators, school counselors, support staff, and paraprofessionals who wish to better serve GLBT youth.

The “social worker” section of the resource manual provides guidance to **rural social service providers**, such as social workers, program directors, medical professionals, psychologists, religious leaders and youth advocates, who are designing, implementing, and managing services to rural students.

The final “resources” section is a collection of organizations with rural-specific programming and rural-specific books, curricula, multimedia, and articles. These resources all meet the needs of rural students, teachers, and social service providers.

A Note on Methodology

The material in this resource manual was informed by personal experiences, existing literature, and the mass media, as well as personal interviews, web-based interviews, and phone interviews with 75 individuals between May 1, 2005 and August 31, 2005. For specific sources, please contact the author.

Students: You Are Not Alone

It is not unusual for gay and lesbian students to feel like they are the only queer kid in town. While larger communities have visible and active gay and lesbian communities, gay and lesbian students in rural places lack gay role models and are disconnected from the larger gay community. But rural gay kids are not alone. Ten percent is a common estimate for the fraction of gay people in society as a whole. This means that there are as many as 30 gay kids in a high school of 300. Rural gay students can take comfort in knowing that there are other kids like them, although maybe not visible, in their own communities. In this section you can read advice shared by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people who grew up in rural communities.

What Other Students Say

Do your best and know that you're not the only one...don't let others drag you down.

(Female, Vermont)

At first I thought homosexuality was an anomaly of weird people in big cities with strange hair.

(Male, Kansas)

Get out. Find a peer group in the next town over until you're more comfortable with yourself, find teachers/adults you can trust and talk to.

(Female, Iowa)

I knew there was something different about me when I was chasing girls in kindergarten, right along with the boys. But I didn't come out to myself till I was in 8th grade.

(Female, Nebraska)

It has been really hard to connect with others.

(Female, Vermont)

It was very hard to live in a "hick" town, surrounded by small-town, small-minded individuals and know that something as big as what I was feeling inside was just waiting to burst out.

(Female, Nebraska)

There's nothing inherently wrong with you. It often takes time to figure out who you are and what you want. The important thing is to have a place or a person you can talk about it with, so it doesn't spin incessantly in your head.

(Male, Kansas)

Don't try to tell yourself you are someone you're not because that's what other people want you to be. It'll get better, you'll make friends that will accept and love you for who you are.

(Female, North Carolina)

I would say hang in there, because it does get better. I would say come out, and stand up for yourself, because it can't get worse than it is. I would also say to be aware that there ARE gay and lesbian people where you live. We exist in rural areas, in the South, in communities of color, in the 'heartland,' and in churches. You may have to work harder to find your people, but they are out there so don't give up.

(Female, Pennsylvania)

Being openly gay and gender non-conforming (as I am now) was not an option for me when I lived there. I knew who I was, I was just scared to death to tell anyone because of how other people who came out were treated. So I did my best to fit in—I got good grades, kept to myself but had lots of "friends"(who I unsurprisingly don't really talk to anymore), played sports, worked, and kept out of trouble, and became severely depressed because of it.

(Female, Iowa)

If it's not safe to "be yourself," don't compromise your values or how you really feel inside. It will only do more damage to you and possibly others. Read as much as you can. Learn about the gay and lesbian movement now and in the past. Talk to someone who is a mentor to you already. If you don't feel comfortable outing yourself to them, ask them how they feel about the issue of gender-nonconformity and queerness.

(Female, Nebraska)

“There’s **nothing** inherently wrong with you. It often takes **time** to figure out who **you** are and what you want.”

For more first-person narratives by rural gay youth visit:

Advocates for Youth

http://www.youthresource.com/our_lives/rural/

PFLAG Detroit

http://www.pflagdetroit.org/MSS_News8.htm

Growing up Gay in Appalachia

<http://users.adelphia.net/~palruth/GayinAppalachia.htm>

“There **are** gay and lesbian people where you live. We exist in **rural** areas, in the South, in communities of color, in the ‘heartland’, and in **churches**. You may have to work harder to find your people, but they are **out** there so don’t give up.”

Multiple Minorities: Gay Students of Color

As a whole, rural communities, while often racially homogeneous, are tremendously diverse. As evidenced by small Chicano border towns, rural Plains Indian reservations, and predominantly black villages of the Deep South, people of color are an important segment of rural America. GLBT students of color face particular challenges in their schools and communities. Nearly half of GLBT students of color face harassment at school based on both their sexual orientation and racial background. As these students navigate their multiple marginalized identities, rural programs must be inclusive ones. In recognizing the critical intersection of race and sexual orientation these programs should consider the following questions: Does our organization reach out to students of color? Do students of color feel comfortable here? Do our materials include images of people of color? Do the topics we address appeal to multiple racial groups?

Teachers:

You Can Make a Difference

Schools play a vital role in the well-being of GLBT students. While gay children may not be free from homophobia in their homes, places of worship, or neighborhoods, schools have the power to create safe spaces for sexual minority youth. Unfortunately, gay students routinely report numerous forms of harassment and homophobia from the school personnel who are charged with their safekeeping. The presence of a single welcoming teacher can make a huge difference in the life of a GLBT young person. When rural gay and lesbian students were asked how a teacher might best meet their needs they responded with the following statements.

In Their Own Words

No teachers ever interfered with me being harassed or teased. One teacher in the whole school had a rule about not saying ‘faggot’ in his classroom—otherwise homophobic slurs flew around everywhere and the only time I ever saw teachers interfere was in the case of vandalism (saying faggot is fine, but carving it on the desk is not).

(Female, Pennsylvania)

School was horrifying everyday. I was not only scared that other students would harass me, but also terrified that teachers would make homophobic remarks or ask me about my interest in girls. I hated it when teachers would just assume that I was interested in women. As a result, I was depressed through much of high school and did not come out of the closet until college.

(Male, Illinois)

It was horrible. I didn’t have anyone to turn to. I hated school my entire life. Even before I knew I was gay, I knew I was different and others picked up on that.

(Female, Nebraska)

I’d really like my community to be more aware of homosexuality because it’s a lot more common around here than most realize. I wish that my teachers would have used gender-neutral language and made GLBT-friendly literature available to students.

(Male, Texas)

Address the issue in a positive way. Don’t ignore it, and don’t put up with students who talk negatively about it.

(Female, North Carolina)

Overall, I would describe my experience as pretty awful. I spent most of adolescence stressed out, worried, afraid of my peers, angry with my teachers, and ashamed of my family. My home life was good, and I had good friends, I was a smart kid and involved in a lot of activities – but it just was not enough to make up for the verbal and physical threats and violence I experienced on a daily basis.

(Female, Pennsylvania)

I know just how much it stunk being there and feeling like I couldn’t be who I was, and no one should have to go through that.

(Female, Iowa)

The amazing thing about rural communities is how tight-knit they are. It is really different to be ostracized in a rural community as opposed to in a city, because in a rural community the community is kind of all there is – and if you get kicked out of it for whatever reason, it can just feel like you are entirely alone in the world.

(Female, Pennsylvania)

“ No **one** should have to go through that. ”

What You Can Do (Without Getting Fired)

Adapted from the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network

1. Use Gender-Neutral Language
2. Don't Assume Heterosexuality
3. Make GLBT-Friendly Literature Available
4. Discuss Current Events that Involve GLBT People
5. Familiarize Yourself with Resources for GLBT Youth in Your Area

A Principal's Story Rural principals are community leaders. The prominence of rural school leaders in the greater community creates additional challenges in their support of GLBT young people. Many school leaders fear that the endorsement of a lesbian couple attending prom, a gay-friendly health education curriculum, or an inclusive, non-discriminatory policy might lead to their termination or, at the very least, a huge headache. Nonetheless, rural principals are not excused from serving the needs of gay young people. One committed Iowa principal discovered this to be the case when a popular male athlete chose to come out of the closet under his watch. He shares his story at the School Administrators of Iowa website at

<http://www.sai-iowa.org/adminGLBTResearch>

“ It was **horrible**. I didn't have anyone to turn to. I hated school my **entire** life. Even before I knew I was gay, I knew I was **different** and others picked up on that. ”

Social Service Providers: You Might Be All They've Got

Rural social service providers connect some

of the nation's most underserved residents to life-changing services. Providers who wish to serve the needs of GLBT people face structural barriers in the areas of transportation, personnel, and local financing. Additionally, they face homophobic attitudes often perpetuated by rural institutions. The experiences of dozens of other rural advocates have informed the content of this section.

How to Create a Successful Program

Use Technology...But Not Too Much

The internet is a powerful tool in reaching isolated young people. Email, chat rooms, list-serves, and other web-based devices can connect rural gay youth to one another and aid in the distribution of GLBT-friendly resources. While the internet is perhaps the only avenue through which rural young people can access such information, a great “digital divide” exists between metropolitan and non-metropolitan internet access. Many rural communities are not reached by high-speed internet cable and many rural young people do not have home access to the internet. Additionally, the public facilities that rural students use to access the internet (schools, libraries, etc) often have homophobic policies in place that censor gay-friendly websites.

Connect Professional Service Providers

Local social service providers are professionals with the skills needed to effectively meet the needs of sexual minority youth. Social workers, counselors, and medical professionals in rural communities tend to be generalists. To best serve the needs of the gay and lesbian community, they must engage in targeted professional development. Unfortunately, the geographic isolation of rural service providers creates a barrier to access these continuing education opportunities. To remedy this problem rural service professionals must form local networks and act as peer educators to one another.

Address Transportation Issues

Public transportation is virtually non-existent throughout rural America. A successful program must provide access to transportation for its clients. To this end, some programs provide travel stipends, carpools, charter buses, and travel buddies. Of course, many mitigating factors influence the appropriateness of each strategy. Nonetheless, a successful program for rural gay youth cannot ignore transportation limitations.

Make Literature Available

Because not all rural students have access to the internet, they must access information in alternative ways. Literature must be made available to gay young people in ways that it can be accessed anonymously and discretely.

Collect Data to Evaluate Programs

Very little data exists on the needs of rural gay young people. In turn, very little knowledge exists to inform programming for this population. In order to best carry out this work, existing programs must document their practices and collect valid and reliable data that not only inform future practice, but also justify effective public policies and targeted funding to rural gay youth.

Form Local Alliances

Rural people value their independence. Social services, if they exist, often go underutilized by rural residents who view such forms of assistance as a sign of weakness. Instead, rural people rely on informal, local networks of social support. Additionally, rural residents value local autonomy. Their communities tend to be close-knit and outsiders are not always warmly received. This appears to be especially true of large, national GLBT advocacy groups who are seen as combative and hostile by rural residents. For programming for GLBT youth to be effective in rural communities it must be locally-owned. The leadership should be “home-grown” and include at least one local straight ally who will likely be perceived by residents as non-threatening. More often than not, when these conditions are met rural programs are received positively by their communities. Do not assume hostility when working to form community alliances, but do be prepared to face objectors.

Partner with Community Colleges

Rural community colleges tie together disjoint communities across rural America. The students at rural community colleges collectively have contacts across entire regions. Gay/Straight Alliances at rural community colleges often draw younger students from local high schools as word-of-mouth proves to be entirely effective in spreading the word of their existence.

Maintain Confidentiality and Anonymity

The coming out process for gay students must be self-paced. Students who access services must not be identified until they choose to be. Because rural communities are small and tightly connected, closeted gay students fear that accessing local services will result in their sexual orientation being involuntarily disclosed to friends and family. Rural programs must work to alleviate these fears.

Be Visible

Straight allies are invaluable to the GLBT community. The presence of a visible, safe, GLBT-friendly adult can transform the life of a rural gay young person.

An International Perspective:

[Outlink Network](http://outlink.trump.net.au/index.htm)

<http://outlink.trump.net.au/index.htm>

Coalition for Education on Sexual Orientation (CESO)

Established in 1998, this 43-member coalition is a network of Illinois schools, social service organizations, health care providers, and municipal governments that works to protect students perceived as GLBT from verbal and physical harassment. In targeting rural, “downstate” communities, CESO has worked hard to network member organizations. By first identifying existing programs for GLBT youth in rural Illinois, the Coalition successfully initiated a statewide Youth Leadership Summit. The gathering not only brought students from otherwise isolated communities together for a healthy social experience, but also allowed GLBT advocates to disseminate information to rural students about community organizing, legal protections, health and wellness, and Gay/Straight Alliances. The end result is a more efficient network of rural Illinois GLBT youth and better equipped young people and advocates in local communities who will further advance CESO’s objective of training educators and social service providers.

Model Program

Youth Guardian Services (YGS)

Technology is a tremendous tool in serving sexual minority youth in rural areas. YGS capitalizes on this growing communication medium by supervising email YOUTH lists that connect sexual minority youth from throughout the world. This entirely internet-based organization (<http://www.youth-guard.org/>) not only facilitates the fostering of relationships between young people, but also works to put them in contact with social service and crisis response organizations in their own communities. The feedback YGS has received indicates that it serves large numbers of rural young people and is one of very few resources those students have to connect with other GLBT young people from similar communities. YGS is entirely staffed by young people (ages 13-25) and serve the youth in their corresponding age brackets. The YOUTH lists are often forums for young people to share their stories of activism and organizing so that youth are mobilized in their home locales. In addition to the lists, YGS maintains an information line and sponsors youth leadership exercises. The importance of YGS to rural kids is invaluable, as evidenced by one young girl from rural Texas who says "I live in rural America and really the only thing that I can honestly be free about being lesbian in is the list."

Model Program

Resources:

Your Connection to the Community

Each one of these resources assists rural students, teachers, and social service providers to address the unique challenges they face. All of the organizations have a history of serving rural youth. The inclusion of faith-based organizations is an acknowledgement of the importance of religious communities in rural America. The books, multimedia, articles, and curricula all include rural-specific material.

Organizations

Coalition for Education on Sexual Orientation (CESO) (Illinois)	(312) 368-9070 x12 http://www.mhai.org/programs/glb.htm
Counseling and Health Center (Iowa)	(319) 337-6998
District 202 (Minnesota)	(612) 871-5559 www.dist202.org
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth Support Project (Massachusetts)	(508) 583-2250 http://www.hcsm.org/glys.htm
Gay RALLY (South Dakota)	(605) 343-4872
GLBT Youth in Iowa Schools Task Force (Iowa)	(515) 243-1221 http://www.iowasafeschools.org/
Gill Foundation (Colorado)	(888) 530-4455 www.gillfoundation.org
GSA Network (National)	www.gsanetwork.org
Indiana Youth Group	(317) 541-8726 www.indianayouthgroup.org
La Crosse Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Assoc., Inc. (Wisconsin)	www.acceptgayhmong.org
National Youth Advocacy Coalition	(800) 541-6922 http://nyacyouth.org
Open Door Youth Center (Illinois)	(309) 823-0555 www.opendooryouthcenter.org
Outright (Maine/New Hampshire/Vermont)	www.outright.org
OutZone	http://www.outzoneonline.org/
prideNet: Iowa Pride Network (Iowa)	(515) 243-1110 www.iowapridenet.org
Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG) (National)	(202) 467-8194 www.pflag.org
The Phoenix Center (Illinois)	(217) 528-5253
Quad Citizens Affirming Diversity (Illinois/Iowa)	www.qcad.net
Rainbow Café	http://www.cuuf.net/rainbowcafe/
Rainbow Youth Outreach (Illinois)	(309) 673-7954 www.rainbowyouth.org
Safe Schools Coalition (Washington)	(206) 632-0662 x49 http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/safe.html
Safe Schools NC (North Carolina)	(919) 619-2167 www.safeschoolsnc.com
Tri-State Alliance (Illinois/Indiana/Kentucky)	www.tsagl.org/
Young Gay America (National)	http://www.younggayamerica.com/index1.shtml

Youth Alliance for Diversity (Idaho)

(208) 336-5096
<http://www.yffn.org/yad.htm>

Youth and Shelter Services, Inc. (Iowa)

(515) 233-3141
<http://www.yss.ames.ia.us/>

Youth Guardian Services

(877) 270-5152
<http://www.youth-guard.org>

Faith-Based Organizations

Baptist

The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists
www.wabaptists.org

Catholic

Dignity/USA
www.dignityusa.org

Disciples of Christ

Gay, Lesbian and Affirming Disciples Alliance, Inc.
www.gladalliance.org

Episcopal

Integrity
www.integrityusa.org

Evangelical Lutheran Church of America

Lutherans Concerned North America
www.lcna.org

Islam

Al Fatiha Foundation
www.al-fatiha.net

Judaism

The World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Jews: Keshet Ga'avah
<http://glbtjews.org>

Mennonite

Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests
www.bmclgbt.org

Mormon

Affirmation
www.affirmation.org

Pentecostal

Fellowship of Reconciling Pentecostals International
www.rpifellowship.com/

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Covenant Network of Presbyterians
www.covenantnetwork.org

Presbyterian Church (USA)

More Light Presbyterians
www.mlp.org

Quaker

Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns
<http://flgbtqc.quaker.org>

Seventh-Day Adventist

Seventh-Day Adventist Kinship International
www.sdakinship.org

United Church of Christ

The UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns
www.uccoalition.org

United Methodist Church

Reconciling Ministries Network
www.rmnetwork.org

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Curricula

“Not Round Here, Affirming Diversity, Challenging Homophobia: Rural Service Providers Training Manual”

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/pdf/human_rights/Not_round_here.pdf

Multimedia

Big Eden (Video)

(800) 438-9653
www.bigeden.com

Coming Out in Rural America (Video)

(800) 228-4630
http://gpn.unl.edu/search.asp?catalog_name=GPN&subject=&gradelevel=&keyword=rural+america

Farm Family: In Search of Gay Life in Rural America (Video)

<http://www.tjoemurray.com/projectspage.html>

Gay in the Heartland (Radio)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4584125>

Jim in Bold (Video)

<http://www.jiminbold.com/index.cfm>

Nothing Like Dreaming (Video)

<http://www.nothinglikedreaming.com/>

Southern Comfort (Video)

<http://www.nextwavefilms.com/southern/index.html>

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