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Title: Community organization in opposition to anti-LGBTQ policies implemented by public school administrations and school boards in Bucks County, Pennsylvania

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Abstract: This Capstone project focuses on how community members in Bucks County, PA have responded to anti-LGBTQ policies which have been implemented by their public school administrations and school boards since 2021. By discussing the various anti-LGBTQ policies that have been implemented in schools specifically in Bucks County through analyzing local news articles, and by engaging with prior literature looking at anti-LGBTQ policies targeting schools and youth in the United States, the impacts of anti-LGBTQ policies on queer youth, and the history of community organizing around the rights of LGBTQ youth, I attempt to illustrate how Bucks County community members have come together to fight against these unjust and harmful policies. I engage with the literature in order to provide historical context for understanding present instances of anti-LGBTQ policy and to provide insight into how methods for mobilizing for the rights of queer people can be implemented in communities like Bucks County today, to combat the seriously detrimental effects of anti-LGBTQ policies on queer youth. Through a discourse analysis of local news articles from Bucks County, PA and interviews with five community members from the county, I find that Bucks County community members are working together in many different ways to mobilize individuals to vote and oust the current school board officials who are passing the anti-LGBTQ policies.

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Introduction

LGBTQ-inclusive education is a highly polarizing issue in the United States (Flores, 2020). In the years 2022-2023, state and local officials across the country passed legislation to restrict conversations and educational information about LGBTQ topics in schools. For example, Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis, passed the "Don't Say Gay" bill (formally labeled the "Parental Rights in Education" bill) in March of 2022, which forbids teachers from providing instruction relating to gender identity and sexual orientation to Kindergarten through 3rd grade students in public schools (Young, 2022). Several other states and counties have since followed suit. In Alabama, lawmakers passed bills restricting the rights of transgender students in schools (Branigin, 2022), and since 2022, LGBTQ-inclusive education has been threatened in public schools all over the country. In response to anti-LGBTQ legislation being passed in certain states and counties, lawmakers opposing such legislation have filed lawsuits to protect educational freedom and the educational rights of queer students through LGBTQ-inclusive education (Scribner, 2022). Although it is mostly red states/counties that have passed anti-LGBTQ school policies, there are exceptions. In my project, I am focusing on Bucks County, PA, as Pennsylvania is a swing state and Bucks County is a swing county, which makes my case study particularly interesting to analyze as such policies are especially polarizing here, and organization in opposition to these policies is greatly pronounced.

For my project, I focus on Bucks County, Pennsylvania, as a case study to understand how individuals (educators, parents, students, and community leaders) have come together to organize against anti-LGBTQ school policies that have already passed. In order to answer this question, I first discuss the history of anti-LGBTQ policies targeting schools and youth in the United States and their associated harmful effects on queer students, and the history of

community organizing around the rights of youth. My aim in doing this is in order to provide context as to how we can understand present instances of anti-LGBTQ policies as they relate to past anti-LGBTQ movements, and how methods which certain communities have used to organize for the rights of young people can be implemented today to prevent harm to LGBTQ youth. I then interrogate local news articles from Bucks County concerning local protests that have occurred in response to anti-LGBTQ school policies, and I also interview several community members in order to understand how individuals there are mobilizing in opposition to current anti-LGBTQ legislation. As someone who is a part of the LGBTQ community, I have experienced many instances of anti-LGBTQ discrimination in school myself and have conducted extensive research on anti-LGBTQ legislation, and so I know just how dangerous and highly damaging such policies are for young LGBTQ students who will not have access to the information, resources, or representative figures they need to help them in their journey of discovering their own identities. LGBTQ youth are already at a much higher risk of experiencing suicidal ideation and mental health issues (around 5-8 times more likely to experience suicidal ideation than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts). Without access to information or resources to help them discover their own identities, loneliness and feelings of isolation could worsen this mental health crisis among LGBTQ youth (Russon et al., 2021). Not only is anti-LGBTQ legislation detrimental to students, but also to teachers, and other members of the community, who are feeling targeted on the basis of their own LGBTQ identities and support of such identities. Many teachers are anxious about doing their jobs in providing an equitable and inclusive education to students due to fear of retaliation from school officials and parents of students (Block, 2022). These severely harmful acts of legislation which have passed in Bucks County might also be representative of a larger and more sinister anti-LGBTQ movement in the

United States. Having interviewed five adult individuals to try to understand how Bucks County community members are mobilizing in opposition to local anti-LGBTQ legislation, and having found that they are focusing their efforts on mobilizing individuals to vote and oust school board members, we can use Bucks County as a model for how to counter this increasingly threatening anti-LGBTQ movement at the national level.

Research Question and Limitations

Since 2021, public school administrations and school boards in Bucks County, PA have introduced two formal anti-LGBTQ policies. My research asks how educators, parents, students, and other members of Bucks County have come together and mobilized in opposition to anti-LGBTQ school policies. Given the small sample size of my research, I do not attempt to generalize the findings from my interviews to all communities in the entire country and I do not provide a critique of the methods people are using to mobilize against anti-LGBTQ legislation. I do, however, discuss mobilizing methods that people use to provide an answer to how we can use the historical context to inform us of ways communities can mobilize against anti-LGBTQ legislation going forward. My project's scope focuses on anti-LGBTQ legislation relating to education in schools, and does not include a full review of how anti-LGBTQ laws in general are currently being implemented across the country.

Literature Review

My capstone is situated at the intersection of scholarship researching anti-LGBTQ policies targeting schools and youth in the United States, the community organizing around the rights of LGBTQ youth in America, and the impacts of anti-LGBTQ school policies on queer youth. By creating an interdisciplinary conversation between these fields of knowledge, my capstone

project is able to reveal how the present context of anti-LGBTQ policies being passed in public schools, such as those in Bucks County, is informed by past anti-LGBTQ movements and mobilization efforts from activists.

Anti-LGBTQ laws targeting schools and youth

At least fifteen states since 2021 have considered passing or have passed bills that target LGBTQ+ youth in schools. These laws affect ways of discussing, addressing, and interacting with LGBTQ students. Examples of such legislation include the prohibition of instruction and curriculum on sexual orientation or gender identity for students in kindergarten through 8th grade, prohibitions against school employees providing gender-affirming care, requirements to include parents in club participation decisions (especially LGBTQ+ clubs), requirements for parental consent regarding the usage of pronouns, the banning of books containing LGBTQ+ themes from schools and their libraries, and protections for teachers who refuse to use the preferred pronouns for their students (Duarte et al., 2022).

This legislation is not new. Prior research shows that anti-LGBTQ laws have been around for a very long time. When Europeans first invaded America in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they generally did not recognize or respect Native American understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, or law (Marc, 2020). As a result of European colonization of the United States, anti-LGBTQ laws constituted an important part of American legislation for many years. One such area where anti-LGBTQ laws have had a significant impact is on youth in schools. For example, in 1951-1952, California not only enforced a ban on immoral conduct for teachers (which included same-sex behavior), but also passed a law that required school boards be notified when teachers were arrested for sex crimes (at this time, same sex behavior was considered to be a sex crime). Other laws authorized the state board of education to decertify

teachers who had been convicted of sex crimes. In 1958, Florida began a six-year campaign of repression against students and teachers at schools of all grade levels. Furthermore, in 1959, Florida authorized teaching certificates to be revoked based on moral misconduct, often which included same-sex behavior. Although such laws did not specifically mention homosexuality, they were typically weaponized against the LGBTQ community. Scholars have shown that American universities also harbor an extensive history of discrimination and anti-LGBTQ policies. In 1920, Harvard University initiated investigations into gay men and their associations at Harvard which resulted in court proceedings (Campagna, 2019). Files from this time reveal that several weeks of interrogations took place at the school after a gay student had committed suicide. These interrogations were designed to expose the gay community at the school. University administrators targeted students who they noticed were entering specific dorm rooms, going to bars and restaurants known to be gay meeting places, and those who did not strictly adhere to clothing and behavior-related gender norms. As a result of interrogations by the administration, seven undergraduates were expelled, several employees were terminated from their positions at the school, and a second gay student committed suicide.

One of the most severe anti-LGBTQ laws in America's history, passed in 1988, that targeted LGBTQ youth in schools could be found in South Carolina, where teachers were only able to discuss LGBTQ people if they were portrayed as unhappy, immoral, or prone to disease (Knox, 2020). Around the same time, at least seven other states, along with multiple localities, school districts, and state governments, adopted "no-promo-homo" policies which were a product of narratives from conservative advocates who often argued in favor of conversion therapy, and were a result of fear over the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Equality, 2022).

Despite the United States Supreme Court's ruling in favor of same-sex marriage laws in 2015, many anti-LGBTQ laws remain in the country today and new ones have been proposed (Rosky, 2017). Some of these laws require teachers to teach students that homosexual behavior is a criminal offense, or that homosexuality is a lifestyle which is not acceptable to the general public, or even that homosexual activity is primarily responsible for contact with the HIV virus. Other laws prohibit teachers from promoting homosexuality (encouraging students to embrace their homosexuality) or suggesting that certain methods of homosexual sex are safe methods of homosexual sex. Some laws require teachers to teach respect and honor for monogamous heterosexual marriage or to emphasize the benefits of monogamous heterosexual marriage. Almost all of these laws, however, require teachers to emphasize the importance of abstinence from sexual activity before marriage and to exclude same-sex relationships from the definition of marriage. In recent literature, scholars and advocates have often referred to anti-LGBTQ curriculum laws as "no promo homo" or "don't say gay" laws. Most of these laws were passed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the United States experienced hysteria about the HIV epidemic and the LGBT movement's early advances. However, many of them were passed more recently amidst local and national struggles over same-sex marriage. At least 129 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced across 29 states during 2017, according to a report published by Human Rights Campaign, a LGBTQ advocacy group (Allen, 2020). Twelve of these bills, which concerned a number of different issues ranging from legislation that bars LGBTQ identifying people from adopting children, to religious freedom legislation, became law, as has been reported by HRC. Moreover, ten different states have attempted to target transgender people with discriminatory legislation that would effectively ban them from having access to public facilities, such as restrooms and changing rooms. One noteworthy piece of discriminatory legislation restricting

transgender people's access to public facilities is Arkansas HB1156, a bill signed by Governor Huckabee Sanders in March 2023, which prohibits transgender students from using restrooms or sleeping quarters consistent with their gender identity (Project, 2023).

The 2011 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescents found that LGBTQ youth in particular are more likely to experience strict disciplinary treatment by school administrators than their heterosexual counterparts (Himmelstein & Brückner, 2011). When looking at six different outcome measures: school expulsion, juvenile arrest, juvenile conviction, police stops, adult arrest, and adult conviction, it has been found that LGBTQ youth suffer disproportionately in criminal justice and school sanctions than their heterosexual counterparts. Although many of the laws which prosecute sexual conduct between same-sex individuals have been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, there is still a substantial connection between these former state laws and the state's public education legislation (Lugg & Adelman, 2015). For instance, the state of Texas relies on the now unconstitutional law prohibiting homosexual conduct to reinforce anti-LGBTQ sex education laws today, despite it being found unconstitutional. As a result, LGBTQ students are still often told that who they are and what they do is illegitimate. As another example, Arizona prohibits educators from suggesting that some methods of sex are safe methods of homosexual sex to the extent that if a male student asks if there is a safe method by which he can have sex with another male, the school is prohibited from providing him with the information he needs (McNeill, 2013). Although bills have been proposed to repeal these policies, no such bill has passed, and many of these anti-LGBTQ sex education policies remain in schools today.

Scholars have shown that anti-LGBTQ curriculum laws have historically been implemented in one of four main ways in the state legislature (Crowell, 2019). One way in which

anti-LGBTQ laws in sex education have been implemented is as “don’t say gay” laws. Examples of these can be found in South Carolina and Louisiana, where discussions of any alternative sexual lifestyles from heterosexual relationships are prohibited and any depiction of homosexual activity in sex education courses is banned (Cukor, 2020). Another type of anti-LGBTQ curriculum law in sex education is the “no-promo-homo” policy, whereby schools are prohibited from promoting homosexuality as an alternative sexual lifestyle (McGovern, 2012). As of now, Arizona is the only state which specifically prevents sex education courses from promoting homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle. Other anti-LGBTQ curriculum laws are more subtle in the way that they simply promote heterosexual relationships in sex education (Elia & Eliason, 2010). For example, the state of Florida emphasizes safe sex only in heterosexual marriages. The final way in which anti-LGBTQ curriculum laws have been implemented, is through the sex education policy of “abstinence until marriage”, which, prior to the 2015 Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage, was designed to suggest that LGBTQ students were not able to live an acceptable sexual lifestyle and were not welcome to information regarding safe sex (DeBlaere & Brewster, 2013).

Through the many ways in which anti-LGBTQ laws have been long established in various state education systems, it is important to understand how these connect to present-day instances of anti-LGBTQ school policies and the detrimental effects of such policies on LGBTQ students and youth. All of this must be addressed in order to protect the wellbeing of LGBTQ youth by focusing on embracing inclusive education in schools going forward.

Impact of anti-LGBTQ legislation on queer students

Given how widespread anti-LGBTQ legislation is across the United States, especially in the education system, it is important to understand the effects that such legislation has on the

experience of LGBTQ youth in schools. In the state of Utah, for example, the Utah Code contains very little guidance or regulation concerning LGBTQ-related topics in primary schools (Rubin & Tew, 2022). However, the Utah Code includes a broad ban on the discussion and expression of religious, personal, and political beliefs by teachers and staff. The terms "political," "religious," and "personal" are left mostly undefined and so legislation regarding LGBTQ topics in schools varies depending on the region, with school districts such as the Davis School District banning all politically-oriented flags, which includes pride flags. In one study focusing on the queer experience in Utah schools, researchers analyzed data from the 2019 National School Climate Study. They found that the majority of LGBTQ students in Utah schools hear anti-LGBTQ comments on a regular basis. Not to mention, most of them have also experienced victimization and discrimination at school, including being unable to use the restroom of their choice, being punished for public displays of affection when non-LGBTQ students would not be punished, and being prevented from using their preferred pronouns or names. Furthermore, only 8% of LGBTQ students reported that they attended a school with comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies that included specific protections for LGBTQ students, and only 5% reported a policy supporting transgender and nonbinary students. As a result, data from the 2019 Student Health and Risk Prevention (SHARP) survey showed that LGBTQ youth in Utah are three times more likely to experience suicidal ideation than their heterosexual peers. Utah consistently ranks in the top 10 states for suicide rates and suicide has been identified as the state's leading cause of death. Not to mention, there are several negative educational and health outcomes for LGBTQ students in Utah. Many queer students report skipping school due to feeling unsafe, and many engage in harmful antisocial behaviors and substance abuse.

Unfortunately, in instances where LGBTQ students experience victimization and harassment in schools, teachers and staff often do not respond to such instances and fail to take action. In one study, the researchers looked at data concerning Latinx LGBTQ students' experiences in schools (Zongrone et al., 2020). These students had often indicated that they did not tell school staff about their experiences with harassment or assault relating to their gender identity/queerness. When asked the reason for this, 63.5% of these students reported beliefs that staff would not do anything about it. When those who did report such instances of harassment and bullying to school staff were asked how staff responded, 46.1% said that they told the student to ignore it, 39.7% claimed that they talked to the perpetrator or told the perpetrator to stop, and 37.2% reported that they took no action. When several different outcomes of the Latinx students were measured, it was found that they experienced the poorest levels of psychological well-being and poor educational outcomes compared to their White non-queer counterparts. According to the 2013 National School Climate Survey, in which nearly 8000 13–21-year-old LGBTQ students, of which 1822 identified as transgender, were surveyed in order to understand their experiences of school victimization, 37.8% felt unsafe, 55.2% were verbally harassed, 11.4% were physically assaulted, and 22.7% were physically harassed due to their gender expression (Cicero & Wesp, 2017). Often such bullying and harassment occur due to the fact that many schools' policies do not include protections based on gender identity and expression. As a result of these experiences and lack of protections for queer students, transgender students experience disrupted or delayed education and career attainment and development, and are more likely to abuse drugs.

Some school policies are specifically designed to restrict the expression of LGBTQ identities in school. For example, in one study looking at LGBTQ expression in school,

researchers interviewed LGBTQ students in order to become informed about anti-LGBTQ school policies (Kosciw et al., 2020). They found that 28% of LGBTQ students reported that they had been disciplined for public affection, such as kissing or holding hands, that was not similarly disciplined among non-LGBTQ students. Furthermore, 16.6% of the students reported that they had been prevented from including LGBTQ-related topics in their class assignments and projects, or discussing LGBTQ topics in class. Around one in ten students suggested that their schools had prevented them from wearing clothes or items which supported various LGBTQ issues, and 7.6% reported that they had been prevented from attending school dances with someone of the same gender. Not to mention, 3% of students claimed to have been disciplined simply for identifying as LGBTQ. In this way, many schools have anti-LGBTQ policies in place in order to limit any expression of queer identity in the school environment. As a result of such policies, the research conveys that queer students often reported dropping out of school or avoiding other types of formal education environments. They also reported having lower educational aspirations, lower levels of self-esteem, and higher levels of depression than students who did not experience such discriminatory practices.

Not only is it important to consider how anti-LGBTQ school policies can negatively impact queer students, but also how pro-LGBTQ policies in schools can mitigate these effects. Often it is the case that pro-LGBTQ policies in schools have a trickle-down effect, whereby less bullying and harassment of queer students occurs by peers when LGBTQ protections are put in place at the institutional level (Wernick et al., 2017). For example, by effectively enforcing restroom-related policies regarding transgender rights, schools can help to lessen the violence or microaggressions that transgender students face when using the restroom. Therefore, by not having pro-LGBTQ policies in place in schools, queer students are more likely to face bullying

and harassment than their non-LGBTQ peers, and hence they are more likely to experience negative life outcomes, including mental health-related and educational-related outcomes, as a result.

Due to the fact that LGBTQ students face significantly worse life outcomes, including mental health and educational outcomes as a result of anti-LGBTQ school policies, it is important to understand how communities around the country can organize in opposition to such policies in order to make schools inclusive spaces where students feel safe and able to express their identities. By analyzing how communities are actively responding to harmful anti-LGBTQ school policies, such as those found in Bucks County, we will be able to better understand how to provide resources that could improve life outcomes for queer students and create a more positive educational environment for all, while preventing the rise of a tyrannical far-right government which seeks to strip people of their civil rights and liberties.

Youth organizing for LGBTQ rights

Although there is a significant history of anti-LGBTQ laws targeting schools and youth in America, there is also hope in the way that young people have historically organized in opposition to protect the rights of LGBTQ individuals. Prior literature has shown that young people have been involved in activism in America since at least the 19th century, when student governments at high schools and universities became common (Braxton, 2016). At this time, young people played a crucial role in labor organizing, the movement for women's suffrage, and the movement to abolish slavery, often by organizing strikes and protests and constituting a significant part of the membership of multiple organizations. At the beginning of the 1900s, the formation of youth organizations such as the Boy Scouts, Campfire Girls, and Junior Citizens organized young people to participate in mock government activities and occasionally enter real

politics as well. Although much of this youth activism occurred under adult supervision, there were also significant instances of autonomous youth activism involving child labor strikes, rent strikes, and organizing efforts among students in historically Black colleges. Many new youth organizations were formed in the 1950s. For instance, the National Student League organized to support strikers and oppose war, the American Youth Congress passed the Declaration of the Rights of American Youth and the American Youth Act to support various youth programs. Moreover, the Southern Negro Youth Congress participated in militant racial justice organizing, while young people in the Congress of Racial Equity directed some of the first anti-segregation sit-ins. Although youth organizing around human rights is not a recent phenomenon, youth organizing groups have evolved greatly, especially over the last 20 years. What was once a scattered and disconnected set of organizations has now become a definable field with established best practices, established networks, and intermediary institutions. Not to mention, youth-led organizations have now increased their scale, power, and ability to achieve meaningful victories for people.

Scholars have found that one youth-led movement that has changed the landscape for LGBTQ individuals in America is the introduction of DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) organizations (Terriquez, 2015). This movement originally focused on lobbying for deserving immigrants, usually students who had achieved highly in school and who were not to blame for their legal status. Diversity within the movement was not highlighted publicly and intersectionality was not focused upon within the movement during the 2000s (Terriquez et al., 2018). In this way, the DREAM movement began like most other youth-led identity-based social movements that minimized within-group diversity in order to promote a single collective identity. After passage of the federal DREAM Act failed in 2010,

undocumented immigrant youth began to employ an intersectional strategy and take a more radical stance in their lobbying for undocumented immigrant youth. Later that year, the DREAM movement initiated its Coming Out of the Shadows identity strategy led by undocumented activists in Chicago (Terriquez, 2015). Using this strategy, several DREAMers came out as undocumented first, which then inspired them to come out as LGBTQ in what is known as social movement spillover. In one study looking at these DREAM organizations, the researchers found that by employing the Coming Out of the Shadows identity strategy, whereby individuals “come out” as a member of a particular social group (in this case, their legal status as an immigrant), these youths felt more inclined to not only disclose their legal status but also their sexual orientation. Overall, this led to more queer activists within the DREAM movement, resulting in a boomerang effect whereby LGBTQ rights were reinforced among immigrant youth. This implies that perhaps intersectional youth-led movements focusing on not only one cause but multiple causes at the same time are the most effective strategy to bring about recognition and positive social change. This could be because movements which focus on multiple causes are more likely to garner the attention of the greater public, and hence result in swifter change and more consequential change. Moreover, the fact that these movements are increasingly being led by youths shows a powerful shift in the balance of power in society: youths have the power to bring about positive social change that both spreads to older generations and also is inherited by future generations.

As is conveyed in prior literature, particular instances of pro-LGBTQ legislation that has been passed as a result of youth organizing include the decision in a series of cases in the late 2010s, whereby courts consistently held that students who identified as transgender should be recognized by schools, schools should use their preferred gender names and pronouns correctly,

provide access to facilities and lockers which match the students' gender identity, and should provide other accommodations as necessary (Mayo, 2022). More recently, the largest teachers' union in the United States, the National Education Association, founded in 1975, included a policy of nondiscrimination in its professional code of ethics, whereby "the educator shall not on the basis of race, color, creed, sex, national origin, marital status, political or religious beliefs, family, social or cultural background, or sexual orientation, unfairly a. exclude any student from participation in any program, b. deny benefits to any student, c. grant any advantage to any student." In this way, various youth organizations and communities have organized around LGBTQ individuals to protect their rights in light of historical acts of anti-LGBTQ legislation.

Scholars have found that youth organizing around the rights of queer people is not always seen at a community level, and can in fact occur on a much smaller scale. For example, in a six-month participatory action research project, researchers analyzed language and behavior in school, as well as anti-bullying and sex education state policies (Linville, 2011). Participants in this research included eight high-school students in New York City and one doctoral student, all of whom were non-heterosexual and/or gender non-conforming. The researchers found that high-school students were not receiving HIV/AIDS lessons in some cases, even though they were mandated by the state. In response, the young people speaking in this research organized in protest to ask for a consideration of their safety that includes their need for accurate and comprehensive information about sex, sexuality, and gender. They advocated for stronger protections concerning the health and safety of LGBTQ youth and asked for such materials to be introduced into the curriculum. In this way, although organizing by these LGBTQ youth was conducted on a small scale, they still came together in protest against the status quo to advocate for their rights and the rights of fellow queer people.

All of these instances of youth-led movements to organize for and protect the rights of young queer people are evidence for the strong positive impact young people can have and are having in combatting anti-LGBTQ policies affecting American youth in schools.

The Present Case Study: Bucks County, PA

Many school boards across Bucks County have passed anti-LGBTQ school policies. Much of this legislation is designed to restrict educational resources related to gender identity and other LGBTQ issues in public school classrooms which has led to the outright banning of LGBTQ books in school libraries (Monroe & Corrado, 2022). For instance, in 2021, the leaders of the Pennridge School District in Bucks County removed a book about LGBTQ identities, entitled “Heather Has Two Mommies”, from all elementary school libraries in the district and sent around an email instructing school officials to remove all books about gender identity from the shelves (Rizzo, 2021). This is just one such instance of anti-LGBTQ legislation to go into effect. In Central Bucks (CB) School District, a Lenape Middle School teacher was suspended from the school in May of this year for assisting a student who had been upset over a policy that prevented teachers from referring to students by their preferred gender names (CBS News, 2022). Central Bucks Superintendent, Abram Lucabaugh, defended the school district against accusations of discrimination against students and faculty who were pro-LGBTQ, citing “the insinuation that our district would single out a teacher and take disciplinary action because the teacher supports LGBTQIA+ students is defamatory.” The superintendent subsequently denied allegations that CB West leadership had prevented the production of the musical “Rent” due to the themes of homosexuality that it presented. Lucabaugh along with the school board has also required all pride flags to be removed from classrooms in the school district due to the fact that they are “a flashpoint for controversy and divisiveness in our school buildings.” This has led to

further outrage among community members who claim that these acts of legislation are blatant attacks on LGBTQ individuals. Despite extreme outrage over these anti-LGBTQ policies, the employment status of the Lenape teacher who was suspended is still under review.

In response to these anti-LGBTQ policies, the ACLU has filed a federal complaint against Central Bucks School District with the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education, claiming that they have violated Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, creating a “hostile environment” for LGBTQ students. (Rizzo, 2022). The ACLU has cited policies that censor books and objects teachers can hang in their classrooms. They also filed against procedures that banned teachers from using their students’ preferred pronouns and administrative decisions that punish staff who speak out against these anti-LGBTQ policies. They have said that administration decisions and policies intimidate teachers into self-censoring their materials. Furthermore, they have cited that such policies have led to a significant increase in severe anti-LGBTQ bullying and harassment of students. Moreover, they shared that many trans students are now afraid to attend school and eat lunch in the cafeteria, instead choosing to eat in the bathroom or in the classrooms of supportive teachers. They also alleged that a former trans student attempted suicide as a result of such bullying. Subsequently, community members have asked the Department of Education to order Central Bucks to remove the anti-LGBTQ policies and to pass legislation to protect LGBTQ students in schools.

Other similar instances of anti-LGBTQ legislation have been passed in schools throughout Bucks County. For example, Central Bucks School District mandated that school counselors divide elementary students by the sex they were assigned at birth for their classes (Human Growth and Development classes) on puberty. These classes discuss topics such as

adolescent physiological and emotional changes, and the human reproductive system (Rizzo, 2022). The District administration told school counselors that students who identified as gender-nonconforming or trans could access the Human Growth and Development classes by attending the classroom corresponding to the student's sex assigned at birth (Rizzo, 2022). Parents were told that students could choose to watch a video on the content in the nurse's office or watch the video at home to fulfill the requirement, or completely opt out of the class. The District administration even told the family of a nonbinary elementary school student that they could not attend the classroom they wished to attend for their puberty class, and said that instead the child had to attend the classroom coinciding with the sex they were assigned at birth, not their gender identity. As a result of outrage over this policy, the Human Growth and Development (HGD) classes were canceled for all the students at that elementary school. Remaining HGD classes in elementary schools throughout Central Bucks School District were paused until further notice, with some rescheduled for later dates. However, according to a school counselor, the district had previously allowed students to attend the classroom that matched their gender identity as opposed to their sex assigned at birth, suggesting that this trend of an increasing number of anti-LGBTQ policies in Bucks County schools is a more recent phenomenon.

According to a September 2022 report from PEN America, Pennsylvania had the third most banned books across the country, with 457 bans in 11 different school districts (Rizzo, 2022). A growing national organization, Moms for Liberty, has coordinated Bucks County parents in favor of censorship and has been the instigator of a recent movement to ban books across the country. In July, after a conservative majority took over a school board in Bucks County, Policy 109.2 passed, which allows anyone in the district to challenge any book and potentially have it be banned from school libraries and from general availability to the public

(Baptiste, 2022). As a result of widespread anti-LGBTQ policies related to education and schooling in Bucks County, several organized protests have erupted in opposition.

Methodology

For my project, I interrogated local news articles from Bucks County, PA discussing community organization in opposition to anti-LGBTQ school policies. I also interviewed five adult individuals in order to find out more about the current school environment and community responses to the anti-LGBTQ policies which have passed in their public schools. I identified subjects to interview by using a snowball sample. Dr. Zemach-Bersin referred individuals from Bucks County whom she knows care about LGBTQ rights and whom she is well acquainted with to me for me to interview. Those individuals then referred me to other individuals in the community to interview. My interview script (the same script was used in all my interviews) read as follows:

1. *“Tell me about your initial response to the policies that have passed in Bucks County concerning LGBTQ issues in schools.*
 1. *What was your emotional and physical response?*
 2. *Did your reactions change at all over time?*
 3. *Were there any people that you reached out to for support?”*
2. *“Tell me about how you got involved in organizing a response to these policies?”*
 1. *Did you already know the people you are working with?*
 2. *As you started meeting, what were some of the ideas you discussed as a possible response?*
 3. *How did you come to a consensus about how to respond?*

4. *As you were organizing, did you have any connections with state or national organizations?*
5. *Tell me more about your specific role in organizing a response?"*
3. *"Tell me more about the response your organization chose.*
 1. *Tell me about some of the steps involved in enacting a response?*
 2. *Who is the target of your actions?*
 3. *Did you experience any pushback in any part of the process?*
 4. *If so, how did you respond to it?*
 5. *Did you try to keep your efforts hidden or did you make your response public?"*
4. *"Tell me a little more about your interactions with teachers and students in organizing this response?*
 1. *How did you reach out to individuals to set up a response?*
 2. *How did you choose whom to reach out to?*
 3. *What made you want to involve others in coordinating a response?"*
5. *"Are you seeing any changes as a result of your organizational response to the policies?*
 1. *Have there been any specific acts of legislation passed opposing anti-LGBTQ policies since your response?*
 2. *Have there been conversations among the general community regarding your response?*
 3. *How are people reacting to your response?"*
6. *"What advice would you give to people who want to organize a response?"*

1. *How would you have conversations with others about how they can get involved in protesting against anti-LGBTQ policies?*
2. *How could others make the most impact when responding?*
3. *How would you advise others to stay safe when responding?"*
7. *"What is your hope for what will happen as a result of your response?*
 1. *Which specific policies would you like changed?*
 2. *Over what sort of timeframe do you expect to see changes?*
 3. *How will you respond if no change occurs?"*
8. *"Is there anything else you would like to talk about?"*.

At the end of each interview, I also asked individuals a series of questions about their age, gender identity, race, and other demographics.

When analyzing my primary sources, I created deductive codes based on the interviews, mainly by looking for common themes surrounding responses to the anti-LGBTQ policies and how individuals are working together as a community to build their response. I have erased any information which could be used to identify my sources in my project in order to minimize any risks to the participants and to allow them to feel more comfortable. These interviews allowed me to acquire direct evidence for how people in Bucks County are coming together to mobilize against anti-LGBTQ school policies.

Findings

Through the process of interrogating local news articles from Bucks County, I learned about many instances of community members coming together and mobilizing in opposition to anti-LGBTQ school policies that have passed across the county (Baptiste, 2022). For instance, one

individual, Kate Nazemi, who has two children in schools in the Central Bucks School District, greatly opposed the new book policy that has gone into effect, and organized a local parade against this book banning. The “larger-than-life banned books march”, as organized by Kate Nazemi in response to Policy 109.2, took place in Doylestown, Bucks County on September 24th, 2022 to protest the banning of educational books and censorship of educational materials across schools and libraries. The marchers dressed as books which had been banned across the United States, including books such as “The Bluest Eye” by Toni Morrison and “Lawn Boy” by Jonathan Evison, which depict LGBTQ themes, racism, and sexually explicit scenes. The protesters constituted a coalition of authors, students, community organizations, parents, and residents who have been honoring the freedom to read and spreading awareness of issues around censorship in their local communities. One of the protestors, Delany, who was interviewed, reported that they have been scattering various banned books in Doylestown throughout the Little Free Libraries in order to protect younger kids from feeling “the same isolation they felt before finding the Rainbow Room”. Moreover, the national organization, “Red, Wine and Blue”, which works to combat recent censorship in schools, hosted an event to discuss censorship and various anti-LGBTQ district initiatives specifically in Central Bucks. All in all, as a result of these organizing efforts, around 150 books have been collected, most of which have been banned or books which have been challenged by individuals, and they will be restocked in Little Free libraries throughout the county.

Interviewing five Bucks County community members helped me to gain an understanding about how people in the community are organizing in response to anti-LGBTQ policies that have been passed by the school districts. Many interviewees held the same beliefs

about the current policies and school board officials: what is happening right now is fundamentally wrong and unethical, and the school board needs new leadership.

A common theme that came up in my interviews when I asked individuals how they reacted to the policies that have been enacted in Bucks County schools was the lack of surprise the individuals experienced when they first heard about anti-LGBTQ policies being passed. For example, when I asked one person what their initial emotional and physical response was to the anti-LGBTQ school policies, they responded saying, “It didn’t completely surprise me. It feels awful. It feels like a stomach ache. But it wasn’t a shock.” This sentiment was reflected in other interviews as well. For example, one interviewee told me that their initial reaction to such policies was “yup, I knew this was coming. I am deeply upset, but I knew this was coming.” Another interviewee shared, “I wouldn’t say I was shocked. I was disgusted, but I wasn’t shocked.” Despite interviewees not being surprised, there was a consensus that community members were deeply upset and angered by these policies. Some of them reported that they had been so upset that they reached out to family members and friends for support. One of the teachers I interviewed talked about how they felt helpless in helping their LGBTQ students and had to reach out to close friends and family to ask about how they could take care of their students during these times. Others talked about how students had come to them to talk to them directly about how they felt as a result of the policies. For example, one person said, “it’s really hard to see the kids feeling upset... the students who I want to support come and talk about [how they] don’t feel safe in school.” The idea that kids are not only feeling upset by the policies but are also feeling targeted and in danger because of these policies is deeply concerning and has serious implications for students’ physical and mental wellbeing, which highlights the need for community-wide organizing in opposition to these policies. Another interviewee said “I am just

absolutely devastated for my students. Their worst nightmares have come true, and I am powerless to get rid of them.” The fact that both these interview quotes were from the perspectives of the students really shows the deep impact that these policies are having on the students themselves and the overwhelming sense of empathy the people have for the children, which highlights the idea of a sense of communal urgency to respond. Hearing this person speak about their sorrow for their students was really moving and made me realize just what youths in this county and across the country are up against. Furthermore, another interviewee responded that their sadness for the students extended to the families who were also affected as a result of their children being affected by the policies. For instance, one person said that they “immediately reached out to families of students to check in with them and see how their kids were coping. My heart aches for them.... It is so hard for them.” Throughout all of these interviews, I really began to understand how these anti-LGBTQ school policies have not only had such a deep impact on teachers and students in schools, but also have had such a huge impact on the overall community of Bucks County, even those who do not work in or do not have affiliations with schools.

Although initial reactions to the school policies were ones of sadness and despair, many of the interviewees discussed how their initial emotional and physical reactions changed as time went on. A few of them discussed how their initial feelings of sadness and despair were replaced by intense feelings of motivation and anger to ensure that these policies were reversed and to work to remove the far-right Republican school board officials from their positions, especially the superintendent. One person said to me, “I was so sad for the kids. But sadness doesn’t get you anywhere. So, I became furious, and I made it my mission to make sure these kids would not be put in harm’s way.” This comment was especially powerful to me, as it conveyed to me the

strong sense of duty and responsibility that the people seem to feel toward the children in their community, which was an incredibly positive thing to see.

When I asked the interviewees about their efforts to organize against such policies, a common first course of action that they participated in was to get in touch with friends and fellow workers/community members they knew held similar viewpoints on these matters and organize protests at school board meetings. For example, one of the interviewees discussed how they rallied together with suburban mothers from the organization “Red Wine and Blue” to disrupt school board meetings and cause trouble for the far-right school board officials. Another interviewee talked about how they showed up at school board meetings with a friend and simply listened to the arguments being made in order to inform them of how they could best think of and provide resources for LGBTQ youths in the county. Another common course of action that the interviewees engaged in was rallying together and joining organizations to protest with at school boards against these far-right anti-LGBTQ school policies. For example, one interviewee talked about how they joined their local organization, Doylestown Democrats, to promote certain Democratic candidates for positions on the school board. Others joined local organizations such as Advocates For Inclusive Education and Neighbors United. The aim of Advocates for Inclusive Education is to advocate for education that caters to the goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Neighbors United seeks to bring together Bucks County community members who oppose anti-LGBTQ policies and promote their voices in the community and at school board meetings with the intention of bringing about policy change.

In addition, a few interviewees also reported that they engaged in door-to-door campaigns, where they went around neighborhoods in Bucks County with these organizations and they knocked on people’s doors to attempt to educate them as to why they should vote for

Democrats in the next elections and why the current school board members had to be voted out of office. Interestingly, when I asked them how they decided which doors to knock on, they told me how they focused on those homes with split voters (where at least one member of the household voted Democrat even with the other(s) voting Republican), and those of Independent voters. The idea behind this, as they said, was to be able to educate those receptive to conversations with individuals of a different viewpoint. They explained that knocking on the doors of only Republican voters would generally be unproductive and would not allow for persuasive conversation. However, they thought that the most to gain would come from talking to those who would be receptive to such conversations and who were not so clearly stuck to their own political ideology. Indeed, some of the interviewees faced conflict when knocking on people's doors, but generally they relayed that they had good conversations and even, in some cases, thought that they might have persuaded certain non-Democratic households to vote Democrat in the next elections despite them being either undecided, Independent, or even Republican voters. Other less common courses of action included individuals helping to set up a website to spread to the surrounding community their message of cooperation with the students and families affected by anti-LGBTQ policies. The goal of this response was not only to try to help their own students directly, but to attempt to create a wider platform for connecting with students around the county in order to support them. In this way, many of the interviewees spoke to the fact that their targets of this coordinated organizational response was not only the school board officials who had implemented these policies, but also the students, who were most affected by these harmful policies. Despite the fact that many of the courses of action pursued in response to anti-LGBTQ school policies were centered around the needs and interests of students and youths of Bucks County, few of the interviewees discussed engaging with students directly

in the process of coordinating a response. Many of them simply reached out to students and their families in order to support them, but few directly engaged the students in movements to protest or other forms of direct action. Perhaps this is because the teachers and community members were trying to shield students from potentially negative and upsetting interactions with policymakers and other individuals, which could be especially traumatic for LGBTQ students who are already being targeted. However, by engaging in an internet campaign to provide resources and assistance for students and their families, the interviewees really spoke to the organization against anti-LGBTQ policies at the community level as opposed to just the individual level. Therefore, throughout all of these interviews, the common theme that came up relating to organization against these policies was the idea of forming alliances with others in the Bucks County community and uniting in groups to rally against school board officials and to jointly provide extensive resources and assistance for LGBTQ students.

When I asked the interviewees about specific anti-LGBTQ policies in schools that concerned them and their students and policies that they would like to be abolished, two different policies were highlighted in particular. These were Policy 321, which is a policy that has led to the banning of pride flags inside classrooms, and Policy 109.2, which bans certain books relating to gender identity and sexuality in schools. However, a positive sentiment that was reflected in almost every interview I conducted was the idea of communal optimism for future change. Despite all the policies that have recently been enacted, the interviewees were hopeful about the future of education policies especially with the upcoming elections in November. Interviewees explained that a lot of the people in Bucks County are fed up with the conservative school board and so they think that the superintendent will be voted out and the school board will be replaced with more progressive leaders who will put an end to these anti-LGBTQ policies. However,

when I asked how they would respond if no change occurs and the school board remains majority Republican after November, the interviewees did not seem to acknowledge that that could even be a possibility, conveying the fact that they were counting on a Democratic win. One of them said to me in response to the question, “I don’t know. I never thought that could be a possibility after the last couple years.” Another told me that they “[didn’t] even want to think about it”, and that they would “see no option but to leave”. The fact that none of the interviewees seemed to know how they would respond if the policies did not change, or even that they neglected to think it could be a possibility that the Democratic school board candidates lose in November, is concerning, as it speaks to ill-preparedness for a situation where LGBTQ students remain targeted in schools beyond the near future. However, these comments also reflect a sense of desperation for change that Bucks County community members hold, and this speaks to the hurt that everyone in the community is feeling right now as a result of the policies.

Unfortunately, a common complaint among the interviewees was the fact that they have not yet seen any changes relating to anti-LGBTQ policies as a result of their organizing efforts. When I asked them if they had seen any change, one of them replied, “None. None at all. And I am pissed off.” However, despite inaction on the part of the school board in response to their efforts, the interviewees did come to a consensus that their efforts had reached those in the community and were having an impact on those who would otherwise not participate in politics. For example, they discussed the fact that newsletters were starting to circulate around Doylestown informing people of the need for change and informing them of the efforts of local organizations and the need for more participants in such organizations. Another interviewee discussed how they received many emails from community members asking them about their organization and how to get involved, and ways in which they could contribute to the organizing

effort. However, despite positive reactions and positive conversations among community members, these organizational responses were also met with a lot of backlash and criticism. For instance, one of the interviewees mentioned the fact that the organization Moms for Liberty stepped up their campaigning and their messaging platform to persuade community members to vote Republican in the coming elections and to stop the “radical Left agenda”. They also discussed how they received threatening emails informing them that their response would be met with violent protest if they continued their messaging and information campaign. Among the more conservative parents in the school district, as a result of organizational responses to anti-LGBTQ policies, some conservative parents threatened to sue these pro-LGBTQ organizations on the basis that they promoted the “sexualization of children” in schools. All in all, the interviewees conveyed the fact that their response was causing significant upheaval among the general community, whether that be positively or negatively.

A common response I received when I asked my interviewees what advice they would give to others about how to organize a response to these anti-LGBTQ school policies was that every individual can bring about change by doing even the smallest thing. For instance, one of the interviewees said “I would tell others to just get out to a protest and hold a sign, or send an email to a friend about what’s going on, or go to a school board meeting and just listen. Anything. Anything at all can make a difference. If we all do something, no matter how big or small, we can fight back as a community, and that’s the most important thing.” The idea, that by each individual in the community participating in some sort of way to show the school board officials their opposition to the policies they can hope to bring about some positive change at the community level, was reflected in the other interviews I held. One community member told me that “if individuals don’t take it upon themselves to go out and protest, then how can we as a

community come together in support for our kids? This is a critical moment in our history and we have to do it right. We have to stand in solidarity with our children and get rid of these far-right tyrants.” The sentiment reflected here was that a communal response can only happen if each individual takes it upon themselves to engage in a response, and it takes many individual responses for a community response to be enacted.

By engaging with local news articles from Bucks County, and by interviewing members of the community about anti-LGBTQ policies in schools and analyzing their responses, I was able to learn a lot about how the community is coming together and mobilizing in opposition to these policies. Having conducted this case study, I hope to have shed some light on how we can use Bucks County as an example to explain how other counties and communities across the country afflicted by anti-LGBTQ school policies can respond to them. The more communities across the country mobilize in opposition to anti-LGBTQ school policies, the more we can hope to improve the mental health crisis among queer youth and improve their overall outcomes, and the sooner we can put an end to a dangerous and harmful far-right movement.

Conclusion

For my capstone project, I provide an understanding for the broader trend of rising anti-LGBTQ movements across the United States as they pertain to the education system, both as they have manifested throughout history, and as they currently manifest today, and how society can come together in opposition to this broader trend in order to protect the rights of LGBTQ youth. I also highlight the critical dangers that anti-LGBTQ school policies around the United States pose on LGBTQ students and the detrimental impacts they have on student wellbeing, both physical and mental. In this way, I highlight the importance of communities coming together in order to protect the critical needs of LGBTQ youth in America. I do all this by focusing on Bucks

County, PA, as a specific, small-scale case study. By interrogating local news articles and interviewing community members of Bucks County, I tell the story of a community afflicted by political unrest and a community in despair over anti-LGBTQ school policies, and how they have organized in an attempt to overcome this tragedy. This Capstone project illuminates the current greater nationwide trend of a struggle between two Americas: one which seeks to protect educational freedom and celebrate the human rights of all individuals regardless of their identities, and one which seeks to restrict access to education and maintain the status quo of an America serving White, Christian, traditional values.

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