What is a GSA?
Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) are school-based groups that promote welcoming, caring, respectful safe and inclusive learning environments for sexual and gender minority students and their allies. GSAs are run by students and supported by school staff. They are relatively new to schools, but are growing in number. GSAs are grounded in the principles of promoting:

- equity for sexual and gender minority students
- safe, caring and inclusive spaces for all students
- healthy, respectful relationships to prevent or eliminate bullying and discrimination.

As peer support networks, GSAs help sexual and gender minority students overcome feelings of isolation and alienation that are a result of homophobic and transphobic bullying. They help students begin to feel empowered. GSAs also help all interested students become allies for their LGBTQ peers. Ultimately GSAs are welcoming, caring, respectful and safe spaces within schools that support diversity, equity and human rights in positive ways – because that’s what Canada’s multicultural and pluralistic society and values are all about.

Why are GSAs important in schools?
Sexual and gender minority students are in every school, culture, ethnicity, faith, socioeconomic class and society in the world. Unfortunately many of these students live in fear: afraid of being rejected by their family and peers and afraid of homophobic and transphobic bullying. Many become isolated and believe that they have to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity from the world. GSAs can help transform the school environment to be a welcoming, caring, respectful, safe and inclusive place for all students. They can also help minimize the negative impacts of homophobic and transphobic bullying and violence. Research tells us that students are more likely to feel safe and are more comfortable being open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in schools with GSAs. Other positive impacts of GSAs on students’ lives include:

- higher self-esteem
- greater school attachment
- improved attendance
- better work ethic
- increased sense of empowerment and hope
- new friendships
- improved home and school relationships
- more comfortable being visible as LGBTQ or as straight-identified allies
- reduction of stress due to hiding one’s identity
- increased confidence
- enhanced sense of pride

LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.

GSAs are in junior and senior high schools across Alberta and Canada.

70% of all students hear derogatory comments such as “that’s so gay” every day in school. Imagine how that feels if you are gay.
What is the role of GSAs?

GSAs offer many different things including:
- counselling and support
- safe spaces
- increased visibility and awareness
- educational and social change

There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach for GSAs in schools. Each GSA is different and should be driven by the needs and goals of each student body. A core aspect of all GSAs should be to maximize inclusiveness of all students, regardless of differences based on sex, age, ability, gender, race, ethnicity, language, culture, religion, social condition, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. A vibrant and successful GSA is a diverse GSA that challenges stereotypes and discrimination, rather than perpetuating them.

Who is an ally?

An ally is a person who supports and stands up for the human and civil rights of sexual and gender minorities. Allies can be students or staff who have LGBTQ friends or family members. Or, they can be students who want to support their sexual and gender minority peers. Allies play important roles in GSAs. Involving allies in a GSA helps educate non-LGBTQ students and staff, reduce discrimination and harassment, challenge stereotypes and improve solidarity within the school. Staff allies can be proactive about inclusion by starting a GSA in their school. In fact, they don’t need to wait for students to ask before starting a GSA – particularly because students may not want to come forward until a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe space is available to them at school.

What do GSAs do?

GSAs organize different activities and events to support the group’s mandate. GSAs should also consider hosting events with other student groups to promote school-wide education and mutual respect. Activities/events may include:
- holding an LGBTQ Book drive for the school library
- creating posters to advertise the GSA in the school
- inviting guest speakers (e.g. from PFLAG [Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] or local affirming faith-based organizations)
- hosting an Ally Week
- participating in No-Name Calling Week
- celebrating National Bullying Awareness Week
- developing anti-homophobic and transphobic bullying workshops and campaigns

GSAs can also plan activities around important days, including:
- Pink Shirt Day (the last Wednesday in February)
- Day of Silence (mid-April)
- Day of Pink (second Wednesday in April)
- International Day Against Homophobia & Transphobia (May 17)
- National Coming Out Day (October 11)
- Purple Spirit Day (mid-October)
- Transgender Day of Remembrance (November 20)

Do I have to be gay to join a GSA?

GSAs are open to all students and school staff who want to show respect and support for sexual and gender minorities. You **do not** have to disclose your sexual orientation or gender identity to participate. GSAs should always be welcoming, confidential and inclusive. They should respect the privacy of individual members. GSA members may include:
- LGBTQ students and staff
- students and staff with LGBTQ family members or peers
- students who are picked on for being “different”
- students and staff who are heterosexual allies

58% of heterosexual students find homophobic comments upsetting.

How do GSAs overcome obstacles?

We know that there is discrimination towards sexual and gender minorities in schools. School community members, including parents, may have unfounded concerns, stereotypical assumptions, and misconceptions about the role and purpose of GSAs. Some of the most common arguments include:
- “GSAs are dating clubs” – No, they are not dating clubs, nor do they promote sexual activity or behaviour. They are about valuing diversity, promoting safety, fostering respect, and improving school and peer connectedness.

Students in schools with GSAs report a more positive climate for sexual and gender minority students.
Gay-Straight Alliances

- “GSAs push the ‘gay lifestyle’ onto students” – No. A student’s sexual orientation or gender identity is not a lifestyle choice. A person’s sexual orientation and gender identity exists long before a student enters school. GSAs provide a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe space for students to learn more about sexual orientation and gender identity issues in non-judgmental and age-appropriate ways.
- “We don’t have any LGBTQ students at our school” – Research suggests that about 2-10% of students are sexual or gender minorities. LGBTQ students often choose not to be visible when school climates are not inclusive. A primary purpose of GSAs is to increase students’ feelings of safety, security, and acceptance at school, as these feelings are essential for students to engage in learning.

If you’re experiencing resistance to your school’s GSA, consider creating a broader mission statement to encompass a wide range of social justice and diversity issues, including LGBTQ issues.

How do GSAs benefit all students?

Bullying creates unwelcoming, uncaring, disrespectful and unsafe learning environments for all students. For example, many heterosexual students are often the target of homophobic bullying and harassment. They might be seen as sexual or gender minorities by other students. Or they might have LGBTQ parents or family members. Research shows that heterosexual boys who are seen as gay are more likely to think about, and attempt, suicide. GSAs can show the school community that homophobia and transphobia are everyone’s problem. Everyone has the power to transform individual lives, change school cultures so they become more inclusive for everyone. They might even save a life.

Endnotes:
1 The information in this fact sheet has been adapted with permission from: Wells, K. (2006). Gay-straight student alliances in Alberta schools. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Teachers Association and The Society for Safe and Caring Schools & Communities.
4 See Wells (2006); Taylor and Peter (2011)
6 See Wells (2006); Taylor and Peter (2011).
7 See Taylor and Peter (2011).