

CREATING WELCOMING, CARING, RESPECTFUL & SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Starting a Gay-Straight Alliance in Your School A Tip Sheet for Students

Follow the regulations and policies for your school

A Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) should be established in the same way as any other school group. Check your student handbook or the school regulations and policies to learn about the procedures for forming student groups. If you can, look for a diverse group of allies to help get you started. Allies are people who support and stand up for the human and civil rights of sexual and gender minorities. Allies could be students or staff.

Alberta's first GSA was established in 2000.

Find a GSA advisor

Find a staff member who is willing to serve as a supportive advisor for the GSA. If possible, look for more than one advisor and try to include both lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) and non-LGBTQ advisors—the group's diversity can be its greatest strength. GSA advisors add stability and continuity as the GSA grows and changes and are important in supporting and empowering GSA members.

Speak to your school administration

Encourage your school administration to be your ally. School administrators can work with the GSA to demonstrate that it is a valued and important part of a welcoming, caring, respectful, safe and inclusive school community. Administrators also serve as an important liaison between students, teachers, parents, school authority administration, and the larger community. Be sure to include them in your planning.

Educate parents and others in your school community

School community members, including parents and school authority members, may have unfounded concerns, stereotypical assumptions and misconceptions about the role and purpose of GSAs.

Work with your advisor(s) and school administration to inform members in your school community that the purpose of a GSA is to promote a welcoming, caring, respectful, safe and inclusive school environment for sexual and gender minority students and their allies.

Develop a mission or vision statement

A guiding statement of core beliefs can help focus your group. It can also demonstrate the importance of a GSA in a school community. Organize your GSA's vision and value statements to include principles related to diversity, equity, human rights and social justice. Find out what the educational priorities and goals are at your school and demonstrate how your GSA helps meet them.

Find a safe meeting place

Select a safe and comfortable location in your school that is relatively private. Remember that some students may feel uncomfortable and nervous when first attending meetings. Try to create an atmosphere that accommodates all individuals and comfort levels.

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Advertise your group

Work with your GSA advisor(s) to discuss the best ways to advertise the GSA. Consider having a “poster party” to design flyers announcing your group’s meetings. Or place ads on your school’s TV or PA system. Remember to emphasize that all students are encouraged to attend your school’s GSA. After all, it is a gay and straight student alliance! The simple presence of the group’s posters and the words *lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer* can send a powerful message of inclusion. Posters can help educate students and staff about the diversity in your school.

- Spread the word about your group by using a variety of communication tools. Sometimes just knowing your school has a GSA makes students feel safe and affirmed, even if they never attend a GSA meeting.
- Maintain a positive, inclusive tone in all communications. Be welcoming and respect each other’s confidentiality. Clearly communicate your meeting times and location across the school.
- Don’t get caught up on the name of the GSA. Some schools might want to call it a diversity group or social justice club. Determine if you want to stand your ground and call it a GSA or if the name is less important than the service you are providing to students in your school. Some schools call their groups a Straight and Gay Alliance (SAGA); Acceptance Club; or Queer-Straight Alliance (QSA).

Your first meeting: Tips!

- Facilitate icebreaker ‘Getting to Know You’ or ‘Teambuilding’ activities.
- Stick to a meeting place and schedule – this helps people find you!
- Use the GSA’s mission statement to guide meetings and activities.

Establish clear guidelines

Think about establishing specific ground rules for group discussions that reaffirm responsible and respectful behaviours:

- Ensure both student and advisor participation.
- Confidentiality and safety are paramount.

- Make sure gossip and labels have no place in your GSA.
- Encourage the group to collectively decide on the GSA ground rules.
- Remember, you do not need to know all the answers at the beginning—you will learn as you go.

Reinforce the importance of straight allies in the group. Make an extra effort to ensure the GSA is welcoming to all LGBTQ students as well as students with differing abilities, languages, socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds. Your school’s GSA should be a safe, respectful, caring and welcoming space for everyone.

Plan for the future

Work with the GSA members to develop an action plan that will make the group an active and sustainable presence in your school. Your action plan might include long - and short-range goals and priorities. Possible activities could include:

- showing LGBTQ-themed movies
- hosting guest speakers
- holding joint meetings and events with other school groups
- writing articles for the school newspaper, yearbook or website
- networking with local LGBTQ community groups
- doing web searches and watching YouTube videos on LGBTQ issues
- suggesting potential LGBTQ student resources that your school library could purchase or license
- creating displays about LGBTQ history
- starting an LGBTQ book club
- inviting LGBTQ school alumni to speak to your group or school
- planning activities to celebrate such events as:
 - Pink Shirt Day (the last Wednesday in February)
 - Day of Silence (mid-April)
 - Day of Pink (second Wednesday in April)
 - International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (May 17)
 - National Coming Out Day (October 11)
 - Purple Spirit Day (mid-October)
 - Transgender Day of Remembrance (November 20)

The possibilities are endless. Be creative and have fun!

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.