

# CREATING WELCOMING, CARING, RESPECTFUL & SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

## Gay-Straight or Queer-Straight Alliances in Schools

### What is a GSA/QSA?

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) or Queer-Straight Alliances (QSAs) are school-based groups that promote welcoming, caring, respectful, safe and inclusive learning environments for sexual and gender minority students and their allies.

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

GSAs/QSAs 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/QSAs help sexual and gender minority students overcome feelings of isolation<sup>2</sup> and alienation that are a result of homophobic and

transphobic bullying. They help students begin to feel empowered. GSAs/QSAs also help all interested students become allies for their LGBTQ peers. Ultimately GSAs/QSAs are welcoming, caring, respectful and safe spaces within schools that support diversity, equity and human

**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.**

rights in positive ways. For more information on starting a GSA/QSA in your school, see [Starting a Gay-Straight or Queer-Straight Alliance in Your School: A Tip Sheet for Students](#).

### Why are GSAs/QSAs 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, gender identity or gender expression from the world. GSAs/QSAs can help transform the school environment to be a welcoming, caring, respectful, safe and inclusive place for all students. Research tells us that students are more likely to feel safe and are more comfortable being open about their sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression in schools with GSAs/QSAs<sup>3</sup>. Other positive impacts of GSAs/QSAs on students’ lives include<sup>4</sup>:

**GSAs/QSAs can help minimize the negative impacts of homophobic and transphobic bullying and violence.**

- 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

## What is the role of a GSA/QSA?

GSAs/QSAs 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/QSAs in schools. Each GSA/QSA is different and should be driven by the needs and goals of each student body. A core aspect of all GSAs/QSA 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/QSA is a diverse GSA/QSA 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<sup>5</sup>. 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/QSAs. Involving allies in a GSA/QSA helps educate non-LGBTQ students and staff, reduce discrimination and harassment, challenge stereotypes and improve solidarity within the school<sup>6</sup>. Staff allies can be proactive about inclusion by starting a GSA/QSA in their school. In fact, they don't need to wait for students to ask before starting a GSA/QSA – 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/QSAs do?

GSAs/QSAs organize different activities and events to support the group's mandate. GSAs/QSAs 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/QSA 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

**Students in schools with GSAs/QSAs report a more positive climate for sexual and gender minority students.**

GSAs/QSAs can also plan activities around important days. For more information on days you may wish to recognize such as Pink Shirt Day and International Day Against Homophobia & Transphobia, see [Starting a Gay-Straight or Queer-Straight Alliance in Your School: A Tip Sheet for Students](#)

## Do I have to be gay to join a GSA/QSA?

GSAs/QSAs 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/QSAs should always be welcoming, confidential and inclusive. They should respect the privacy of individual members. GSA/QSA 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/QSAs overcome obstacles?

We know that there is discrimination towards sexual and gender minorities in schools<sup>7</sup>. School community members, including parents, may have unfounded concerns, stereotypical assumptions, and misconceptions about the role and purpose of GSAs/QSAs. Some of the most common arguments include:

- "GSAs/QSAs 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.

- “GSAs/QSAs 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, gender identity or gender expression exists long before a student enters school. GSAs/QSAs 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<sup>8</sup>. LGBTQ students often choose not to be visible when school climates are not inclusive. A primary purpose of GSAs/QSAs is to increase students’ feelings of safety, security and acceptance at school, as these feelings are essential for students to engage in learning.

**Informed staff allies can dispel common stereotypes about GSAs/QSAs and work with the school community to positively address LGBTQ issues.**

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

## How do GSAs/QSAs benefit all students?

Bullying behaviours create 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 perceived as gay are more likely to

**26% of heterosexual students are verbally harassed about their gender expression. 10% are physically harassed because they are ‘perceived to be gay’ by their peers.**

think about, and attempt, suicide<sup>9</sup>. GSAs/QSAs can show the school community that homophobia and transphobia are everyone’s issue. Everyone has the power to transform individual lives, change school cultures so they become more inclusive<sup>10</sup> for everyone. They might even save a life.

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>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.

<sup>2</sup>Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). (2010a). Questions & answers: Sexual orientation in schools. Retrieved from <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca>.

<sup>3</sup>Taylor, C., & Peter, T., with McMinn, T. L., Schachter, K., Beldom, S., Ferry, A.,

Gross, Z., & Paquin, S. (2011). Every class in every school: The first national climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools. Final report. Toronto, ON: Egale Canada Human Rights Trust.

<sup>4</sup>See Wells (2006); Taylor and Peter (2011)

<sup>5</sup>Wells, K., Roberts, G., & Allan, C. (2012). Supporting transgender and transsexual students in K-12 schools: A guide for educators. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Teachers’ Federation.

<sup>6</sup>See Wells (2006); Taylor and Peter (2011).

<sup>7</sup>See Taylor and Peter (2011).

<sup>8</sup>Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). (2010b). Questions & answers: Gender identity in schools. Retrieved from <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/qagis-qrise/index-eng.php>

<sup>9</sup>Dorais, M., & Lajeunesse, S. L. (2004). Dead boys can’t dance: Sexual orientation, masculinity, and suicide (P. Tremblay, Trans.). Montreal, PQ: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

<sup>10</sup>National Association of GSA Networks. (2011). GSA advisor handbook. Retrieved from <http://www.gsanetwork.org/advisor-handbook>.