

CREATING WELCOMING, CARING, RESPECTFUL & SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Positive Impacts of Gay-Straight / Queer-Straight Alliances

What are the Positive Impacts of Gay-Straight Alliances/Queer-Straight Alliances?

Schools provide students with opportunities to develop many important relationships. Key relationships with peers and school staff play an important role in supporting students' abilities to learn resiliency skills and reach their full potential. Frequently, students experience academic difficulties when they do not feel safe at school¹. Educational professionals have a legal and professional duty to create welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments for all students regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. School-based support is especially important for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth who may experience rejection by their families². Gay-Straight or Queer-Straight Alliances (GSAs/QSAs) are an effective and proven way to create positive and inclusive school climates for all students. They also strongly contribute to student learning and well-being³. Positive impacts of GSAs/QSAs include:

Greater School Attachment and Connectedness

Strong attachment to school is an important part of positive youth development⁴. It is related to:

- higher academic achievement
- greater participation in the school community
- lower levels of depression⁵

Students who attend schools with GSAs/QSAs are much more likely to say their schools are supportive of LGBTQ people. They are more likely to:

- be open with some or all their peers about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity
- see their school climate as becoming less homophobic

Heterosexual students report higher levels of school connectedness and are less likely to skip school than their LGBTQ peers⁶. For trans (transgender, transsexual, gender queer) youth in particular, school connectedness is strongly associated with better mental health⁷. GSAs/QSAs serve to enhance school connectedness, personal well-being, mental health, and can help LGBTQ youth feel supported and to excel at school⁸.

Increased Safety and Decreased Incidents of Bullying

Students who attend schools with GSAs/QSAs report:

- feeling safer
- hearing fewer homophobic remarks
- experiencing less bullying behaviours and harassment
- having school staff more likely to intervene against bullying behaviours
- being able to identify supportive adults in their school⁹

These benefits reach students even when they do not attend GSA/QSA meetings. LGBTQ-inclusive policies contribute to safer and less hostile school environments for students¹⁰.

Improved Mental Health and Student Well-Being

GSAs/QSAs significantly improve LGBTQ students' psychosocial well-being and self-esteem and help to foster an accepting, inclusive school climate. GSAs/QSAs also work to decrease feelings of depression and despair for many LGBTQ youth¹¹ which helps to reduce suicide ideation and attempts for these students¹².

Higher Self-Esteem and Positive Identity Development

GSA/QSA membership is associated with greater comfort with one's sexual orientation and gender identity¹³ and overall positive identity development¹⁴. GSAs/QSAs can help students feel affirmed by their peers, and supported by a welcoming, caring, respectful, safe and inclusive school culture. All of these supports help students to cultivate feelings of pride in both themselves and others¹⁵.

Improved Work Ethic and School Attendance

Being a member of a GSA/QSA is associated with increased school achievement for LGBTQ youth¹⁶. Trans youth, in particular, report better grades¹⁷. Additionally, GSAs/QSAs decrease the risk for LGBTQ students to drop out of high school¹⁸ and to miss school due to fear of bullying and harassment¹⁹. As well, GSA/QSA membership can create long-term positive benefits for LGBTQ students, such as enhanced psychosocial well-being and an increased chance of post-secondary school attainment²⁰.

Increased Sense of Empowerment, Pride and Hope

GSAs/QSAs provide opportunities for LGBTQ and allied students to develop advocacy and leadership skills through activities such as:

- educating school community members (students, staff, families and community partners) about the effects of bullying and harassment
- modelling ways to positively intervene in discrimination.
- helping to inform school policies related to supporting diversity, equity and human rights.

LGBTQ students are motivated and empowered when they:

- have a voice
- feel part of a group
- can use information to enhance LGBTQ rights²¹

Challenging Heteronormativity and Increased Visibility of LGBTQ Identities

One powerful benefit of GSAs/QSAs is the increased representation of visible LGBTQ identities in schools. This visibility can help to challenge dominant, and often stereotypical gender norms. Through education and awareness-building, GSAs/QSAs can create spaces for the celebration of diversity and many different expressions of identity in schools. When students don't feel they need to hide who they are, they often have a more positive school experience. Relationships with peers and school staff members are also greatly improved when students feel supported to express themselves²².

Allied students are students who do not identify as LGBTQ but work to support a safe and caring learning environment for all students.

Building Positive Relationships

GSAs/QSAs provide safe spaces for students to develop positive relationships with both peers and school staff²³. When students can connect with peers experiencing similar issues, special bonds are created. Students may share experiences about:

- coming out to their families and friends
- exploring their identities
- navigating family life
- finding supportive adult mentors²⁴

How Do GSAs/QSAs Support Heterosexual and Allied Students?

Many, and often unintentional, sexist remarks can be heard every day in school. These frequently include:

- “You throw like a girl.”
- “Why are you wearing pink, dude.”
- “That’s so gay.”

Sexist remarks are discriminatory against women and girls. They assume that females are “lesser” than males. Sexist comments are not only harmful to women and girls, but also to men and boys. They can be used to bully men and boys about their masculinity. They often put people into rigid “gender boxes.” This is harmful because it limits expressions of masculinity and femininity. Ultimately, gender stereotyping and harassment limits all students. If students fear being bullied for who they are, they cannot fully express their true selves. Gender oppression means that students cannot fully engage or flourish in their schools. For example, sexism and gender stereotyping diminishes student feelings of safety and inclusion. They also negatively impact a student’s mental health. Bullying and/or silence around LGBTQ issues create unsafe learning environments for all students.

GSAs/QSAs can challenge stereotypes and help all students feel safe and respected by:

- promoting a climate of gender inclusion
- affirming diverse identities
- cultivating respect for differences

As a result, GSAs/QSAs play an important role in challenging and changing school cultures.

They can be an important tool for engaging the entire school community in addressing many larger safety issues. These include:

- gender-related bullying, violence and harassment

1 in 12 heterosexual students reported being verbally harassed about their perceived sexual orientation. 1 in 4 reported being harassed about their gender expression.

- making school safer for all students, staff and families, including students with same gender parents or LGBTQ siblings or parents.

can attempt to support their members in coping with multiple and conflicting experiences of discrimination by striving to help decrease isolation felt by students whose identities are marginalized.

How Do GSAs/QSAs Support Diverse Student Identities?

Students may experience discrimination related to many factors. These can include, but are not limited to:

- gender identity and expression
- race
- ethnic or cultural origin
- Indigenous peoples/heritage
- religion
- socioeconomic background
- physical and mental ability
- sexual orientation

When these identities overlap or intersect for students, they may experience discrimination on multiple levels. They also frequently experience more barriers to full participation in their school. For example, Egale Canada Human Rights Trust highlighted that youth of colour are least comfortable discussing LGBTQ topics with anyone in their schools, including coaches, teachers, classmates and parents, and even with close friends²⁵. Youth of colour also experience lower perceived support from their GSA/QSA.²⁶ GSAs/QSAs

Endnotes:

¹ Veale, J., Saewyc, E., Frohard-Dourlent, H., Dobson, S., Clark, B., & The Canadian Trans Survey Research Group, (2015). *Being Safe, Being Me: Results of the Canadian Trans Youth Health Research Survey*. Vancouver, BC: Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable youth Centre, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia.

² 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.

³ Deming, E., Soule, K., Poulsen, N., Walker, T. (2014). Gay–Straight Alliances Impact on School Climate and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender Student Well-Being. *Vistas, Article 45*, 1-9.

⁴ See Veale et al. (2015).

⁵ Peter, T., Taylor, C., Ristock, J. & Edkins, T. (2015). Pride and Prejudice: Factors Affecting School Attachment Among Lesbian, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Girls. *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 19*(2), 249-273. DOI: 10.1080/10894160.2015.969127.

⁶ See Peter et al. (2015).

⁷ See Veale et al. (2015).

⁸ See Peter et al. (2015).

⁹ See Deming et al. (2014).

¹⁰ See Deming et al. (2014).

¹¹ See Toomey et al. (2011).

¹² See Deming et al. (2014).

¹³ See Toomey et al. (2011).

¹⁴ Liboro, R., Travers, R., & St. John, A. (2015). Beyond the Dialectics and Polemics: Canadian Catholic Schools Addressing LGBT Youth Issues. *The High School Journal, 98*(2), Winter 2015, 158-180. DOI: 10.1353/hsj.2015.0000

¹⁵ Murphy, H. (2012). Improving the Lives of Students, Gay and Straight Alike: Gay-Straight Alliances and the Role of School Psychologists. *Psychology in the Schools, 49*(9), 883-891. DOI: 10.1002/pits.21643.

¹⁶ See Toomey et al. (2011).

¹⁷ See Veale et al., (2015).

¹⁸ See Toomey et al. (2011).

¹⁹ See Toomey et al. (2011).

²⁰ See Deming et al. (2014).

²¹ See Murphy (2012).

²² See Deming et al. (2014).

²³ See Liboro et al. (2015).

²⁴ See Deming et al. (2014).

²⁵ See Taylor et al. (2011).

²⁶ Poteat, V., Calzo, J., Mundy-Shephard, A., Scheer, J., Yoshikawa, H., Gray, M., Lipkin, A., Perrotti, J., Shaw, M. (2015). Contextualizing Gay-Straight Alliances: Student, Advisor, and Structural Factors Related to Positive Youth Development Among Members. *Child Development, 86*(1), 176–193.