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 school. 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 transgender, genderqueer, or gender-diverse students who may experience rejection by their families. 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-being. Positive impacts of GSAs/QSAs include:

Greater School Attachment and Connectedness
Strong attachment to school is an important part of positive youth development. It is related to:

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

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 peers. For trans (transgender, transsexual, genderqueer) youth in particular, school connectedness is strongly associated with better mental health. GSAs/QSAs serve to enhance school connectedness, personal well-being, mental health, and can help LGBTQ youth feel supported and to excel at school.

Increased Safety and Decreased Incidents of Bullying
Students who attend schools with GSAs/QSAs report:

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

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 students.

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 youth, which helps to reduce suicide ideation and attempts for these students.

Higher Self-Esteem and Positive Identity Development
GSA/QSA membership is associated with greater comfort with one’s sexual orientation and gender identity and overall positive identity development. 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 others.
Positive Impacts of GSAs/QSAs

Improved Work Ethic and School Attendance
Being a member of a GSA/QSA is associated with increased school achievement for LGBTQ youth. Trans youth, in particular, report better grades. Additionally, GSAs/QSAs decrease the risk for LGBTQ students to drop out of high school and to miss school due to fear of bullying and harassment. 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 attainment.

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 rights

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 themselves.

Building Positive Relationships
GSAs/QSAs provide safe spaces for students to develop positive relationships with both peers and school staff. 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 mentors

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 feel 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
• making school safer for all students, staff and families, including students with same gender parents or LGBQT siblings or parents.

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, classmatess and parents, and even with close friends. Youth of colour also experience lower perceived support from their GSA/QSA.

Endnotes:

4 See Veale et al. (2015).
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).
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).