

CREATING WELCOMING, CARING, RESPECTFUL & SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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

Every student has a right to belong to a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) or Queer-Straight Alliance (QSA). As a student, you also have the right to start a GSA/QSA if your school does not have one. Look for a diverse group of allies to help start a GSA/QSA in your school. Allies are people who support and stand up for the human and civil rights of people who identify as LGBTQ. Allies could be students or staff.

Find a Staff Liaison (Advisor)

Notify your school leadership, so that they can identify a supportive liaison for the GSA/QSA. Think about staff who

GSA/QSA liaison(s) add stability and continuity to the group.

If your school leadership is not able to find a GSA/QSA liaison, your principal may serve as the staff liaison. You may also consider asking a community member supervised by a staff member. If no staff or community liaison is available, your principal will contact the school board and the Minister of Education who will, in turn, appoint a responsible adult to work with your GSA/QSA.

Work with school leadership

Once the GSA/QSA liaison(s) is in place, continue to work with your school leadership. The school leadership team, which includes the principal, is an important connection between students, teachers, parents, school system leaders and the larger community. Supportive school leadership is essential in creating welcoming, caring, respectful, safe and inclusive school environments.

Promote your GSA/QSA

Together with your GSA/QSA liaison(s), discuss the best ways to promote your GSA/QSA within your school. Spread the word by using a variety of communication tools. You may consider including messages announcing the first meeting on your school website, school announcements or a poster.

Sometimes just knowing their school has a GSA/QSA makes students feel safe and affirmed, even if they never attend a GSA/QSA meeting.

Remember to emphasize that all students and staff are welcome to be part of your school's GSA/QSA. Reach out to both LGBTQ and non LGBTQ students – the group's diversity can be its greatest strength.

Plan the first meeting with your liaison

Work with your GSA/QSA liaison(s) to design the agenda for your first meeting:

- **Start with an icebreaker.** 'Getting to Know You' or other teambuilding activities help members feel comfortable and build trust among the group.

- **Lead a conversation on what you will name your group.** The group can be called a GSA or a QSA or you may choose a different name. For example, some schools call their groups a Straight and Gay Alliance (SAGA), Acceptance Club, Diversity Group or Spectrum Club.
- **Determine when, where and how often the group will meet.** Remember that some students may feel uncomfortable and nervous when first attending meetings. Try to find a location in your school with an atmosphere that accommodates the comfort levels of all group members.

Build a strong and effective group

Once your group is underway, it may be helpful to establish the following:

- **Mission or vision statement.** A guiding statement of core principles can help focus your group. It can also demonstrate the importance of a GSA/QSA in a school community. You may wish to organize your vision and value statements to include principles related to diversity, equity, human rights and social justice.
- **Guidelines.** Consider ground rules to guide group discussions and encourage responsible and respectful behaviours. For effective communication and building trust, it is important to ensure
 - everyone has an opportunity to participate
 - confidentiality and safety (no gossip or labels)
- **Promote your mission.** Posters and other forms of communication educate students and staff about the diversity in your school. It is important to maintain a positive, inclusive tone in all communications. The presence of visual media throughout your school displaying words such as *lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer* can send a powerful message of inclusion.
- **Be inclusive.** Reinforce the importance of straight allies in the group. Make an extra effort to ensure the GSA/QSA is welcoming to all LGBTQ students as well as students with differing abilities, languages, socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds. Your school's GSA/QSA should be a safe, respectful, caring and welcoming space for everyone.

Remember, you do not need to know all the answers at the beginning - you will learn as you go.

Ideas for action

Work with the GSA/QSA 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 diversity themed movies
- hosting guest speakers
- holding joint meetings and events with other school groups
- writing articles for the school website, blog, newspaper, yearbook, etc.
- networking with local LGBTQ community groups
- doing web searches and watching videos on relevant issues
- suggesting LGBTQ student resources for your school library
- creating displays about LGBTQ history
- starting a book club
- inviting LGBTQ school alumni to speak to your group or school
- planning activities to celebrate such events as:
 - Random Acts of Kindness week (week of February 14)
 - Pink Shirt Day (the last Wednesday in February)
 - Day of Silence (mid-April)
 - Day of Pink (second Wednesday in April)
 - Mental Health Awareness Week (first week of May)
 - International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (May 17)
 - National Coming Out Day (October 11)
 - Purple Spirit Day (mid-October)
 - National Bullying Awareness Week (third week of November)
 - 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.