

# GSA Startup Guide

## Steps to Starting Your GSA in the Face of Resistance



### STEP 1

#### Know the Law

The law is on the side of those who want to start a GSA. If you encounter resistance, or your GSA is not given the same access to resources as other clubs, contact Lambda Legal or the ACLU for assistance.

#### Demonstrate the Need for a GSA

1. Show the statistics to your school board and administration
2. Compile and provide a list of interested students and staff
3. Have local LGBTQ+ speakers educate admin and staff



### STEP 2



### STEP 3

#### Show the Proven Benefits of GSAs

GSAs create a safer school environment for all students - not just LGBTQ+ students. GSAs contribute to the success of the entire student body. Show your school board and administration the statistics that demonstrate this.

#### Enlist the Assistance of the Pre-Existing Power Structure

Having your administration, counselors, school psychologists, and others on your side can help you navigate any resistance you encounter.



### STEP 4



### STEP 5

#### Submit Your Proposal Letter, and Write Your Mission Statement

Prepare your club proposal following school guidelines, and work with GSA members to determine your club's mission and goals.

**Your GSA is Up and Running! What's Next?**  
A GSA is just STEP 1 to Creating a Safe and Affirming School.

**NEXT: Learn how to build PILLARS OF SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL**



### STEP 6



# Statistics Concerning LGBTQ+ Students in Schools

- LGBTQ+ youth report overwhelming “rejection and harassment” from “families, schools, religious institutions, and community or neighborhood (Higa et al., 2014, para. 33).”
- LGBTQ+ youth are 2-7 TIMES more likely to attempt suicide than students who identify as heterosexual (Youth.gov, n.d.).
- The mental health risks faced by LGBTQ+ youth are most associated with experiencing “discrimination, negative interactions, harassment, and bullying” - especially from peers and adults at school (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016).
- Even though 85% of LGBTQ+ youth experience harassment and bullying at school each year, according to one study 57% opted not to report the incident to a teacher or administration, and, of those who did report the incidents, 62% stated that nothing was done (Sinclair & Reece, 2016; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016).
- Transgender youth are at a significantly greater risk of some types of harassment or maltreatment than their gay peers. These include being scorned, physically attacked, and being kicked out of their homes (Sutherland, 2019).
- 42 percent of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, including more than half of transgender and nonbinary youth (Youth.gov, n.d.).
- 25% of transgender youth have attempted suicide (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016).
- LGBTQ students were more than 2x as likely to have been physically assaulted at school than their non-LGBTQ peers (Underhill, 2017).
- 57.6% of LGBTQ students stated that they feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation. 43.3% said they feel unsafe due to their gender expression (Hannah, 2017).
- LGBTQ+ students who experienced school-based harassment and victimization had lower grade point averages than their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Sinclair & Reece, 2016, p. 110). In fact, LGBTQ students who have suffered bullying and harassment are 3x more likely than their non-LGBTQ peers to miss school, and 2x more likely to reject the concept of attending college (Hannah, 2017).
- 75% of non-LGBTQ+ youth identify as supportive of LGBTQ+ youth, yet 92% of LGBTQ+ youth report receiving negative messaging about their sexual and/or gender identities at school. When the majority of non-LGBTQ+ youth are vocal supporters, school-wide LGBTQ+ negativity decreases (Underhill, 2017).
- 95% of LGBTQ youth report hearing negative remarks about their sexual orientation and gender expression (Hannah, 2017).
- 16% of LGBTQ of color, and 8% of white LGBTQ youth are homeless (Youth.gov, n.d.)
- Some LGBTQ students have reported hearing statements hostile to the LGBTQ+ community from school staff, faculty, and administration (Stonefish & Lafreniere, 2015).
- All students in schools with Gay Straight Alliances are more accepting and inclusive of all forms of diversity - not only in terms of gender and sexuality, but diversity of religious beliefs, race, and ethnicity (Mayo, 2013).

## References

- Hannah, J. L. (2017). *One student at a time: A reflection of support for a first-year GSA club and its impact on perceived acceptance for LGBTQ students. The Clearing House*, 90(3):98-102. doi:10.1080/00098655.2017.1301154
- Higa, D., Hoppe, M. J., Lindhorst, T., Mincer, S., Beadnell, B., Morrison, D. M., Wells, E. A., Todd, A., & Mountz, S. (2014). *Negative and positive factors associated with the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. Youth & Society*, 46(5), 663–687. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X12449630>
- Mayo, J. B. (2013). *Critical pedagogy enacted in the gay-straight alliance: New possibilities for a third space in teacher development. Educational Researcher*, 42(5):266-275. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23462392>
- Sinclair J., & Reece, B. J. (2016). *Gay-straight alliances in the battle for rights: A tipping point for progress over prohibition. Interchange*, 47:109-120. doi:10.1007/s10780-015-9257-3
- Stonefish, T. & Lafreniere, K. D. (2015). *Embracing diversity: The dual role of gay-straight alliances. Canadian Journal of Education*, 38(4). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1086834.pdf>
- Sutherland, D. K. (2019). *The push for transgender inclusion: Exploring boundary spanning in the gay-straight alliance. Sociology Compass*, 13:e12739. doi:10.1111/soc4.12739
- Underhill, C. (2017). *Navigating spaces: Moving along the (dis)enfranchisement spectrum through a high school GSA. Theory in Action*, 10(4):89-99. doi:10.3798/tia.1937-0237.1728
- Youth.gov (n.d.). *Behavioral health. https://youth.gov/youth-topics/lgbtq-youth/health-depression-and-suicide*



# Benefits of GSAs to Individual Students & the School as a Whole

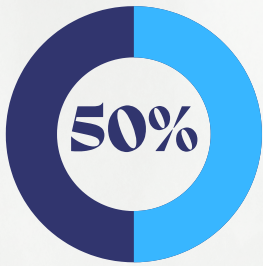
## *Benefits to Individual Students*

- LGBTQ students involved in GSAs reported that the GSA helped them with 3 types of empowerment. The first is empowerment through knowledge - they knew their rights, and how to advocate for them. The second is personal empowerment - they had good self esteem and a sense of agency, which is the realization that you have the power to act to change situations. The third is relational empowerment; they had a sense of belonging to a community and of improving the school for future students (Calzo et al., 2018).
- Students in schools with GSAs indicate the presence of a safer school climate and more supportive teachers/staff. They earn better grades, are less isolated, are less likely to skip school due to fear, feel a greater sense of well-being, and have higher self-esteem (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016; Hannah, 2017; Porta et al., 2017; Calzo et al., 2018).
- GSA membership promotes self-confidence (Sutherland, 2019).
- GSAs represent safety, and the more years a GSA is present in a school, the more the perception of safety among the student body increases (Ioverno et al., 2016).
- LGBTQ+ youth in schools with a GSA experience less bullying and harassment (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016; Porta et al., 2017).
- LGBTQ+ youth in schools with a GSA experience fewer mental health and substance abuse issues and take part in fewer risky behaviors. They are less likely to smoke, drink alcoholic beverages, experience suicidal thoughts or actions, engage in casual sex, and suffer from depression (Poteat et al., 2016; Sinclair & Reece, 2016; Porta et al., 2017).
- Students in a GSA had lower likelihood of risky sexual behavior (Poteat et al., 2016).
- Members of a GSA report feeling unified, perceiving the GSA to be a place of community and connection (Porta et al., 2017; Sutherland, 2019).
- LGBTQ+ students in a school with a GSA feel more connected to the school overall, with a greater sense of belonging and engagement (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016; Hannah, 2017).
- LGBTQ+ youth attending schools with a GSA perceive their schools to be safer and more supportive than LGBTQ+ youth attending schools without a GSA. They are also more likely to report that their school is safe, tolerant, and respectful (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016).
- LGBTQ+ youth in a school with a GSA are more likely to attend college (Porta et al., 2017; Calzo et al., 2018).
- Students in a school with a GSA are more able to find and identify adult allies (Sinclair & Reece, 2016).
- GSAs help adolescents develop the knowledge and agency to counter the heteronormative culture (Sutherland, 2019).
- GSAs are gateways to accessing community resources, including organizations outside of school and supportive adults (Porta et al., 2017).
- A study of LGBTQ college students found that a campus group for sexual minorities was the single largest protective factor in the students' lives. It had the greatest predictive effect on sexual minority identity development, reduced concerns about acceptance, positive identity affirmation, and reduced internalized homonegativity (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016)
- School-based LGBTQ+ support organizations can help students develop self reflection, bravery, leadership, agency, and civic engagement (Porta et al., 2017; Calzo et al., 2018)



# LGBTQ+ STUDENT STATISTICS

Why do your LGBTQ+ students need a GSA? Here are some statistics that demonstrate the difficulties LGBTQ+ adolescents encounter.



More than half of Transgender Youth have **Seriously Considered Suicide**



1 in 4 Transgender Youth have **Attempted Suicide**

LGBTQ+ Youth are **2-7 Times** more likely to **Attempt Suicide** than their non-LGBTQ+ peers



**42% of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered suicide in the past year**

LGBTQ+ youth report **OVERWHELMING Harassment and Rejection** from



families



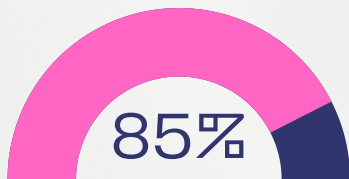
faith communities



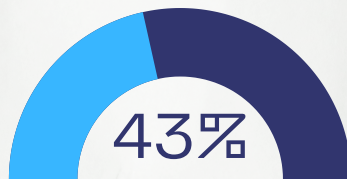
schools



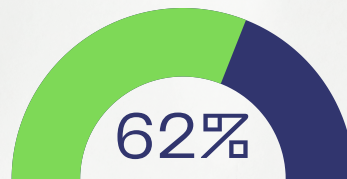
communities



of LGBTQ+ Students **Experience Harassment and Bullying** at School Each Year



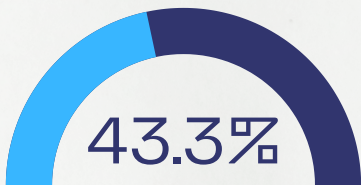
Only **43% Reported** the **Bullying Incidents** to a Teacher or Administrator



of Those who Reported the Incidents Stated that **Nothing was Done**

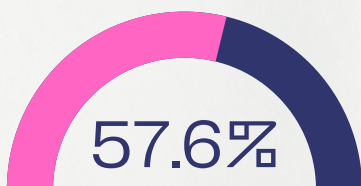


**16% of LGBTQ youth of color, and 8% of white LGBTQ youth are homeless**



of LGBTQ+ Students **feel unsafe** due to their gender expression

LGBTQ+ students were more than **2 Times\*** as likely to be physically assaulted at school  
\*than their heterosexual peers



of LGBTQ+ Students **feel unsafe** because of their sexual orientation

**Some LGBTQ+ students reported hearing statements hostile to the LGBTQ+ community from FACULTY and ADMINISTRATION**

LGBTQ+ Youth who Experienced School-Based Harassment:



had **Lower GPAs**



were **3x more likely** than non-LGBTQ+ peers to miss school



**95% heard negative remarks** about their sexual orientation and gender expression at school



Were **2x more likely** to not consider higher education

3 of 4 non-LGBTQ+ youth identify as allies of LGBTQ+ youth



All students in schools with GSAs are more accepting and inclusive of all forms of diversity...



... not only in terms of gender and sexuality, but also diversity of religious beliefs, race, and ethnicity.





# GSAs Improve Schools

GSAs improve schools for individual students, and they improve the school as a whole.

## LGBTQ+ STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS WITH A GSA\*

Earn better grades



Are less isolated

Have fewer mental health issues



Are less likely to skip school



Have a greater sense of well-being, higher self-esteem, and more self-confidence

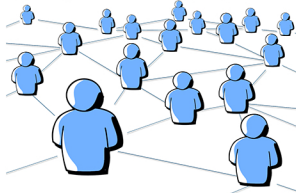


\*compared with LGBTQ+ students in schools with no GSA



Experience less bullying and harassment

**Feel more connected to the school with a greater sense of belonging and engagement**



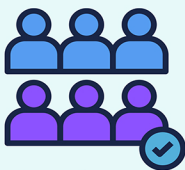
**Are more able to identify adult allies**

Are less likely to smoke, drink alcohol, or engage in risky sexual behavior



**Are more likely to consider school a safe, tolerant, and respectful place**

## BENEFITS OF GSAs to SCHOOLS AS A WHOLE



**All students in schools with a GSA have better educational outcomes**



**The presence of a GSA in a school lowers ALL FORMS OF BULLYING**

**Schools with GSAs have greater tolerance of all differences**

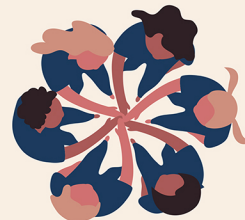


**GSAs help build student civic engagement**



Engaged students become engaged citizens

**Schools with a GSA are safer for the ENTIRE student body**



**GSAs help students learn to feel empowered in the face of injustice**

References available at [creating safeschools.com](http://creating safeschools.com)



# Creating Safe Schools

## Steps to Building Pillars of Support Throughout Your School



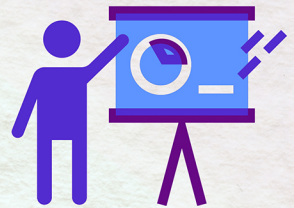
### STEP 1

#### Learn the Language, and Use It

Read the language and terminology guides to know how to speak to and about the LGBTQ+ community with respect and understanding. Learn students' pronouns. Identify your pronouns. Correct others when they use disrespectful language.

#### Encourage/Initiate Staff-Wide LGBTQ+ Training

1. Conduct a school needs-assessment to target training needs
2. Show the faculty the statistics, and how they can make a difference
3. Don't just HAVE an enumerated anti-bullying policy, train faculty on how to enforce it.
4. If you have a GSA, have the advisor/students speak to the faculty



### STEP 2



### STEP 3

#### Have a School Anti-Bullying Policy that Includes LGBTQ+ Bullying

It is important to include anti-LGBTQ+ bullying in the school anti-bullying policy. It is also vital to train faculty and staff on how to enforce that policy, and why enforcement is necessary. Additionally, tell students about the policy and repercussions for violating it.

#### Steps Allies Can Take to Support the LGBTQ+ Community Every Day

**\*ONE supportive adult\* in the life of an LGBTQ+ adolescent can reduce the risk of suicide by 40%**

Actions can include: display support in your classroom; respect student pronouns; teach an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum; enforce respectful language among students and staff; actively enforce the anti-bullying policy; request LGBTQ+ training; attend GSA meetings even if you are not the sponsor; support GSA fundraisers; encourage students to be affirming and respectful.



### STEP 4



# *Actions Allies can Take*

## **Ways to be an ally to the LGBTQ+ community every day**

### **In the Classroom**

- Display your support in your classroom – the Safe Space symbol, rainbow colors, trans colors, non-binary colors, etc.
- Announce your preferred pronouns to your class and in your email signature.
- Announce GSA activities, such as conferences or fundraisers, to your classes. Encourage support of the GSA.
- Speak inclusively to your classes (and all students/staff) whether or not you believe you are speaking to any members of the LGBTQ+ community. First, you don't know if you are, or not. Second, you are modeling behavior for all the other students, and benefitting every student they come into contact with.
- Include LGBTQ+ issues in your curriculum.
- Ensure your curriculum contains no negative LGBTQ+ content, language, etc.
- Have information available about LGBTQ+ resources in your community, such as support groups, health clinics and hotlines.
- Have accessible print materials related to LGBTQ+ issues. Include information and resources concerning name change and gender change.
- Be aware that not all LGBTQ+ students want to be open, and support your students where they are on their journey.

### **In the School as a Whole**

- Request LGBTQ+ professional development training from your administration and school district.
- Enforce the school's anti-bullying policy.
- Speak up every time you hear students or staff use anti-LGBTQ+ language.
- Wear attire sold by the GSA, like t-shirts. That's an easy way to show LGBTQ+ students that you are an ally, and help build a safer school climate.

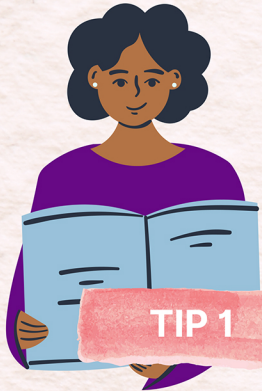
### **All the Time & Everywhere**

- Vote, and encourage your students to vote when they are eligible.
- Learn LGBTQ+ terminology, and use it. Be willing to adapt as language changes.
- Be an outspoken advocate everywhere you go.
- Be aware of cis-normative and hetero-normative systems, and work to counter them.
- Be aware that when kids (and adults) come out, they are at their most vulnerable, so be an especially vigilant ally at that time.



# GSA Curriculum Guide & Tips

## Your GSA is Up and Running! Here are some Suggestions for Success



### Having an engaged faculty advisor is a strong contributor to GSA success

The GSA sponsoring faculty member might want to help train student GSA leaders in how to organize, plan, and run their GSA (Sutherland, 2019). This arrangement allows for the GSA to benefit from structure and oversight while also helping develop student agency.

**TIP 1**

### Open each meeting with a predetermined set of activities.

1. Many clubs begin with introductions and preferred pronouns
2. Start each meeting discussing group ground rules and group norms
3. Summarizing the last meeting and the upcoming agenda can help all attendees feel on-board.



### Start with the 10-Curriculum Start-Up Guide to get your group going

The GSA Start-Up Guide will help your group establish meeting norms and discover why members are attending. It will assist you in conducting important conversations about language, family, peer and community support, resources, and advocacy opportunities.

## Determine YOUR GSA's goals moving forward

**Assess and take into account member needs and desires.**

**Will your focus be Advocacy, LGBTQ+ Education, Social Support, Small Group Support - or, most likely, a bit of each?**

Most groups focus on learning about the LGBTQ+ community's history and specific needs, advocating for LGBTQ+ people and rights, developing peer and community relationships, and providing individual support to members in times of need.

### Where is YOUR Group Going to Go & How Will it Get There?





# Education & Knowledge

## How the GSA can plan a curriculum to share knowledge of the LGBTQ+ community & history

### Suggested Topics

- The history of LGBTQ+ rights in the United States and the world
- History of inequality as a whole in the United States and the world
- The history of transgender rights and how they have not always aligned with LGB rights as a whole
- The unique experience of being a queer person of color
- Media portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community, historically and currently
- Book club: discussions of books important to the LGBTQ+ community
- LGBTQ+ people in history
- Current legislation: how to read it; how to advocate for (or against) it; the legislative process
- Current court cases, and how the legal system serves as a check on legislation
- Available services: clinics, hotlines, support groups
- Mental health awareness: signs to watch out for, how to get help for yourself or others
- Multiculturalism: how gender, sexuality, and race intersect
- Invite the faculty and administration, to present information to them about LGBTQ+ issues, and school-based concerns
- Guest speakers on related topics: lawyers, politicians, lobbyists, health care workers, community advocates, social media influencers
- Discuss, model and teach responses to anti-LGBTQ+ actions and rhetoric in the school and the community

### Remember

**When exploring LGBTQ+ history and issues, make sure to encompass the entirety of the community's history, to include that of bisexual, queer, asexual, demisexual, and transgender individuals, as well as LGBTQ+ people of color. GSAs which discuss issues of racism help LGBTQ+ people of color feel a sense of belonging in the group.**



# Advocacy Ideas

## How the GSA members can engage in advocacy in the school and community

### In the School

Be active with your school district's school board. Know the agendas and policies, and suggest initiatives to improve school climates. Team with other GSAs in the district, and elicit community support at school board meetings

- Educate administration and faculty on LGBTQ+ issues and school-based concerns, to advocate for needed changes.
- Educate administration and faculty on binary gender concepts, and on issues of discrimination and harassment of LGBTQ+ adolescents to advocate for support.
- Work on responses to anti-LGBTQ+ statements/actions by students, faculty, and staff. It can be important to learn that anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment often stems from ignorance rather than malice, and work to counter that ignorance with information.
- Educate peers about what LGBTQ+ students face at school, to help change and improve school culture, and student attitudes and behaviors.
- Observe the Day of Silence ([dayofsilence.org](http://dayofsilence.org)) in the school (April); encourage students, faculty, and administration to observe it as well, and share its meaning.
- Educate on and observe the Transgender Day of Remembrance (November)
- Have a Pride Prom
- Work with administration and the school board to educate about and challenge heteronormative policies, such as gender-binary bathrooms, locker rooms, dress codes, and gender-based segregation. Bathrooms and locker rooms are some of the most dangerous places on a school campus for LGBTQ+ students, especially transgender students.
- Give classroom presentations on LGBTQ+ issues, the experience of being LGBTQ+, why terminology matters, etc.

- Arrange the following at school: Ally Week, No Name-Calling Week, Think B4 You Speak ([thinkb4youspeak.com](http://thinkb4youspeak.com)); educate administration, faculty, staff and student what the weeks mean, and why.
- Team with other school organizations, including those concerning racial and religious issues, to counter all forms of oppression.
- Celebrate LGBT History Month (October).
- Ally with other groups to celebrate the entire school culture. Celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (January) and Black History Month (February).

### In the Community

- Speak to public officials about LGBTQ+ issues to advocate for change.
- Share information with faculty, administration, and the student body on current policy initiatives, legislation, and court cases concerning LGBTQ+ issues.
- Participate in community panel discussions on LGBTQ+ issues.
- Work to educate current and future educators on LGBTQ+ issues in schools, through local colleges and educator training through the district.
- Lobby at the State Capitol (for instance, during Lobby Day); lobby on behalf of (or against) LGBTQ+-related legislation as the legislation is being discussed by legislators



# Build Support

## How the GSA members can build a support network in the school and community

### In the School

- Put on a queer prom – make it affordable, to avoid financial barriers from preventing attendance (Hint: Seek out community sponsors).
- Host movie screenings.
- Start a social media group to connect outside of school.
- Host a book club.
- Have a “Bring a Friend” day, to introduce new members to the club, and expand your club’s school associations. (Similarly, have a “Bring a Teacher” day where each member asks a teacher to join them at the meeting).
- One GSA would take time for members to share any “Big Gay Moments” they had experienced since the past meeting. These could be positive or negative, but they were ways to process notable events that occurred outside the security of the group.
- Send out flyers/invitations to teachers and staff inviting them to your meetings, to help build a structure of support throughout the school – keep the invites coming, even if people don’t attend the first time, they might the 3rd, or 10th!

### Team with Other Clubs to:

- Paint a diversity mural.
- Celebrate Black History Month
- Participate in a school-based service project (painting lockers, planting trees, passing out “You Matter” stickers, ...).

### In the Community

- Attend GSA Regional Meetings and Conferences
- Have a GSA Field Day – arrange for GSAs from all local/county schools to meet up somewhere locally; invite speakers, community members, and representatives from local LGBTQ+ organizations.
- Provide a forum for engagement with various community members – LGBTQ+ and other issues of privilege, diversity, politics. Knowledge, advocacy, and community support all intertwine with this approach.
- Represent your GSA in local pride festivals and parades



# *Small Group Support*

## **Ideas to Provide Small Group Support to Members**

---

Sometimes students will need support with difficulties beyond the peer and community support regular GSA meetings and activities can provide. In these instances, it's important to be able to reach out to school psychologists or social workers for additional mental health assistance.

Not only do mental health professionals serve as important resources, they can work with small groups to facilitate discussions on difficult issues and help the adolescents develop resilience, self-reflection, and coping mechanisms.

If members of your GSA express a desire for small group support, reach out to your school mental health professionals and administration to make the necessary arrangements. Often these groups should be limited in number in order to allow for more personal interactions.

***Some GSAs designate one meeting a month as closed to non-members, to allow for more open discussions of issues.***