Gay–Straight Student Alliances in Alberta Schools

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A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

This guide was authored by Kristopher Wells.

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Contents

Executive Summary

This guide draws upon current legislation, law, educational policy and research to develop a critical framework for creating and sustaining gay–straight student alliances (GSAs) in Alberta schools. Practical strategies, suggestions and a list of frequently asked questions are provided to help school administrators, counsellors, teachers and students anticipate and overcome potential barriers and challenges to this important social justice and human rights work. GSAs are identified as a critical change agent that can help to create safe, caring and inclusive schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, queer (LGBTQ) students and their allies. Correspondingly, the three most significant factors in building healthy and resilient school communities for LGBTQ students are identified as (1) development of school policies on inclusion, (2) professional development training and awareness building, and (3) the active and visible presence of GSAs or associated LGBTQ support groups in schools.

LGBTQ Terms & Definitions*

Ally: A person, regardless of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, who supports and stands up for the human and civil rights of LGBTQ people.

Bisexual: A person who is attracted physically and emotionally to both males and females.

Gay: A person who is physically and emotionally attracted to someone of the same sex. The word *gay* can refer to both males and females, but is commonly used to identify males only.

Gender identity: A person's internal sense or feeling of being male or female. Gender expression relates to how a person presents his or her sense of gender to the larger society. Gender identity and gender expression are often closely linked with the term *transgender* or *trans-identified*.

GSA: A school-based gay–straight student alliance found in some high schools across North America.

Heterosexism: The assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that this sexual orientation is superior. Heterosexism is often expressed in more subtle forms than homophobia.

Heterosexual: A person who is sexually and emotionally attracted to someone of the opposite sex. Also commonly referred to as *straight*.

Homophobia: Fear and/or hatred of homosexuality in others, often exhibited by prejudice, discrimination, bullying or acts of violence.

Lesbian: A female who is attracted physically and emotionally to other females.

LGBTQ: A commonly used acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, transsexual, two-spirited and queer identities. *Sexual minority* is a synonymous term.

Queer: Historically, a negative term for homosexuality. More recently, the LGBTQ communities have reclaimed the word and use it in a positive way to refer to themselves.

Transgender/Trans-identified: A person whose gender identity, outward appearance, expression and/or anatomy does not fit into conventional expectations of male or female. Often used as an umbrella term to represent a wide range of nonconforming gender identities and behaviours.

Transphobia: The irrational fear of people whose actual or perceived gender identity/expression departs from stereotypical gender roles and expectations.

Transsexual: A person who experiences intense personal and emotional discomfort with their assigned birth gender. Some transsexuals may undergo treatments to physically alter their body and gender expression to correspond with what they feel their true gender is.

Two-spirited: Some Aboriginal people identify themselves as two-spirited rather than as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans-identified. Historically, in many Aboriginal cultures, two-spirited persons were respected leaders and medicine people and were often accorded special status based on their unique abilities to understand both male and female perspectives.
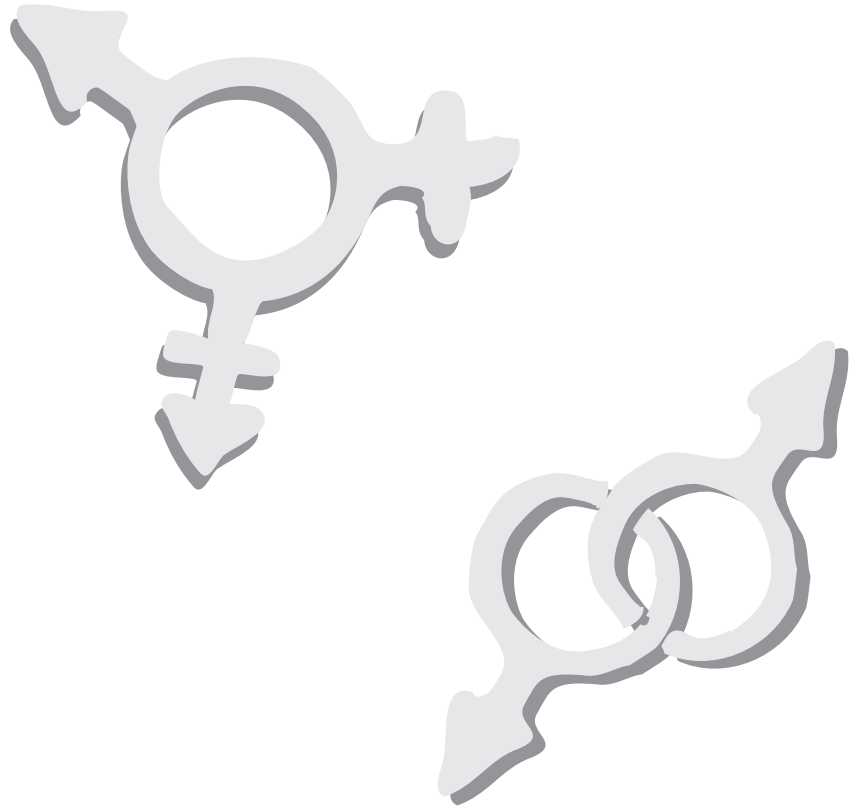
*Some terms and definitions have been adapted from the guidebook *Safe and Caring Schools for Lesbian and Gay Youth: A Teacher's Guide*, published by the Alberta Teachers' Association. More terms and expanded definitions are available on the ATA's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity webpage.

Introduction

This guidebook is part of a series of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified and queer (LGBTQ) educational resources produced by the Alberta Teachers' Association and is designed to assist teachers, school administrators and counsellors in understanding the educational and safety needs of students who are or are perceived as being LGBTQ. Specifically, the goals of this resource are to

- assist educators in creating safe and welcoming spaces for LGBTQ and allied students,
- create dialogue and build awareness about the health needs and safety concerns of LGBTQ and allied students,
- build the resiliency of LGBTQ and allied students, and
- develop the capacity of educators to support and sustain gay–straight student alliances (GSAs) in their schools.

The information presented in this guidebook is designed to provide teachers who are initiating GSAs with basic information on a complex and important issue. Please visit the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity section of the ATA website for a broader range of information on other LGBTQ educational issues.

LGBTQ Educational Issues at a Glance

Health and Safety Concerns

Research indicates that the most common perpetrators of youth violence are young, primarily white, heterosexual males (Health Canada 2005). In many instances this violence is often directed against those who are or are perceived as being LGBTQ. Correspondingly, the Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities (formerly known as the ATA's Safe and Caring Schools Project) has identified LGBTQ youth, or those labelled as such, as one of the most at-risk groups in Alberta schools.

Violence against LGBTQ students and adults occurs on a multitude of levels that can range from individual to collective acts. These acts may consist of behaviours that include homophobic name-calling (words like *fag, queer, dyke* when used in demeaning and hurtful ways), shunning

(a common bullying tactic among females) and stalking. Inappropriate behaviours like these can often lead to a progression of other more violent emotional and physical assaults. Even in schools where attempts are made to minimize verbal and physical harassment, LGBTQ youth can still experience the "oppression of silence." This silence may come in the form of avoidance of discussions of LGBTQ issues or in the absence of positive information or images of LGBTQ youth, adults and same-gender parented families.

Experiencing violence, either as a witness or as a victim, can have significant and lasting implications that may establish a spiral of self-destructive behaviour throughout a young person's life.

Sexual minorities are among the most frequently targeted victims of hate-motivated violence in Canada (Health Canada 2005). For LGBTQ youth, this victimization has been directly linked to a significant number of increased emotional and physical risk factors, which may include negative self-esteem, drug and alcohol abuse, feelings of depression and isolation, disruptive school behaviour, increased sexual activity and decreased academic performance (Peterkin and Risdon 2003; Ryan and Futterman 1998). In correlation to these risk factors, LGBTQ youth have been found to have suicide rates that are two to three times higher than their heterosexual peers (Fenaughty and Harré 2003).

Experiencing violence, either as a witness or as a victim, can have significant and lasting implications that may establish a spiral of self-destructive behaviour throughout a young person's life. Many LGBTQ youth often turn their feelings of hurt and despair inward, which manifests itself as a form of internalized homophobia. For many youth, the ultimate expression of internalized homophobia leads them to hate themselves for feeling different from the rest of society. In some cases, youth may also externalize their pain and hurt and become the perpetrators of violence toward others. Clearly, there are significant health and safety concerns for *both* heterosexual and non-heterosexual youth in schools. While many programs and support services exist to help heterosexual youth feel safe and secure in their schools, very few school-based programs are designed to help LGBTQ and allied students deal directly with hate-motivated prejudices, internalized homophobia and homophobic bullying.

Coming Out

Research shows that for many youth sexual identity is firmly established in early childhood (Ryan and Futterman 1998). Some students report having had a sense of their sexual orientation and gender identity in elementary school. As society becomes increasingly more accepting of LGBTQ persons, youth are beginning to come out at younger ages. For example, the average age for self-identification as a lesbian or gay person now occurs at the age of sixteen (Peterkin and Risdon 2003; Ryan and Futterman 1998). Unfortunately, as LGBTQ students become more visible they may also become increased targets for victimization. As a result, it

is important that teachers at all grade levels support LGBTQ students by helping them to develop a positive self-identity and a sense of feeling safe and cared for at school. Furthermore, many students come from LGBTQ families or have LGBTQ siblings. It is important for these students to feel that their families and identities are a valued and visible part of the classroom and larger school community.

Family Supports

Next to the family, schools play one of the most important roles in the lives of students. Unfortunately, some LGBTQ students may not come from families that are supportive of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Unlike other minority students whose families can help them positively reframe experiences of discrimination, many LGBTQ youth have families that are unsupportive and even discriminatory. LGBTQ youth are one of the few invisible minorities in schools. Often these students will not come out and be visible unless they feel their school is a safe environment. Because of the risk involved, a teacher should never reveal a student's sexual orientation or gender identity to a parent or colleague without the express consent of that student. Unwanted disclosures or breaches of confidentiality, whether at school or home, can have potentially devastating and possibly life-threatening consequences.

While it is important to respect a student's confidentiality, if you suspect that a student may be suicidal or is being subjected to abuse you must take appropriate professional action and ensure that the student receives immediate attention and support. At minimum, you should refer the student to a school counsellor or administrator, and that person will help to determine what further steps are necessary to protect the student.

Building Resilient School Communities

Several important factors can help teachers build resilient school-based communities and, in turn, reduce the health and safety concerns of LGBTQ youth. These protective and preventive factors include
- positive experiences with teachers, parents and other caregivers;
- school environments that value and embrace diversity;
- clear policies and guidelines that protect students from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity;
- visible allies and LGBTQ role models; and
- the establishment and support of school-based GSAs (Griffin et al., 2004; Lee 2002).

These resiliency factors strongly correlate with increased academic achievement, improved health and wellness, and positive social development. Supportive school environments make a tremendous difference in the health and achievement of all students. Schools that fail to address homophobia and heterosexism can create substantial personal and social costs to LGBTQ students, their families and the larger society. Schools must be places where LGBTQ young people and their families are accepted and supported, not threatened and isolated. Canadian courts have found that schools that fail to address homophobia and heterosexism can be considered to be in serious breach of their professional responsibilities and to be engaging in a form of educational malpractice.

Addressing the root causes of violence in schools requires a collaborative school and community approach that involves students, teachers, administrators, parents, community-based agencies and youth outreach programs. GSAs demonstrate one important example of a school-based collaborative initiative that values the unique contributions and diversity of all of its students, teachers and families.
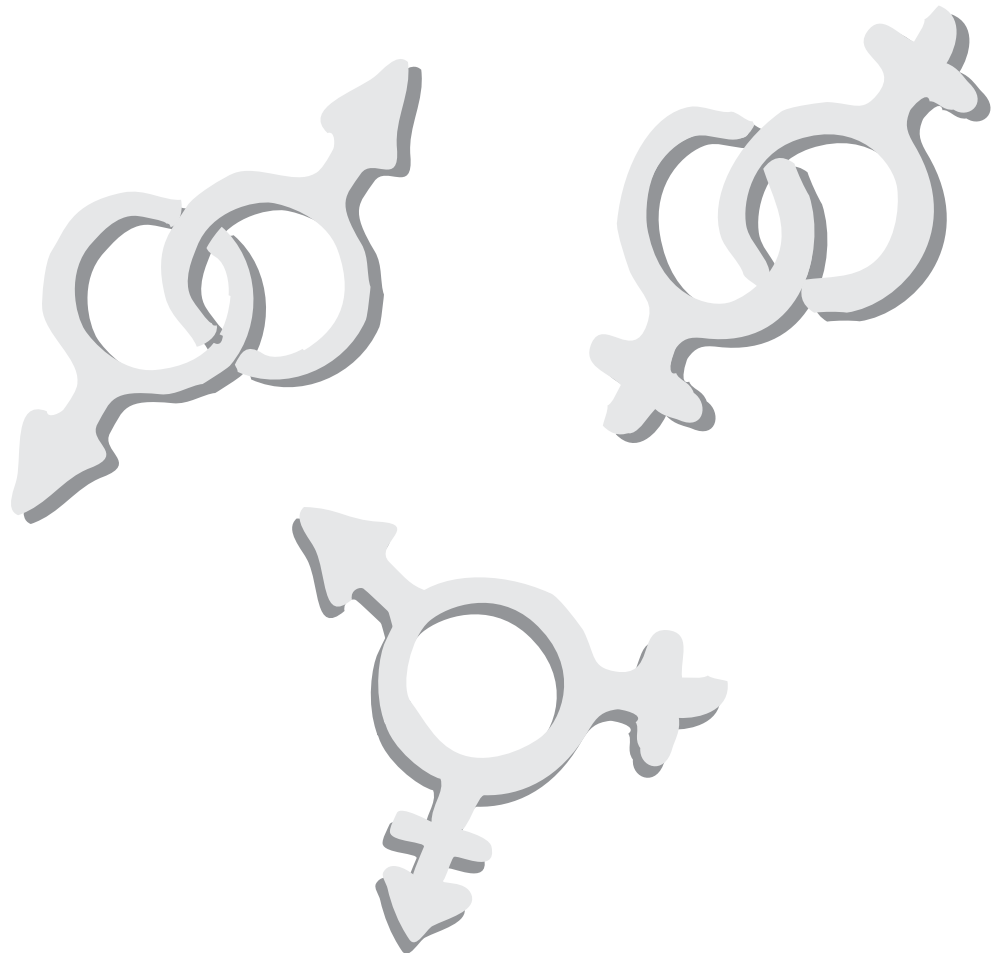
What Are Gay–Straight Student Alliances?

Gay–straight student alliances (GSAs) are student-run and teacher-supported school-based groups that work to create safe, caring and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ students and their allies in schools. Typically, GSAs are designed to provide a safe space for students to meet, socialize and support one another as they discuss their feelings and experiences related to sexual orientation and gender identity issues.

Importantly, GSAs are a confidential space in which *no* assumptions are made about a student's or a teacher's sexual orientation or gender identity. Some members of a GSA may be LGBTQ students or teachers, while others may have LGBTQ friends or family and want to become a supportive ally. As a result, assumptions about a person's sexual orientation or gender identity (whether the person is perceived as heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual or trans-identified) should never be made. All GSAs should strive to be welcoming spaces for all students and teachers who are interested in addressing homophobia, heterosexism and other forms of related discrimination and prejudice.

GSAs are a relatively new phenomenon in North American schools. The first known GSA started in 1989 in Concord, Massachusetts. Alberta's first GSA was established in 2000 at Lindsay Thurber Comprehensive High School in Red Deer. This GSA was formed as part of the school's highly successful STOP (Students and Teachers Opposing Prejudice) human rights program. Currently, there are GSAs in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. British Columbia has over 30 GSAs, and more than 2,000 GSAs exist in the United States. Many of these GSAs work within their schools to educate students and the larger school community about the negative effects of homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism. GSAs can also help students and staff to learn about diversity, respect and human rights in positive and supportive ways that recognize Canada's multicultural and pluralistic society and values.

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Why Are GSAs Important in Alberta Schools?

Contemporary research demonstrates that discrimination is rare within schools that actively promote an appreciation of difference and a sense of community. For example, the California Safe Schools Coalition issued a recent report on the impact of GSAs in California schools. This 2004 report found that in schools where GSAs had been established, students describe feeling

- safer at school,
- less likely to be harassed for their differences,
- more likely to have supportive adults who want them to succeed, and
- more likely to say that teachers treat them more fairly and with greater respect. (p. 20)

Corresponding to the findings above, another recent study (Lee 2002) reveals that student involvement in GSAs is reflected in increased academic achievement, improved attendance, enhanced work ethic, a sense of empowerment and an increased sense of hope for students' academic future (pp. 5–6). Importantly, GSA participants highlighted how "their involvement in the Alliance positively affected relationships with school administrators, teachers, family and peers" (Lee 2002, 7). Students in this study also spoke of new friendships, higher self-esteem, increased visibility and improved relationships at home and in school.

In Alberta, recent consultations with GSAs have revealed that they identify their alliances as important spaces that focus on "building a safe, accepting environment for all students" (SAGA 2005), which includes initiatives to address human rights, peer support and inclusive education. One such GSA describes itself as a

> group open to all students and staff who would like to either come with questions, support or simply to see what we are about. We offer a place of safety and support in allowing all students to be themselves and to deal with issues arising from their sexuality as well as from the many social challenges they face both in and out of school. We meet socially and at times will have videos and/or guest speakers as well as many other activities that promote an openness and spirit of tolerance for all peoples. (Straight and Gay Alliance 2005)

Important Guiding Legislation and Policies

Schools should promote and support environments that contribute positively to students' physical, psychological and emotional development. This responsibility extends to all students regardless of race, ethnicity, ability, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity. The following legal and legislative policies can assist schools in developing a policy framework that supports the establishment of GSAs and other social justice initiatives.

1. The Alberta *School Act* Section 45(8)

Available from the Queen's Printer, www.qp.gov.ab.ca/catalogue

A board shall ensure that each student enrolled in a school operated by the board is provided with a safe and caring environment that fosters and maintains respectful and responsible behaviors.
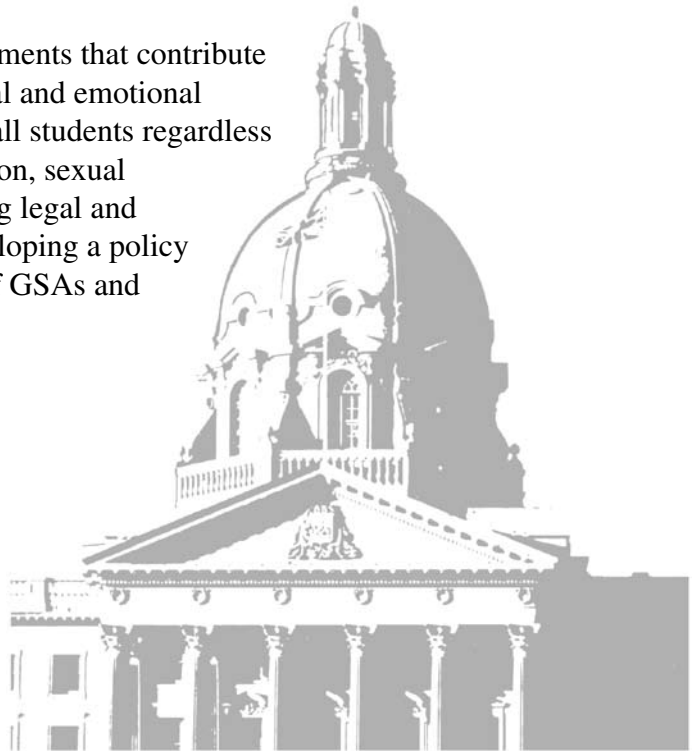
In the context of education, courts have held that publicly funded schools, school boards and the actions or in actions of school officials are subject to *Charter* scrutiny. As a result, all students have the right not to be discriminated against in school settings, though this right is often violated with respect to LGBTQ students. Educational professionals must realize that they have a mandated responsibility to ensure that LGBTQ youth and their families are treated with respect and integrity. Addressing homophobia, heterosexism and all predudice based on sexual identity is critical to this social responsibility. GSAs can provide one way for schools to actively live out their ethical, legal and professional obligations to create safe, caring and inclusive schools for all students.

2. The ATA Code of Professional Conduct

www.teachers.ab.ca, click on Professional Conduct (under Teaching in Alberta)

(1) The teacher teaches in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of all persons without prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, **sexual orientation**, **gender identity**,

physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry, place of origin, place of residence, socioeconomic background or linguistic background.

3. The Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers

www.teachers.ab.ca, click on Rights and Responsibilities (under Teaching in Alberta)

(9)   Teachers have the right to be protected against discrimination on the basis of prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, **sexual orientation**, **gender identity**, physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry, place of origin, place of residence, socioeconomic background or linguistic background and have the responsibility to refrain from practising these forms of discrimination in their professional duties.

4. ATA Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Long-Range Policy 18.A.35

www.teachers.ab.ca, click on About the ATA (under Policy and Position Papers)

The Alberta Teachers' Association supports the establishment of gay–straight alliance groups to create awareness and action that promotes the creation of safe learning environments for all students in Alberta high schools. [2005]

5. *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*

http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/charter

Section 15 (1) of the *Charter* states

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Although Section 15 (1) of the *Charter* does not explicitly make reference to sexual orientation in its equality provisions, since 1995 the courts have regarded sexual orientation as analogous to the other personal characteristics listed. The inclusion and the accommodation of difference represent the spirit of Section 15.

6. *Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act*

www.albertahumanrights.ab.ca

Although not expressly stated in the *Act*, as of April 2, 1998, **sexual orientation** is read into the *Act* by the Supreme Court of Canada as a protected ground of discrimination in Alberta.

7. Bill C-250 – *An Act to amend the Criminal Code* (Hate Propaganda)

http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/C-46

Bill C-250, which was passed in the House of Commons in February 2004, amends Section 318 (Hate Propaganda) and Section 319 (Incitement of Hatred) of the *Criminal Code of Canada* to include sexual orientation within the listing of identifiable groups against which hate propaganda is deemed a criminal offence. Correspondingly, the Edmonton Police Service's Hate and Bias Crime Unit considers threatening homophobic language to be a hate incident that should be reported to all school resource officers.

The Major Roles of School-Based GSAs

The listing (Griffin et al., 2004) on the following page identifies four major types of GSAs and some of their most common characteristics. By no means is this an exhaustive list. It is important to note that the nature and role of GSAs will change based on the perceived school climate and the needs and concerns of the students and teachers involved. In fact, in some conservative school cultures it might be very difficult to start a GSA. In these environments the creation of a safe space could be an important first step.

GSAs should not be understood as a one-size-fits-all approach that will provide a "magic cure" for homophobia and heterosexism in schools. Rather, GSAs can be more accurately understood as one vital part of a systematic approach to reducing bullying and improving student safety and acceptance of differences. Without the active support of the entire school community (including administrators and, in some cases, the school board) GSAs are likely to remain as isolated havens of safety for a small group of students.

Four Major Types and Roles of GSAs

1. GSAs for Counselling and Support

- Have limited school-based support
- Are counsellor led
- Focus on the individual student
- Offer psychological support services
- Are often invisible within the school
- Perceive the school climate as hostile

2. GSAs that Provide Safe Spaces

- Are officially sanctioned student groups
- Have limited visible presence
- Focus on individual support and social activities for its members
- Include heterosexual allies
- Focus on normalization and fitting in

3. GSAs to Raise Visibility and Awareness

- Are student led and teacher supported
- Focus on student safety and human rights
- Have a visible schoolwide presence
- Are characterized by social, educational and political activities
- Initiate schoolwide educational activities and programs (e.g., guest speakers, assemblies, pride week activities)
- Focus on building tolerance and understanding

4. GSAs to Effect Educational and Social Change

- Build networks and coalitions with other school and community-based groups
- Are strongly supported by school administration and parent council
- Focus on school climate and organizational change through outreach activities (e.g., diversity days, staff training, inclusive curriculum)
- Have an anti-oppression educational mandate across intersections of difference (race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.)
- Strive to move beyond tolerance

At first glance, creating a GSA might seem like an overwhelming task filled with difficult challenges. One way to anticipate and overcome challenges is to build a strong coalition of support that includes students, teachers, administrators, counsellors and parents. By involving members from these key educational stakeholders, your GSA will develop a variety

of strategic tools to educate the entire school community and, in turn, demonstrate that LGBTQ students and their families are to be valued and respected. Remember, even if your GSA helps make your school safer for only one student, your efforts will have been successful!

How to Start a Gay–Straight Student Alliance in Your School

Suggestions and Strategies for Teachers and Students

1. Follow all school/district policies and guidelines.

A GSA should be established in the same way that any other group in your school is formed. Check your student handbook or district policies to see what the school's rules are for creating student groups. These rules may require students to seek the permission of a teacher or the school administration, and to enlist the support of other students.

2. Find a GSA advisor.

Find a teacher, administrator or school staff member who would be willing to serve as a supportive ally for your group. If possible, try to include both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ advisors in your group.

3. Speak to your school administration.

Encourage your school administration team to become your ally. They may work with your GSA to demonstrate that your group is a valued and important part of the school community. Administrators serve as important liaisons between students, teachers, parents, school boards and the larger community—be sure to include them in your planning. Encourage your school administrators to read this booklet and visit the ATA's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity webpage (look under Diversity, Equity & Human Rights).

4. Inform school counsellors and other school resource people about your GSA.

School resource workers and counsellors will often know of many students who might benefit from your school's GSA. School counsellors in particular can be an important source of support and guidance.

5. Develop a mission or vision statement.

A guiding statement of core beliefs can help to focus your group and, in turn, demonstrate how serious and important your group is to the school community. Organize your GSA's goal and value statements to include principles related to diversity, human rights and social justice. Find out what your school's or district's educational priorities are and demonstrate how your GSA helps to live them out.

6. Find a safe meeting place.

Hold your meetings in a safe and comfortable location in your school that is reasonably private. Remember that some students might feel uncomfortable and nervous when first attending meetings (GALE BC 2004). Try to create an atmosphere that accommodates all individuals and comfort levels. Safety and confidentiality should always be primary concerns.

7. Advertise your group.

Work with your GSA advisor to discuss the best ways to advertise your GSA. Consider having a poster party to design flyers announcing your group meetings. Remember to emphasize that ALL students are encouraged to attend your GSA.

If posters become defaced or torn down, do not get discouraged. Work with your advisor to use this opportunity as a teachable moment to talk about discrimination. The simple presence of your group's posters and the words *lesbian, gay, bisexual* and *trans-identified* can send a powerful message of inclusion and can help to educate students and staff about the diversity in your school (GALE BC 2004).

The simple presence of posters might help students feel safer at school, because they are a visible sign of acceptance. Some of these students might never attend your GSA. However, they will know that there is a safe space for them should they ever need it. Never underestimate the impact that your GSA can have.

Things to consider when advertising:
- Make sure your posters set a positive tone for your group.
- Include meeting times, locations and dates.

- Utilize LGBTQ affirming symbols on your posters, such as the rainbow flag or pink and black inverted triangles.
- Think about including a short description about what goes on at your meetings and be sure to highlight that supportive allies are welcome to attend.
- Emphasize that student confidentiality and safety are guaranteed.
- If your school has a webspace for student groups, consider developing a website for your GSA and advertise the weblink.

8. Plan your first meeting.

Select a meeting time that is convenient for most of your participants. Revisit the group's mission statement and brainstorm possible activities and topics of discussion for future meetings. Some GSAs hold meetings on a weekly basis; others, monthly. Determine what kind of schedule will work best for your group. If your GSA has a budget, don't forget to bring snacks to your meetings. Everyone loves free food!

9. Establish clear guidelines.

Think about establishing specific ground rules for group discussions that reaffirm responsible and respectful behaviours. Reinforce the importance of straight allies in your group and make an extra effort to make your GSA welcoming to trans-identified, two-spirited, and youth of colour and/or differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In addition to creating a welcoming environment, work together to develop and establish a group philosophy or mini charter of rights and freedoms that can be posted or read at the beginning of each meeting.

Keep a positive and supportive tone in your group meetings and remember to emphasize the importance of equal participation (by students and advisors), confidentiality, safety and the right of individuals to make mistakes and learn from them. Be clear that gossip and labels have no place in your group.

10. Plan for the future.

Work with your GSA to develop an action plan that will help make your group an active and sustainable presence in your school. Your action plan might include long- and short-range goals and priorities. Possible activities include
- showing LGBTQ-themed movies from the National Film Board of Canada,
- inviting guest speakers,
- holding joint meetings with other school groups,
- writing articles for the school newspaper or website,
- networking with local LGBTQ community groups,

GSA Tip

Visit the ATA's website at www.teachers.ab.ca, click on Diversity, Equity & Human Rights (under Issues in Education), Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, Multimedia Features, and "Building Bridges and Overcoming Barriers" to listen to gay youth activist Bruce Lyth describe his experiences helping his GSA, in conjunction with his school's Christian Club, hold what they describe as the first gay pride day held in a Canadian high school.

- undertaking a web search on LGBTQ youth issues,
- visiting your school library and suggesting potential LGBTQ student resources,
- creating a bulletin board display about LGBTQ history,
- starting an LGBTQ book club or reading group,
- inviting LGBTQ school alumni to speak to your group, and
- planning activities to celebrate special days, such as
  - National Coming Out Day (October 11),
  - The Day of Silence (in April),
  - The National Day Against Homophobia (in May),
  - Transgender Day of Remembrance (in November) and
  - your local community LGBTQ Pride Week.

The possibilities are endless. Be creative and have fun!

Developing an Action Plan for Your GSA

(1) Assess your school environment.

Consider developing a school climate survey. Does your GSA (or larger student body) perceive homophobia, transphobia or heterosexism to be significant issues in your school?

Start with self-reflection and ask GSA members to think about their own school-based experiences. If members feel comfortable, ask them to share their experiences, either in a large group or with one or two other people. Your GSA might decide to explore common themes and concerns and use these experiences as teachable moments that could be brought to the attention of your school administration or counsellors. Be careful not to focus only on potential problems. Instead celebrate and build upon the successes in your school.

(2) Develop a safe school vision.

A vision helps to clarify your goals, which, in turn, can motivate your group's actions. Start by brainstorming a "blue sky" vision for your GSA

and school. You could ask members to think about what an ideal school for LGBTQ youth would look like. Remind group members that there are no limits. They shouldn't worry about how to achieve the vision—they should concentrate on imagining it. For example, you could ask: What would this school look like? How would it feel to be an LGBTQ student in this ideal school? What would the school sound like? How would students and teachers treat each other?

(3) Make your vision a reality.

- Develop a Charter of Rights and Responsibilities.
- Identify resources or sources of support that can help you live out your vision.
- Set short-, medium- and long-term goals that will help you develop a road map to success and inclusion.
  - Clearly identify what your GSA wants to accomplish.
  - Describe how these goals reflect your vision or charter.
  - Discuss the supports that are needed to make this goal a reality.

Once you have identified one or two key goals, develop an action plan. You may decide to establish several smaller working groups to divide the tasks into manageable pieces. Remember to network with other school groups, teachers and community organizations. You might be surprised to find out that many different groups share your vision of a healthy, safe and inclusive school.

(4) Celebrate your successes along the way.

Remember, a safe and inclusive school is every student's right *and* responsibility. Give back as much as you take from your school. Take the time to recognize and celebrate your accomplishments throughout the year, no matter how small or large. Throw your GSA a birthday party each year to celebrate your achievements and be proud of what you have accomplished!

Never forget that each vision requires thousands of tiny steps to become a reality. Don't be afraid to take the first small step on the road to inclusion. Hundreds of other students, teachers and school staff members will walk in your footsteps once you decide to begin the journey. Each step along the way can help to create another ally and open up more hearts and minds.
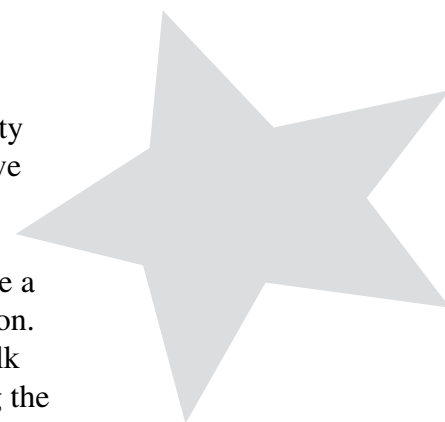
Tips for Sustaining Student Involvement in GSAs

- Prepare for student turnover as a natural part of your GSA.

- Remember that long-term challenges require long-term goals and initiatives to effect significant change. Don't expect your GSA to change your school's culture overnight.

- Build leadership capacity by developing a mentoring program in which older and more involved students help to mentor and support younger ones. This mentoring program will help to develop the skills and confidence of the GSA's younger members so that they can step into leadership roles when older students graduate from school.

- Allow your GSA to be flexible enough to meet the changing needs of students each year. Think of your GSA's activities as a spectrum of possibilities that will vary depending on individual comfort and experience levels. Some students will be most comfortable simply having a safe space to have lunch, while others might be interested in planning workshops and guest speakers for their school.

- Invite straight allies to participate in planning your GSA's activities and meetings. After all, creating a safe school is everyone's responsibility.

- Network and build coalitions with other student groups. Multi-issue organizing is a powerful way to demonstrate the connections between issues of sexism, racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism, homophobia and other forms of injustice (GSA Network 2004). Join forces with other student groups and mobilize your collective energies to improve your school community.

- Make your GSA inclusive and celebrate internal diversity by welcoming aboriginal students, students of colour and any other students who have experienced some form of oppression based on their actual or perceived differences. Internal diversity can be the greatest strength and most powerful force of your GSA.

- Perhaps the most important factor in sustaining the longevity of your GSA is to ensure that it is a safe, welcoming and confidential space where everyone is respected for their unique individual differences as they participate in an open, fun and safe environment.

GSA Tip

Looking for funding? Your GSA can apply for an inclusive learning communities grant from the Alberta Teachers' Association's Diversity, Equity and Human Rights committee. Visit www.teachers.ab.ca and click on Diversity, Equity & Human Rights under Issues in Education and follow the links.

Understanding the Risks and Realities in Supporting GSAs

The Surrey Teachers' Association (2000) describes Canadian schools as one of the "last bastions of tolerated hatred towards [LGBTQ] people" (p. 2). Teachers who actively work to challenge discriminatory attitudes directed towards LGBTQ students may be surprised to find that this discrimination can be reflected back. In some cases, teachers who become GSA advisors may be labelled as being LGBTQ persons. In other situations, parents might be a significant source of resistance and object to GSAs on personal, moral or religious grounds.

Because of these very real concerns, teachers who are interested in supporting GSAs should work very closely with their school administrators and parent councils. In many cases these two key educational stakeholders will have common misconceptions or unfounded concerns about the nature and role of GSAs in schools. An informed teacher can go a long way toward helping to dispel common stereotypes and, in turn, helping to alleviate many of the perceived fears that are generated when a school begins to publicly address LGBTQ educational issues.

If you are interested in becoming a GSA advisor or supportive ally, think about incorporating the following suggestions into your social justice work:

- If you know of other teachers who have been involved in GSAs, contact them for advice. These teachers will have a wealth of information that might help your GSA avoid misunderstandings or early setbacks.
- Work as closely as you can with your school administration. However, if your school administrators are not supportive, consider other options. If your school will not sanction an official GSA, ask if they will support the creation of an LGBTQ safe space or zone. Remember, that each school climate is unique and no one GSA model will fit perfectly into each school. Take the "temperature" of your school and determine which model of GSA will work best for your particular environment.
- Work in small, progressive steps. If your school is not ready for a GSA, focus your energies on building a broader human rights culture. Consider building coalitions of support with other school-based groups to lay the foundation for addressing LGBTQ educational

An informed teacher can go a long way toward helping to dispel common stereotypes and, in turn, helping to alleviate many of the perceived fears that are generated when a school begins to publicly address LGBTQ educational issues.

issues in the future. Remember—you want your GSA to have a sustainable future. In some schools this will require long-range planning with incremental steps that will eventually pave the way for a strong framework upon which to build the GSA's work.

- Remember that, like any other human rights and social justice initiatives, your GSA will take a serious time commitment. Build as many diverse alliances as you can and involve a variety of individuals and groups in your initial planning phase. No one teacher or student should be responsible for creating and sustaining a GSA. Everyone should take the responsibility to develop a strong, vibrant and inclusive human rights culture in your school.

Frequently Asked Questions About GSAs

This section features frequently asked questions from teachers, administrators, counsellors, students and parents about GSAs and LGBTQ educational issues. The answers and suggestions provided are not meant to offer a comprehensive analysis: rather, they are meant to stimulate dialogue, develop critical thinking and provide individuals with a broad range of possible responses to address many of the questions and concerns that arise as they begin to build an inclusive school environment.

We don't have any LGBTQ students in our school. Why do we need a GSA?

LGBTQ students are in every school, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic class and society in the world. Many LGBTQ students simply choose not to make themselves visible when they perceive their school or family environment as a hostile or unwelcoming space. Current research indicates that between 3 and 10 per cent of people identify as nonheterosexual (Frankowski 2004; Ryan and Futterman 1998). However, these statistics may be greatly underreported due to the societal stigmatization and fear of violence that are often associated with publicly identifying as nonheterosexual.

More specifically, in Canada, a 2004 Ping national youth survey of 1358 youth participants between the ages of 13 and 29 revealed the following:

- 3.5 per cent of respondents identified as an LGBTQ person
- Of the respondents who identified themselves as heterosexual, 7.5 per cent acknowledged experimenting with members of their own sex
- 58.6 per cent reported knowing an LGBTQ coworker or classmate
- 62.1 per cent agreed or completely agreed that they were very comfortable with the topic of LGBTQ issues
- 23.8 per cent reported witnessing an act of violence or verbal abuse directed toward an LGBTQ person their own age (in the 15–19 age group the rate was 27.5 per cent)

LGBTQ students who perceive their school environment as threatening or unwelcoming spaces, will often experience a profound sense of isolation, alienation and fear of exposure. These perceptions often significantly impede or compromise the "developmental tasks of adolescence related to self-esteem, identity, and intimacy" (Frankowski 2004, 1828). GSAs provide an important space for LGBTQ and allied students to develop the resiliency that will aid in their healthy social, emotional and cognitive development. When students do not feel safe or included in their schools, they are not capable of the ambitious learning that should be a fundamental part of the educational process.

Types of isolation faced by LGBTQ youth

(1) **Cognitive**	Limited access to information on sexual orientation or gender identity.	
(2) **Emotional**	Repeated exposure to negative and critical messages/language about LGBTQ persons from peers, educators and family.	
(3) **Social**	Alienation/isolation from peers, family and support networks.	

—cited in Martin and Hetrick 1998

Do GSAs try to convert heterosexual students into an LGBTQ "lifestyle"?

No, a student's sexual orientation or gender identity is not a "lifestyle" choice. Sexual orientation is usually established at a very early stage in a child's developmental process. Some students report knowing that they were different from others as early as age five or six. Other students state that they did not become aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity until they were much older. Importantly, a person's sexual orientation is not simply an either/or, binary choice. Research findings and historical literature indicate that human sexuality and expressions

of gender can most accurately be understood as operating along a broad continuum that ranges from an individual identifying as exclusively heterosexual to exclusively nonheterosexual. The exact determinants of what makes someone self-identify as heterosexual or nonheterosexual are not yet completely understood. However, contemporary research suggests that a person's sexual orientation is most likely **not** simply determined by any one single factor or influence, but instead represents a complex "combination of genetic, hormonal, and environmental influences" (Frankowski 2004, 1828).

In 1973 the American Psychological Association reclassified homosexuality from a mental disorder to a form of normal sexual orientation and identity expression. Counselling or educational practices that suggest that a student's sexual orientation can be changed or "cured" through the use of reparative or other such conversion therapies have been denounced by the American and Canadian Psychological Associations as well as by many teacher associations across Canada as a serious breach of a member's ethical conduct and professional responsibilities. For more information on the care and counselling of LGBTQ students, please see the guidebook entitled *Creating Safe, Caring and Inclusive Schools for LGBTQ Students: A Guide for Counsellors*.

I teach in a religious-based school. Can we start a GSA?

Yes, different types of GSAs can and have been successfully established and supported within religious-based schools throughout North America. For example, one such pastoral care ministry was established in an Alberta Catholic high school in 2004. Many faith-based communities recognize the important need to provide safe, caring and supportive spaces for LGBTQ students within the context and teachings of their own religious beliefs. In many cases the resistance to establishing a GSA in a faith-based school stems from a series of common misconceptions, which frequently include the belief that GSAs are dating clubs focused on sexual activity and illicit or immoral behaviours. It is important to remember that, first and foremost, all GSAs are grounded in issues of equal access and accommodation, which are firmly established and protected in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and all provincial and territorial human rights statutes. Importantly, the core function and mandate of school-based GSAs are related to meeting the significant health and safety needs of LGBTQ and allied students. GSAs in faith-based communities play a critical and vital role in helping to build vibrant, welcoming and faith-affirming classrooms and schools for LGBTQ students, teachers and same-gender parented families.

How can GSAs support trans-identified students?

Historically, trans-identified students have faced severe and pervasive discrimination and harassment in their schools and communities. While much progressive educational work has been accomplished in relation to the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual students, trans-identified youth still face significant barriers within their schools. Many of these obstacles stem from a lack of knowledge, information and sensitivity about issues related to gender identity and expression. In 2003, the ATA became the first teacher association in Canada to include gender identity as a protected ground against discrimination in a professional code of ethical conduct. This change to the ATA's Code of Professional Conduct requires that all teachers teach in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of trans-identified students and other minorities.

GSAs can assist in meeting the needs of trans-identified youth by helping to educate their membership and, in turn, the entire school community about gender-identity educational issues. For example, a GSA might decide to assess school/district policies and codes of conduct to see if they include protections for trans-identified students. Students might also survey the school's bathroom and locker room facilities to see if they are inclusive of trans-identified youth. For example, are there designated gender-neutral bathrooms or change rooms?

Openly accepted and supported trans-identified students can have a profound impact in a school because they help to demonstrate how dominant perceptions of gender, representation and expression should be opened up to questioning and critique by all students (Mayo 2004). When trans-identified, ethnic minority, two-spirited or other traditionally marginalized people become recognized and respected as valued members of a GSA, issues of diversity and difference work to reveal identity and sexuality as complex and interconnected processes. Within GSAs that are inclusive and affirming of sex, sexual and gender differences, difference is no longer marked as a site of exclusion; rather, it can be understood as expanding the space of the possible, which can enable students to feel more comfortable in challenging traditional gender and sexual stereotypes and expectations. This kind of ethical and critical questioning helps to unravel the complex threads of identity and, in turn, can help students feel more accepted and valued for who they are and not for what the dominant school or culture tells them they should be. For more information on trans-identified issues from a student's perspective, read **Reece's TransYouth Zine,** which is available on the ATA website. Go to www.teachers.ab.ca, click on Diversity, Equity & Human Rights (under Issues in Education) and follow the links.

Why is it important to include straight students in GSAs?

Some students and teachers may feel that it is important for a GSA to be an LGBTQ-only space. After all, every other space in school is designed for heterosexual students! Rather than exclude straight-identified students, though, perhaps the focus should be on the more important issue: Why do straight students want to be a part of a GSA? (Mayo 2004). There are a variety of responses to this question. Some students have LGBTQ parents, friends or family members. Others might be interested in joining a GSA simply because they are tired of the social pressures of trying to fit in. In many ways a GSA is one of the few sanctioned school spaces where students can openly question understandings of sexuality, challenge gender roles and expectations, and feel safe and valued for their differences. GSAs don't force people to find their place in the mainstream. Instead, they are spaces that encourage students to transgress and actively question the value of rigid codes of identity and gender expression. Once students begin to ask these and other critical questions, heterosexism, classism, racism and other forms of unearned privilege quickly surface as important issues for discussion. By engaging in discussions that link multiple isms, new and powerful allies are created in the process of people simply getting to know one another. Research supports the power and potential impact of alliances by demonstrating what we already know to be true: simply getting to know an LGBTQ person is one of the most significant ways to reduce discrimination and prejudice. Without the active participation of straight-identified students, important opportunities for individual learning and alliance building are lost.

I am a supportive ally. How do I support students in starting a GSA in my school?

One of the first and most important steps in creating allies is to begin educating yourself, the school administration and other school staff members about the significant health and safety needs of LGBTQ students. This important awareness building can occur in a variety of ways that range from simple strategies, such as watching educational videos from the National Film Board, to reading information on the ATA's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity webpage. Alternatively, a more encompassing approach might be to consider asking your administration to book one or more of the ATA's LGBTQ professional development workshops on sexual orientation and gender identity for the school staff.

GSAs have been most successfully embraced and supported in schools that have built a strong and vibrant human rights culture. These GSAs demonstrate how supporting LGBTQ students and their families is an important extension of the school's human rights work. Allied teachers who believe in social justice initiatives can help interested students develop a proposal to create their own GSA. Clearly defining the GSA's mission, philosophy and goals in that proposal can highlight the importance of addressing student health and safety needs and concerns as the core mandate of the GSA. Successful GSA proposals also emphasize how the school's GSA will serve as an important educational vehicle for all students, school staff and parents to learn about and appreciate diversity as one of the school's greatest strengths.

Below is one conceptual model that can help you begin to build an inclusive and supportive human rights culture in your school.

AWARENESS

LGBTQ
and allied
students

SUPPORT ⟷ TRAINING

Wells LGBTQ Educational Model, 2005
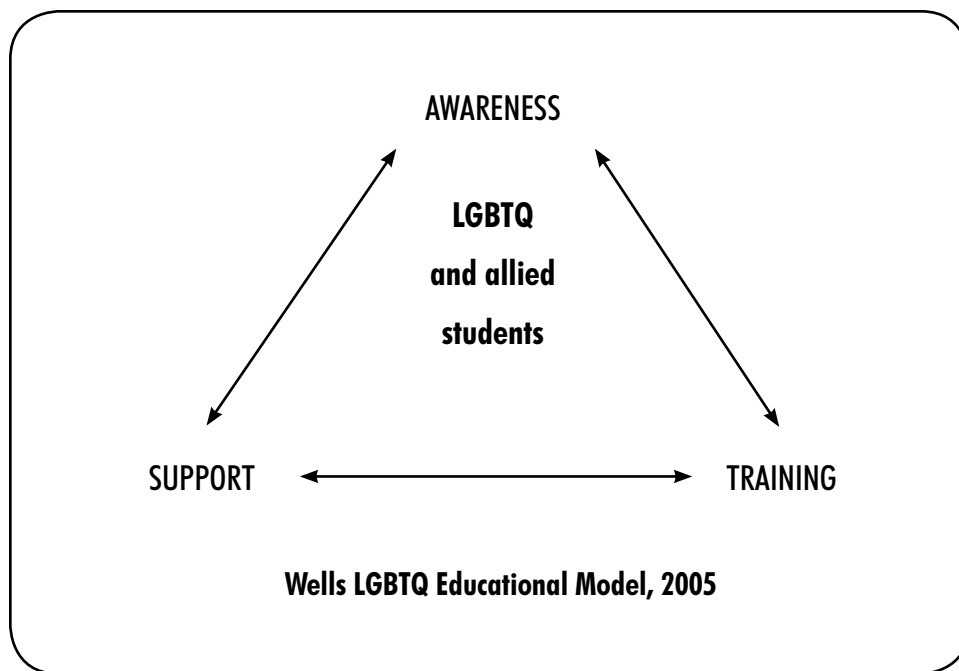
Awareness   You can begin to build awareness in your school by improving your school's library resources, using and modelling inclusive language in your classroom and challenging misconceptions and stereotypes about LGBTQ people. One powerful way to build awareness and an atmosphere of respect is to seize upon the teachable moment when it arises in your classroom. For example, when a student calls another student a "fag" or "dyke" use this opportunity to talk about the inappropriateness of derogatory remarks and the history behind such words. The National Film Board educational videos *in other words* and *Sticks & Stones* provide rich age-appropriate descriptions about the history and power of exclusion lurking behind the use of homophobic language.

Training   To help educate your students about sexual orientation and gender identity, consider bringing in local youth or adult guest speakers to your classroom or school. Encourage your colleagues to attend LGBTQ sessions at teacher conventions and conferences. Approach your school administration and ask them to consider making LGBTQ educational issues a schoolwide professional development goal.

Support   Develop a human rights culture in your school and work with your parent council and administration to create communities of support for LGBTQ and allied students, teachers and same-gender parented families. Remember that it is also vitally important to provide support for the teacher advisors of GSAs as well as for the students. It is always important to reaffirm that GSAs are confidential and supportive spaces for all students and teachers regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Emphasize that you don't have to be an LGBTQ person to facilitate or support a GSA. In fact, allied teachers or teachers who are committed to social justice educational initiatives are often in the best position to demonstrate that sexual orientation and gender identity issues are important educational issues that should be addressed by everyone, including heterosexual teachers, administrators, counsellors, parents and students.
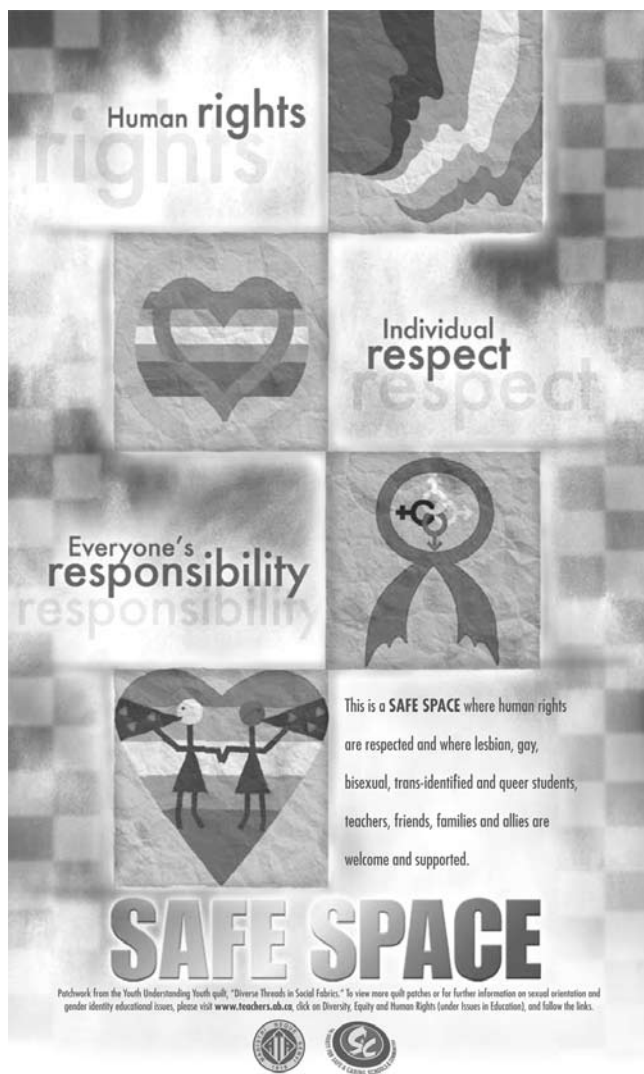
ATA/SACSC Safe Space Poster and Sticker

GSAs and Building Educational Capacity and Youth Resiliency

In their international study, Fenaughty and Harré (2003) identify several important factors that can help to build educational capacity and resiliency in LGBTQ youth:

(1) Positive representations

(2) Family and community acceptance

(3) Positive peer and school relationships

(4) LGBTQ support networks, and

(5) Access to a variety of coping strategies, which can increase students' self-esteem and sense of belonging.

Fenaughty and Harré also suggest that "positive social acceptance may be the most influential resiliency factor" available to LGBTQ youth (p. 16). This acceptance helps to minimize the effects of heterosexism and homophobia and thus can help reduce the stresses associated with the coming-out and coming-to-terms processes.

GSAs also provide a crucial link in building and fostering inclusive learning communities that actively value diversity as an essential ingredient in the creation of safe, caring and vibrant school communities.

The authors also found that students involved in GSAs felt more comfortable being visible and vocal in their school settings as LGBTQ persons *and* as straight allies. Students also indicated that coming out in a supportive school environment reduced the stress associated with hiding and managing their identities. When students learn to overcome one form of stigma they often gain the skills and confidence to positively address others that they may encounter later in life. Notably, belonging to a GSA served to increase student confidence and involvement in school activities and, at the same time, helped students develop a sense of pride in their differences and same-gender parented families. These examples of self-esteem and capacity building are pivotal in helping LGBTQ youth address issues related to marginalization and are critical in increasing educational attainment and reducing health-related risk factors.
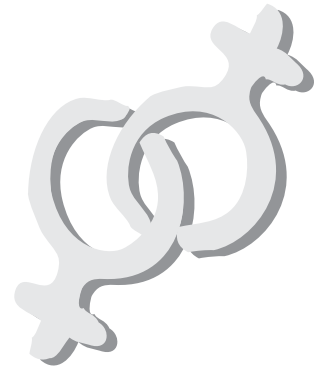
Clearly, the local, national and international studies cited throughout this guide highlight the catalytic importance of establishing GSAs in schools as one significant strategy to reduce the pervasive harassment, violence and discrimination that is often directed towards students who are or are perceived to be LGBTQ persons. Importantly, GSAs also provide a crucial link in building and fostering inclusive learning communities that actively value diversity as an essential ingredient in the creation of safe, caring and vibrant school communities. As this resource and much educational research demonstrate the three most significant factors in changing school climates and building resilient school communities for LGBTQ students are (1) inclusive policies, (2) professional development training and awareness building and (3) the active and visible presence of GSAs or associated support groups in schools. Teachers, administrators, counsellors, support staff, parents and students all play an important part in creating safe, welcoming and inclusive schools. Be there for *every* student and make a difference in your school!

Educational Resources for GSAs

LGBTQ Educational Guide Booklets

Creating Safe, Caring and Inclusive Schools for LGBTQ Students:
A Guide for Counsellors

Gay–Straight Student Alliances in Alberta Schools: A Guide for Teachers

Safe and Caring Schools for Lesbian and Gay Youth: A Guide for Teachers

These guide booklets can be downloaded from the ATA Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity webpage.

ATA LGBTQ Educational Workshops

Workshop 1—Building Awareness of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Issues

Workshop 2—Exploring Diversity Issues Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Workshop 3—Creating Safe and Caring Learning Environments for LGBTQ Students

Book these workshops by contacting the ATA Professional Development office at 447-9475 (in Edmonton) or 1 800-232-7208 (outside Edmonton).

Important Websites

ATA Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Educational webpage
Go to www.teachers.ab.ca, click on Diversity, Equity & Human Rights under Issues in Education and follow the links.

AlterHéros
A bilingual Canadian website that strives to increase public awareness about issues related to sexual orientation and homophobia.
www.alterheros.com

Egale Canada
Egale Canada advances equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-identified people and their families across Canada.
www.egale.ca

Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia (GALE BC)
GALE BC provides a comprehensive educational website dedicated to disseminating LGBTQ educational resources for Canadian educators and students.
www.galebc.org

Gay–Straight Alliance Network
An American-based website that provides excellent tip sheets, strategies, and suggested activities for students interested in starting and sustaining GSAs.
www.gsanetwork.org

Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities
The mission of the Society is to encourage home, school and community practices that teach, model and reinforce socially responsible and respectful behaviours, so that living and learning can take place in a safe, caring and inclusive environment.
www.sacsc.ca

YouthSafe.net
This Calgary-based website provides resources and information on sexual orientation and gender identity issues for youth.
http://youthsafe.net/

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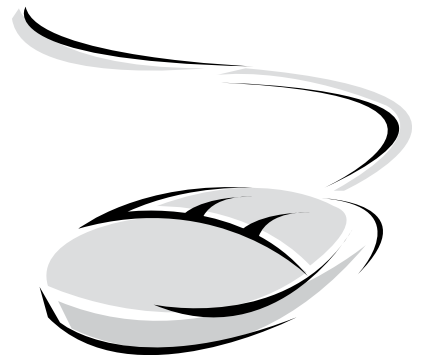
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