

# How to Work in Coalitions

## A Resource for Students

### **What the heck are coalitions anyway?**

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The most basic definition of a coalition is a group of organizations that come together for a specific purpose. There are usually one or more people who represent each organization. Organizations have their own reasons for being involved – they all have different issues that they focus on but they have come together for the common issue around which the coalition is organizing.

For example, statewide organizations that GLSEN has worked with have included groups that focus on LGBT issues, youth, legal activism, immigrant rights, civil and human rights and other issues. When they come together, however, they all focus on passing legislation and policies that promote safer schools.

### **Who participates in coalitions and who runs these things?**

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Participants in coalitions can be students, GLSEN staff, staff and volunteers from partner organizations, GLSEN chapter members, volunteers, concerned community members, state legislators, staff from legislators' offices... lots of people! No one officially runs most coalitions though one or more groups will act as facilitators, setting up the agenda, arranging for conference calls and in-person meetings and doing some of the administrative work that coalitions require.

Some coalition conference calls are facilitated by GLSEN staff while some are facilitated by staff from other organizations. As representatives of a national organization we always need to keep in mind that local organizers have often been working on a specific bill since long before GLSEN got involved. This means that they may have expertise that we don't have, knowledge of unique issues within their state, as well as knowledge of work that has been done in past years.

Decisions are made by whoever is on a conference call or whoever replies to an email on a listserv. Subcommittee chair people are often empowered to make certain decisions. So the more calls you show up for, the more you get to participate in the coalition!

### **How do they work?**

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Conference calls: These sometimes happen once a month, but if a bill is really active they might happen more often. Conference calls are one of the main ways that members of a coalition communicate, make decisions, update each other on the work each organization is doing, and come up with collective strategies and plans.

Email listservs: These are a secondary form of communication for coalitions.

Subcommittees: These are often created to work on specific tasks. For example, there might be a Public Education and Mobilization committee if the coalition wants to work on raising awareness around a bill and getting people involved. An important responsibility of subcommittees is reporting back to the larger coalition in order to maintain accountability to that larger group.



Organizations: Many organizations commit their support to the coalition by signing on to a statement of principles. Any organization can do this. Invitations are sent out through many channels (email listservs, personal networks, community events) to any and all organizations in a state that may be interested in signing on. The broader the coalition membership is, the stronger it will be.

Tasks: During conference calls things will come up that need to get done but are not necessarily related directly to the work of any one organization. For example, if the coalition is planning an advocacy day, someone will need to send outreach emails, arrange visits with state legislators, find meeting space, arrange for meals, and so forth. Individuals will volunteer to do these tasks or sometimes be assigned them through a subcommittee.

Actions: Coalitions often work together to organize an action. This could be an advocacy day, a rally, a letter-writing campaign, or something else.

## **Why would YOU want to be part of a coalition and what do you need to do to prepare?**

Legislative campaign work is impossible to do alone. Working in a coalition connects you to many other people and resources and enables you to be part of a broad, community-based effort. Here's the thing though: many coalitions have never had young people participate before. They are not always prepared to include students. And that's fine, it just means that you need to do some self-advocating to make sure that your voice gets heard and that you get to participate in ways that you want to.

## **Get Ready to Get Involved!**

Before you get involved with a coalition there are a few things you should do to get ready. Hopefully this resource has given you some of the tools you need. In a lot of ways, working in a coalition is like being part of a student club like a GSA. For example, if you have an idea you need to find a way to get people to hear you and you have to communicate your idea clearly so that they understand. There are also ways in which coalitions are different from student clubs. Notably, you will likely be one of only a few youth involved. This can be a challenge because adults often are not used to listening to young people and taking their opinions seriously. Don't let this discourage you – speak up on conference calls and in meetings!

Also, many times adults will expect young people to be able to speak for ALL young people and will often try to only give you tasks that are related to outreaching to youth. Make sure that you are doing tasks that you are interested in and want to do. Here are some tips:

- Don't be afraid to say that you are just one person and cannot speak for all youth
- Speak up if you want to have a more meaningful role in the coalition
- To ensure that you are involved with decision-making, ask that meetings are held outside of school hours
- Find someone on the coalition who you trust and who supports you – you might want to debrief conference calls and meetings with that person afterwards

Do you feel a little bit more prepared to work in a coalition? We hope so! Remember, organizing is hard work but it's a lot of fun too. Take a minute to feel proud of yourself. And good luck!

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If you are a student and you are, or would like to be, working to get safe schools legislation passed in your state – contact Eric Waters at [ewaters@glsen.org](mailto:ewaters@glsen.org)