



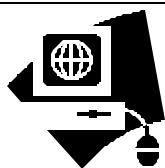
Gay-Straight Alliance Handbook

A resource of Student Pride USA

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I. Introduction

Welcome! This handbook has been put together through many resources and experiences, including other established Gay-Straight Alliances (GS), to help you in forming a GSA at your own school. It will guide you step-by-step through the process -- from approaching your school administration to organizing your GSA and planning your meetings. It will help you think of issues you may address as you approach your GSA formation. The handbook includes a list of resources available, many with web links for direct access. Through the Student Pride USA program you can network with hundreds of other youth across the country for support or ideas in your GSA work. Additional copies of this handbook are available for download (FREE) from GLSEN's website at www.glsen.org.



The computer icon (left) will appear in this document where you can find more extensive resources on a specific issue or subject online @ www.StudentPrideUSA.org

II. What is a GSA?

A GSA is a student-led and organized, non-curricular school club that aims to create a safe, welcoming and accepting school environment for all youth, regardless of one's sexual orientation or gender identity. A GSA brings together LGBTQ and Straight students to address issues that affect us all, including harassment, discrimination and bias. A GSA allows these youth to build coalitions and community that can work towards making safer school environments for all people. Most importantly, GSAs provide support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) identified students.

III. Why Start a GSA?

You probably already know why your GSA is important to you, but you should also know why a GSA is important for your school. You should be able to state the mission and goals clearly and write them so that everyone understands the GSA's role in your school. Some reasons other students started GSAs have been to:

- provide a safe environment for students to address issues of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender roles,
- focus on core school values for LGBTQ students to learn and growth,
- build a partnership between LGBTQ and straight identified students,
- encompass the broadest range of students including "real or perceived" sexual orientation and gender identity,
- recognize outstanding contributions in the school environment,
- help the school establish effective anti-harassment and discrimination policies,
- educate the school and local community on LGBTQ issues, and
- promote safe schools where diversity is accepted and harassment is condemned.

Note: Adding "real or perceived" is important because it includes not only LGBTQ students but also those who "appear" to be LGBTQ, by some, but may be straight. It also includes students who aren't sure or don't want to define their sexual orientation or gender in conventional "boxes."



Samples of
GSA mission
statements

IV. Finding and Building Support for a GSA?

Many GSAs have found their success depends greatly on building good alliances with others. A good first approach would be to find supportive students, teachers, administrators, and staff within your school. Some steps you might take include:

- Contact other LGBTQ students if you know them,
- Find straight students who may be LGBTQ-supportive,
- Ask school guidance counselors for help; they may be able to put other students facing similar issues in contact with you,
- Talk to teachers and staff who are not judgmental and appear understanding of diversity,
- Find school leaders who have supported other human rights initiatives, and
- Build alliances with people who may face other biases or prejudices.

One of the most unique values of a GSA is that it includes people of different sexual orientations and gender identities - it is not a "gay club". Straight identified students, teachers and administrators can be just as supportive as anyone else, and offer their own insights and ideas into the problems they've seen within the school.

You can also find support outside of school in the local community, though no other group should ever control your GSA. Groups to look at include:

- LGBTQ-owned or friendly businesses,
- GLSEN and PFLAG chapters, and
- LGBTQ-friendly alumni.

You should also know who might oppose the GSA – from both inside and outside school. While many GSAs start with no, or little, opposition, some communities may have organizations that will want to prevent you from having yours. Erik Stegman, 18 of Seattle, WA tells us, "Sometimes starting up a GSA turns into a debate much more powerful than anything you've had in forensics, but the strategy remains the same—researching the opposing view is essential."

Finally, network with students from other GSAs. They may have already faced many of the same issues and can provide a wealth of valuable information. Here are just a few ways you can connect other GSAs:

- Join Student Pride USA, a national network of over 700 GSAs across the country. Registration (free) provides you with the National GSA Directory, the choice to be listed in the directory and access to GSA Talk, a national email discussion list-serve, among much more. Register online at www.StudentPrideUSA.org.
- Check schools in your area to find other GSAs which may not have joined Student Pride USA yet, and
- Search the Web for GSAs and for LGBTQ students who might lead you to GSAs.

V. School Administration and School Boards

Before meeting with a school administrator or board, be prepared to answer commonly asked questions. Below are some things you might consider doing before such a meeting:

- Examine school policies on the formation of student groups, and prepare any documents (application, constitution, mission statement, goals, etc) that are needed.
- Review school policies on issues like school safety, diversity, harassment and discrimination and examine their impact LGBTQ issues. Are people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities protected?
- Write your proposed club goals and mission clearly.
- Answer possible questions concisely and objectively.
- Determine if there are any LGBTQ-friendly members on the school administration or school board who will support your GSA.
- Gather any stories of harassment, discrimination or bias that you or others have experienced, if possible.
- Obtain local, regional or national statistics on LGBTQ youth harassment and violence in schools like yours.
- Show how homophobia affects everyone, regardless of one's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Note: Depending on your school's system for reviewing and accepting applications for a school club, you may need to see the principal or school board. However, if your school is covered under the Equal Access Act, the school must treat your application & acceptance the same as it would any other club (see section XI: *Legal Protections for GSAs*, for more information).



Examples,
statistics and
personal stories

VI. Organizing your GSA

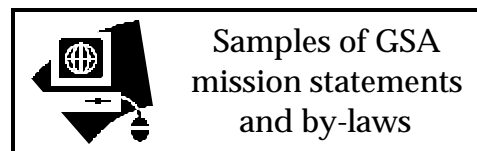
As previously stated, many schools have policies on how to establish and organize school clubs. Follow it. Organizing your GSA should be a group effort, with all the members participating as equals. Naturally you may have some ideas you'll bring, but the group will grow in strength as it determines collectively its structure, by-laws, and rules. Your first few meetings will probably be devoted to organizing your GSA. In general there are several steps GSAs commonly take (*some of these often depend on school club guidelines*):

- Find an adviser, probably from the faculty or staff.

- Examine other club structures.
- Draft club by-laws and rules for review by the members.
- Finalize club by-laws and rules, possibly by vote or consensus.
- Establish policies to assure the safety and confidentiality of each member.
- Document everything for future generations! You're making History!

Most GSAs prefer to keep their organizational structure fairly simple. A common form includes club officers (president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary) or an executive board, chair or co-chairs and members. Other clubs at your school may provide examples. Keep your by-laws rather general and let your club rules and policies address day-to-day issues. The by-laws typically include your:

- Mission statement.
- Process to select officers.
- Rules to modify your by-laws or to make club policies, and
- Guidelines for appropriate actions by members (e.g. respect and confidentiality)



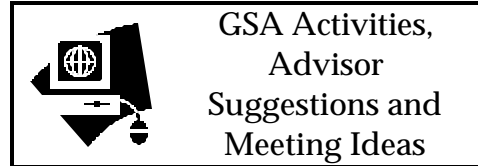
VII. GSA Meeting Logistics

Meeting logistics can vary as much as the cities in which GSAs exist across the nation. Here are some of the more common things GSA youth leaders have found helpful in achieving their club's success:

- Find a safe place for meetings, preferably away from high-traffic areas. This helps for students who may be hesitant to attend, as well as avoiding distractions or noise during your meetings.
- Avoid time conflicts with other clubs and sports so that students are able to attend. Also consider transportation and bus schedules so that you're able to get home after the meetings.
- Advertise the meetings with diverse fliers to attract diverse people. Many GSAs have noted that advertisements, such as flyers and posters, have been torn down or defaced. Mikhail Abraham Lewis (18) from Helena, MT suggest you "just keep putting new ones up. Eventually people will stop reacting to them through vandalism."
- Place notices and articles in the school paper.
- Consider hosting a bulletin board with announcements, meeting schedules and displays.

To encourage people to actively attending meetings, make the meetings meaningful, fun, and short. You may want to follow a prescribed format such as this one from a GSA in Boston, MA.

- Start and end meetings on time; keep meetings short (less than an hour),
- Assure the faculty advisor attends all meetings,
- Let the faculty advisor participate as an equal in the meetings but not control or dominate the meetings,
- Participate in opening or closing "activity exercises" that are fun to play and teach a meaningful lesson
- Document meeting discussion topics, activities and attendance, and
- Provide snacks, if possible, a small but effective way to encourage attendance.



VIII. Financial support?

In many schools, clubs can raise money and use it for specific activities, such as to buy educational books or fund staff trainings. Before raising funds, however, check with your school guidelines for rules and regulations on how you are allowed to raise money, where it can be held and how it can be spent. Here are some common ways to ensure successful fundraising.

- 1) Examine the school policies and make sure you follow them carefully
- 2) Set fundraising goals that your group will aspire to achieve
- 3) Plan how you will raise this money (e.g., raffles, bake sales, "direct ask")
- 4) Raise the money
- 5) Send prompt thank you notes to all donors
- 6) Allocate the funds to projects, programs or activities (e.g., library, trainings)
- 7) Document all funds collected and spent

Note: It is often easier for a business to provide goods or services rather than money, so you might ask the local pizza parlor for snacks or the local movie theater for tickets.

IX. Assuring Continuity of Your GSA?

We're sure the last thing you want isn't that all of your work building your GSA simply ends after you leave or graduate. Instead, you probably want your GSA to continue successfully, long after the initial leaders. Therefore, you have to build longevity into the GSA by nurturing the younger members and developing their leadership. To help assure a GSA's continuity, many youth organizers have done the following.

- Designate some leadership positions for sophomores and juniors (e.g., the club VP) so they have a chance to learn as they take on responsibilities.
- Work with new members to find out what their interest are and what they're interested in doing.
- Include new members in all aspects of your GSA meetings, from leading activities or sessions, to projects or trainings.
- Send your members to trainings and conferences.



The key to keeping and supporting members is to stop thinking about what "they can do for our group" but instead, "what can our group do for them?" Very few people will stay in a group if they feel not needed, unwanted or if they don't enjoy themselves in the process. Remember, you should be building new and future leaders.

I start with the premise that the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers."
- Ralph Nader (b. 1934)

X. Confronting Homophobia and Resistance?

Unfortunately, most every town and school will have people who might be confrontational or who might harass students. Recent statistics show that the average student hears anti-gay epithets over 25 times a day. If anti-gay violence or harassment occurs, report it immediately. Document what occurred. Expect action. If nothing satisfactory happens, ask the school superintendent in writing for a response and course of action. Dealing with harassment, discrimination and bias can be very difficult, but schools can, and should, be held responsible for the safety and well being of all students while at school and en route to or from school.

If harassment, violence, discrimination or bias occurs, follow these actions:

- 1) Report It! The more people, the better.
- 2) Send written statements and request for action to the school principal and the school superintendent.
- 3) Send copies of your letter to your assistant principal, guidance counselor, teachers (if involved), community LGBTQ organization(s) and your city, county or state's Human Relations Commission.

XI. Legal Protections for GSAs?

In community organizing, litigation is a last resort. While there are situations and circumstances that may be cause for immediate legal action, most situations can be solved by organizing your school or community. Simply put, if a principal allows a GSA to form because of a threatened lawsuit, the administration will not be supportive and will be reluctant to understand why the GSA is needed and important. However, if the school community organizes and convinces the principal to allow the group there is much greater chance the principal will learn to value the group's presence, leading to easier working relationships in the future. Additionally, legal cases usually drag on for a long time, cost a lot of money and stir even more controversy.

While suing a school may be the last resort in many cases, seeking legal support is not. If necessary for legal support, seek help in researching the legal issues from groups such as Student Pride USA. Legal advisors may also be able to provide a letter of support, a basic document informing school administrators that a GSA does have a legal right to meet.



Equal Access Act (how to use & text of), legal letters of support, legal resources and laws, educational resources

You should first determine whether your school is public, private, or religiously affiliated. In most cases, legal protection of association only applies to public schools and does not apply to religiously affiliated schools. A parochial school opposed to homosexuality can probably deny formation of a GSA, because they are a private organization. For those schools, you can only try to change the prevailing culture by educating the leaders on LGBTQ issues.

For federally funded public schools, The Federal Equal Access Act of 1984 protects any GSA wishing to start if the school already has, or allows, other non-curricular clubs. This Act further states that all non-curricular clubs must be treated equally and may not be denied due to their moral or political values.

There are many resources to research legal issues. Student Pride USA, Lambda (Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund) and ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) have websites with much useful information. (see; *Resources*)

You can also use www.FindLaw.com to search state laws. Select your state and do a keyword searches on “sexual orientation” or “discrimination”. As of January, 2000, only seven states appeared to have laws protecting students from discrimination based on sexual orientation (California, Wisconsin, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Massachusetts). However, every school in every state is required and expected to provide a safe learning environment at school and en route to/from.

XII. Organizational Resources

Education

Student Pride USA

- A national network of GSAs and youth organizers working to create positive change in America's educational system, grades K-12.

Mail to: GLSEN (see below)
(212) 727-0135 / (212) 727-0254
www.studentprideUSA.org / studentpride@glsen.org

GLSEN - Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network

- National educational organization working to make schools safe for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

121 West 27th Street, Suite 804
New York, NY 10001
(212) 727-0135 / (212) 727-0254 (f)
www.glsen.org / glsen@glsen.org

Legal

ACLU - American Civil Liberties Union

- The American Civil Liberties Union is the nation's foremost advocate of individual rights -- litigating, legislating, and educating the public on a broad array of issues affecting individual freedom in the United States.

125 Broad Street, 18th Floor
New York, NY 10004-2400
(212) 549-2627 / (212) 549-2650 (f)
www.aclu.org / lgbthiv@aclu.org

LAMBDA Legal Defense Fund

- Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund is a national organization committed to achieving full recognition of the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, and people with HIV/AIDS through impact litigation, education, and public policy work.

120 Wall Street, Suite 1500
New York, NY 10005-3904
(212) 809-8585 / (212) 809-0055 (f)
www.lambdalegal.org / lambdalegal@lambdalegal.org

Find Law

- Internet search engine on legal issues

www.findlaw.com

Other

PFLAG - Parents, Friends and Family of Lesbians And Gays

- National organization supporting the parents, friends and families members of LGBT persons

www.pflag.org / pflag@pflag.org

Queer America

- National Internet directory of LGBTQ operated & friendly organizations searchable by area code or zip code

www.queeramerica.com