



Gay- Straight Alliance Handbook

-A Guide for Teachers-

What are GSAs?

A gay-straight alliance (GSA), sometimes called a GSM or gender and sexuality alliance, is a student run group which allows students, staff and allies¹ to meet, network, discuss problems, get educated and eliminate biphobia / homophobia /transphobia. GSAs provide a safe, respectful environment for all members of the group. Some GSAs act as a support group, activist club, or social group. It is up to the members to decide what the GSA will be.

How can a GSA benefit my school?

A GSA can be very beneficial for any school. A GSA allows 2SLGBTQ+ and straight students to come together and do things as a group. It promotes diversity, inclusion and can be an effective tool for educating youth on 2SLGBTQ+ issues. A GSA can provide positive activities and opportunities.

Why is a GSA so important?

Students may be at different levels of "coming out"². GSA meetings may be the only opportunity available for these students to be themselves in a non-judgmental environment. This freedom can help 2SLGBTQ+ youth get through high school. For some, the GSA group can be the only support available.

¹*Allies are people who identify as straight that are supportive and accept LBGTQ people and may even advocate for equality.*

²*"Coming out of the closet" is an expression used to describe the process of disclosing one's identity or orientation.*

Who Can Join a GSA?

Any student can join a GSA regardless of religion, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, or age. Sometimes a GSA will be started under the name of a Diversity Club or a Human Rights Group. The more diverse the membership, the better as one of the main objectives of a GSA and Diversity Clubs is to promote diversity, acceptance, and understanding.

What Activities Can the GSA Take Part In?

A GSA can host almost any activity, as long as the activity complies with the school's policies and is approved by administration. Usually activities are related to 2SLGBTQ+ activism.

- A GSA can host a **Day of Silence** (dayofsilence.org). During this event students remain silent the entire day to bring attention to the silencing faced by 2SLGBTQ+ people.
- The GSA may wish to host an event to commemorate the **International Day Against Homophobia** (homophobiaday.org). For example, they can invite a 2SLGBTQ+ activist for a lunch time informal session and discussion
 - The GSA can host an event to mark the **International Transgender Day of Remembrance** (transgenderdor.org). For example, a GSA could show a transgender related documentary or film and followed by a discussion.
- The GSA can also host movie and pizza nights, bowling outings, hikes, etc. These events allow students to interact in a fun and safe environment.

How Do I Start a GSA?

If you feel that your school would benefit from a GSA, or even a "diversity club," follow these five steps to creating a successful group.

- 1) **Get approval from administration.** To start any group within a school, the administration usually has to be contacted for approval.

Be prepared with information and materials. You may wish to prepare a presentation for the administration to eliminate misconceptions. This presentation could cover the positive effects a GSA has on a school community, the adverse effects of homo/bi/transphobia on students, an outline of what activities the group will be hosting and the number of interested students in the school. Remember to be careful with the way you state things as this may be a touchy topic for some people.
- 2) **Establish interest within the school.** Host a meeting with all interested students, staff, and parents. A guided discussion is essential as there may be misconceptions about GSAs.
- 3) **Establish a committee.** A committee should be established to coordinate meetings and events, pass all correspondence through the administration of the school, and aid in leading group discussion. This committee should be comprised mostly of students but should include teachers, adults, or school staff.
- 4) **Advertise.** The committee should make some basic posters to establish more interest within the school. The time, date and place of the first meeting should be included. For the meetings, find a place that is relatively private as some students may feel uncomfortable with being in a GSA.
- 5) **Host the first meeting.** At your meeting, allow people to have a say in how the group will be run and its

priorities and policies.

Time to network before starting! Usually in a GSA there will be some structure, where people take on different responsibilities. Bring food and music as GSA meetings should be fun! It's also an incentive for people to come and should keep people coming back.

6) Establish ground rules and guidelines.

Some common rules include:

- Members are not expected to share their sexual orientation or their gender identity.
 - Everyone must respect one another.
- Meetings are confidential. When dealing with private matters such as sexual orientation and gender identity some people are very protective. Privacy is important.
- Adults participate on equal grounds with students. They may participate in discussion but are not there to lead.
- Members may say something they feel may be offensive, as long as the intention is not to hurt and offend anyone. Members can participate in open discussion.
- There is to be no gossip at meetings. One of the purposes of the meeting is to be able to talk *to* each other, not *about* each other.

Your Role as Advisor:

It is common for the advisor to assume the position of "group leader." Successful GSA's are led by youth, for youth. The advisor should:

- guide the youth, offer assistance,
 - foster leadership skills,
- delegate responsibilities to students,
 - facilitate discussions,
 - encourage interactions, and
- create a safe and caring environment.

Government of Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education Safe Schools Policy:

4.0 CODE OF CONDUCT

All members of the school community have the right to feel safe and secure in all school related activities and share in the responsibility for ensuring this is the case. The school community includes students, parents or guardians, volunteers, teachers, and other adults whose roles or jobs place them in contact with students in any school setting or school activity. It is expected that all members of the school community will promote safe, caring and inclusive practices by doing their best to:

- effect an orderly, productive work and learning environment free from aggression or disrespectful behavior.
 - relate to one another in a positive and supportive manner, with dignity and respect.

- **embrace the diversity of all peoples**, regardless of economic status, race, colour, national or ethnic origin, language group, religion, **gender, sexual orientation**, age or ability; and
 - support non-violent conflict resolution.

Reprinted from Safe School Policy Department of Education, Newfoundland and Labrador 2008.

Information for parents

Sometimes parents will be concerned about their child being a member of a GSA. Some parents fear that their child may "convert" and start leading a "gay lifestyle." The fact of the matter is that sexual orientation or gender identity are not lifestyle choices. These are established at a very early stage of development.

Other common misconceptions are that GSAs are dating groups. It is important to establish the fact that the GSA is there to promote diversity, inclusion, and respect. Developing a mission statement for the group can help focus the group and demonstrate the GSA's importance.

Where can I get more information on GSAs?

www.gsnetwork.org

The National GSA Network (U.S.A) has resources on: how to start a GSA, how to facilitate a meeting, how to make your school a hate free zone, how to approach transgender issues, how to gain new membership and how to have fun doing it all!

www.schools-out.org.uk

A British organization working towards equality in schools.

www.nlsexualhealthcentre.org

Visit Planned Parenthood's website to find out more information on their 2SLGBTQ+ services.

Sexual Health Questions? We Have Answers!

Location:

St. Clare Avenue
St. John's, NL, A1C 2J9

Hours:

Monday: 9am - 4:30pm
Tuesday: 9am - 4:30pm
Wednesday: 9am - 4:30pm
Thursday: 12pm – 6:00pm
Friday: 9am - 4:30pm

Phone:

579-1009

Toll Free: 1-877-NO MYTHS
(1-877-666-9847)

Website:

www.plannedparenthoodnlshc.com

Email:

pp.nlshc@gmail.com

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