



Gay-Straight Alliance Handbook

-A Guide for Students-

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.

¹Allies 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?

1) Find supportive staff members to work with you. Allies are a very important part of a GSA. Most schools will not allow any youth groups to be active unless there is an adult supervisor/moderator. You may wish to give this teacher a copy of GSA Handbook - A Guide for Teachers

2) Become knowledgeable of your school/district policies. Make sure you comply with all rules when starting a GSA. If not, the group may not be allowed to proceed at school. Many times, it can be very hard to start a GSA.

3) Pick a meeting place. Find a place that is relatively private as some students may feel uncomfortable with being in a GSA. Chose a classroom that is not in a high traffic area or have meetings after school.

4) Advertise. Advertising is one of the most important parts of creating a GSA. You may wish to ask teachers to announce it in classes and put up flyers. It will generate membership, spread awareness in your school and turn your GSA into the talk of the town!

5) Host your first meeting. At your meeting, allow people to have time to network before starting. Usually in a GSA there will be some structure; someone will usually coordinate meetings/lead discussion. 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.

Language has been one of the key components in the struggle of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. We see this when people have been vocal about issues and when people have used names in a derogatory fashion. Because language has been such a key factor, it is only fitting that we have to be very careful while using it.

1. With people who are transgender, it is very important to use the proper gender pronouns. Take the time to find out which pronouns a person prefers.
2. Do not use slang terms. While some people may use them casually, others may be greatly offended.
3. Use inclusive language; don't use language that makes it seem like you are making assumptions about someone's identity.

OUR RIGHTS AS A STUDENT

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.

Where Can I Get More Information on GSAs?

www.gsanetwork.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: Planned Parenthood promotes positive sexual health attitudes and practices through education, community partnerships, and information services in an environment that supports and respects individual choice. They provide knowledge, resources and skills needed to make informed sexual health choices and encourage a proactive approach to sexual health education and practices. Visit their website to find out more info on their 2SLGBTQ+ services.

Sexual Health Questions? We Have Answers!

Location:

47 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

Revised: July 2020