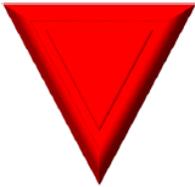


If you have questions or concerns around:

- Establishing a Gay-Straight Alliance
- Supporting or accommodating a gender diverse student
- Providing Education for staff or students
- Creating a safe space/inclusive classroom



- Talk to your school administrator
- You may talk to your school counsellor first



- Consult PSSD guidelines—*Gender and Sexual Diversity*



- Administrator will contact Coordinator at Division Office



- Coordinator will consult with administrator and counsellor to develop a plan



- Administrator will monitor the plan and consult with coordinator if required

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Prairie Spirit School Division: Safe, Caring & Accepting Schools Supporting Gender and Sexual Diversity

Guiding Principles

Prairie Spirit School Division is committed to establishing and maintaining a safe, equitable, and welcoming learning and teaching environment for all members of the school community. This includes those students, staff, and families who identify or are perceived as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirit, queer or questioning their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Prairie Spirit School Division expects all members of this diverse community to be welcomed, respected, accepted, and supported in every Prairie Spirit School Division facility.

All members of the school community have the right to learn and work in an environment free of discrimination, prejudice and harassment. This right is guaranteed under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Saskatchewan Human Rights Act*. These rights shall be supported, and enforced so that all members of the school community may work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and appreciation for individual differences. Prairie Spirit School Division will not tolerate harassment, bullying, intimidation, or discrimination on the basis of a person's actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Prairie Spirit School Division believes that all sexual and gender minority students, staff and families have the right to:

- be treated fairly, equitably, and with dignity and respect
- have their confidentiality protected and respected
- self-identification and determination
- freedom of conscience, expression, and association
- be fully included and represented in an inclusive, positive, and respectful manner by all school personnel
- have equitable access to the same supports, services, and protections provided to heterosexual students and families
- have avenues of recourse (without fear of reprisal) available to them when they are victims of harassment, prejudice, discrimination, intimidation, bullying, and/or violence
- have their unique identities, families, cultures, and communities included, valued and respected within all aspects of the school environment.

Commonly Used Terms and 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 sexual and gender minority people.

ASEXUAL

A person whose interest in others does not include sexuality.

BISEXUAL

A person who is attracted physically, sexually, and emotionally to persons of the same and opposite sex.

CISGENDER

A non-transsexual person whose gender identity, gender expression, and natal (birth) sex align with conventional expectations of male or female.

CLOSET

Hiding one's gender identity, or sexual orientation from others in the workplace, at school, home, and/or with friends.

COMING OUT

A process through which trans individuals disclose to others their gender variance and/or sexual orientation.

CROSS-DRESSER

Cross-dressers, who were historically often referred to as transvestites, are men or women who enjoy dressing as the opposite sex. Most cross-dressers do not identify as transsexual, nor do they wish to use hormones or have sex reassignment surgery. Cross-dressing also occurs in the gay and lesbian culture where gay men dress and perform as drag queens and lesbians dress and perform as drag kings to deliberately exaggerate or parody gender stereotypes.

FTM OR F2M

A person who is transitioning or has transitioned from female to male.

GENDER DYSPHORIA

The emotional discomfort an individual experiences due to internalized conflicts arising from the incongruity between one's natal (birth) sex and one's sense of gender identity (a personal sense or feeling of maleness or femaleness).

GENDER EXPRESSION

Gender expression is the manner in which individuals express their gender to others. A person's gender expression is often based on the binary model of gender, which is either stereotypically male or female. However, some individuals choose to express themselves in terms of a multiple model of gender, mixing both male and female expressions since they do not see themselves as being either stereotypically male or female, but possibly some combination of both or neither

genders. Some individuals may receive aggressive reactions or violent responses from members of society who feel a woman is acting too masculine or a man is acting too feminine. The majority of homophobic and transphobic bullying is often based upon the enforcement of rigid sex-role stereotypes, rather than a person's actual sexual orientation or gender identity.

GENDER IDENTITY

Gender identity is a person's internal sense or feeling of maleness or femaleness. Gender identity relates to how a person views oneself and gender expression relates to how they may present his or her sense of gender, usually along stereotypical binary lines, to the larger society. Gender identity and gender expression are often closely linked with the terms transgender/trans-identified. While sexual orientation and gender identity are separate and distinct categories, "many transgender people seek support and acceptance from the gay and lesbian community, where gender norms are often more inclusive" (Ryan & Futterman, 1998, p. 48).

GENDER QUEER

An umbrella word referring to gender identities other than male and female. Many youth prefer the fluidity of the term gender queer and reject the labels of transgender or transsexual as too limiting. For example, gender queer individuals may think of themselves as having both male and female gender identities, or as having neither male nor female gender identities, or many other possible gender identities not restricted to the traditional gender binary model.

GENDER REASSIGNMENT SURGERY (GRS)

Sometimes used instead of "sex reassignment surgery".

GENDER ROLES

The set of behaviours a person chooses or is expected to express as a man or a woman. These are the behaviours that Western society most often calls "masculine" or "feminine". Gender roles can change with time and may be different from one culture to another. For example, many Indigenous communities have rich histories of multiple gender traditions.

GENDER VARIANT/GENDER NONCONFORMING

Gender-linked behaviours, which are different from those stereotypically expected of an individual's sex. Also used as a broad umbrella category for transgender, trans-identified, and transsexual identities.

GSA

A school-based gay-straight alliance found in some junior and senior high schools across North America. Gender variant students should be made to feel welcome and included as part of a school's GSA.

HETEROSEXISM

The assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that this sexual orientation is superior. Heterosexism is often expressed in more subtle forms than homophobia or transphobia. For example, allowing students to only bring opposite gendered partners to school dances or events is a form of heterosexism often exhibited in schools.

HETEROSEXUAL

A person who is physically, sexually, and emotionally attracted to someone of the opposite sex. Commonly referred to as “straight”.

HOMOPHOBIA

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

HOMOSEXUAL

A person who is physically, sexually, and emotionally attracted to someone of the same sex. Commonly referred to as “gay” or “lesbian”.

INTERSEX

A general umbrella term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the stereotypical definitions of female or male. Historically, the medical community labeled intersex persons as hermaphrodites and often surgically assigned them a sex in early infancy. Contemporary perspectives have sought to question and challenge the arbitrary practice of sex assignment surgery as a form of compulsory identity and/or genital mutilation. Recently, some individuals have moved to eliminate the term “intersex” from medical usage, replacing it with “disorders of sex development” (DSD) in an effort to avoid conflating anatomy with gender identity. Others have suggested that “intersex” be changed to “variations of sex development” as a way to avoid pathologizing this condition. These decisions and suggestions are controversial and are not accepted by all intersex people or medical professionals.

LGBTQ/GLBTQ

Commonly used acronyms that are shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirit, queer, and questioning identities. Sexual and gender minorities is often used as an umbrella category to refer to these identities.

MTF OR M2F

Male to female. A person who is transitioning or has transitioned from male to female.

NATAL SEX

The sex a person is assigned at birth, which is often equated to one’s biological sex.

PAN GENDER

Individuals who consider themselves to be other than male or female, a combination of the two, or a third gender. Gender queer is a similar term.

QUEER

Historically, a negative term for homosexuality. More recently, LGBTQ communities have reclaimed the word and use it in a positive way to refer to themselves. Queer can also include anyone whose sexuality or gender identity is outside of heteronormative bounds.

QUESTIONING

A person who is unsure of his or her gender identity or sexual orientation.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Sexual orientation generally refers to feelings of attraction, behaviour, intimacy, and identification with persons of the same or opposite gender. These deeply held intrinsic personal, social, and emotional thoughts and behaviours direct individuals toward intimacy with others. These relationships may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual, or if an individual is not inclined to have sexual relationships with another person, he or she may be asexual. One's sexual orientation may be known during childhood or adolescence, or it may take many adult years before an individual comes to terms with his or her sexual orientation.

SEXUAL MINORITY

An umbrella category for lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities.

SEX REASSIGNMENT SURGERY (SRS)

Also referred to as gender reassignment surgery (GRS), or sex change operation, sex reconstruction surgery, genital reconstruction surgery, gender confirmation surgery, and sex affirmation surgery.

TRANSGENDER (TG), TRANS-IDENTIFIED, OR TRANS

These terms refer to a person whose gender identity, outward appearance, or gender expression does not fit into conventional expectations of male or female. Also commonly used as an umbrella term referring to anyone who is gender variant. Transgender individuals normally identify with a gender that is different from the one they were assigned at birth. In this guidebook, we use the term transgender as an expansive and inclusive term to represent a wide range of gender identities and expressions.

TRANSITION

The process of changing from one's natal (birth) sex to that of the opposite sex. In many cases, this process is begun with hormone therapy, and often followed by sex reassignment surgery (SRS).

TRANSSEXUAL (TS)

An individual whose gender identity is not congruent with his or her natal sex. Many transsexual individuals frequently experience discomfort with the disparity between their physical body and sense of self (gender dysphoria) and, as a result, often begin transitioning with hormone therapy and may follow with surgery to make the body more closely align with their gender identity. All transsexual people are transgender, but not all transgender people are transsexual.

TRANSMAN OR TRANSBOY

A person who is transitioning or has transitioned from female to male (FTM).

TRANSWOMAN OR TRANSGIRL

A person who is transitioning or has transitioned from male to female (MTF).

TRANSVESTITE (TV)

See cross-dresser.

TRANNY

Sometimes used by non-transsexual people as a derogatory expression when referring to a transsexual individual. Also, used as a “reclaimed” word by transsexual individuals when talking amongst themselves. When used this way, it is often understood as a positive expression.

TWO-SPIRITED

Some Aboriginal people identify themselves as two-spirited rather than as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or transsexual persons. 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.

INTRODUCTION

This guidebook 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
- develop the capacity of educators to support and sustain gay-straight student alliances (GSAs) in their schools.

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, Egale, Canadian Human Rights Trust, which supports LGBTQ through research, advocacy and community engagement has identified LGBTQ youth, or those labelled as such, as one of the most at-risk groups in Canadian 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.

Sexual minorities are among the most frequently targeted victims of hate-motivated violence in Canada (Heath 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 Harre’ 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 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
- 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 Can the School Do?

1. PROVIDE LEADERSHIP

Take the lead by providing comprehensive and age-appropriate training on LGBTQ issues for all staff, students, and members of the School Community Council. Use teachable moments to discuss diversity and gender issues in the office, staffroom, and classroom. Demonstrate your support for staff that initiate and adopt inclusive behaviour. Remember, changes in attitude rarely occur overnight, and those who are exploring strategies and behaviours new to the school need to feel the administration's support, especially if others are to follow. The status quo may appear acceptable, but it also may be supporting a hurtful climate for an often silent and invisible gender minority.

2. ESTABLISH BASIC EXPECTATIONS IN YOUR SCHOOL CODE OF CONDUCT

Ensure that your school and division have clear non-discrimination policies and explicit codes of student conduct, which expressly prohibit harassment and discrimination on the basis of a student's actual or perceived gender identity or expression. Statements such as "tranny" should be clearly classed with derogatory racial and homophobic expressions. Demeaning racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic jokes and comments should always be challenged. Discuss how to challenge these remarks without being confrontational. For example, when someone uses these terms, follow up with a private conversation emphasizing the history and origins of the offending words and the damage putdowns can have on a student's self-esteem. Remember, students may also have gender variant family members and friends. Your silence signals your consent to the act of discrimination.

3. BE INCLUSIVE

Consider finding role models for all minority groups in your school. Examples of role models could be female scientists and church leaders, Aboriginal authors and elders, transgender and transsexual athletes and business people, poverty activists and professionals, community leaders or politicians who have a disability. Use these as examples in your discussions and make clear your admiration for their accomplishments, rather than their differences. Clearly define specialized or new terminology (e.g., transgender, transsexual, gender variant), and wherever possible encourage the use of gender inclusive language. For example, refer to partner, rather than husband or wife. Be respectful and supportive of diversity by modeling the language and pronouns that students use to describe their identities. On school forms and databases ensure that a student's preferred or chosen name can be accurately recorded on class lists, timetables, student files, etc.

4. CREATE INCLUSIVE AND USER-FRIENDLY LIBRARIES

Ensure that your school library has the best and most up-to-date collection of age-appropriate books on sexual orientation and gender identity issues and topics (See Schrader & Wells, 2007; Wells, Pratch, Bewick, 2011). Examine the materials on gender identity that are currently available in your library and ask to have those with transphobic content reviewed for possible removal. Include a variety of novels, short-story collections, movies, and magazines for youth that are affirming of gender variance. Check to ensure your library or school is not using Internet software filters that block access to age-appropriate sites that contain information on sexual orientation and gender identity.

5. BE PREPARED AND PROACTIVE

If your school suffers criticism from the local community because of a LGBTQ student, staff should be prepared to defend the rights of all students to a safe, welcoming, inclusive, and equitable educational environment. In your discussions, emphasize the health and safety concerns present and remember to protect a student and family's right to confidentiality at all times.

6. PROVIDE RESOURCES AND TRAINING FOR SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

Counsellors are often considered a critical lifeline for students who may be experiencing difficulty at home or in the school. Ensure that your counsellor or school social worker has access to supportive reference materials and contacts for relevant LGBTQ organizations. Encourage counsellors, social workers, and support personnel to attend sessions on sexual minority and gender identity issues at teachers' conventions or to organize a professional development in-service session for school and/or division staff. Ensure that all anti-bullying, mental health, and suicide prevention programs in your school are inclusive of the needs and realities of sexual and gender minority youth.

7. MAINTAIN CONFIDENTIALITY

With issues of discipline, learning difficulties, and child abuse, the first adult in the school who is aware of a problem generally calls on the support of other adults, be they administrators, counsellors, parents, or the police. In the case of LGBTQ students, such a protocol may place the student at increased risk. LGBTQ youth who are not "out" may have special confidentiality concerns. Telling even one person, without the student's permission, can leave him or her vulnerable to abuse within the school or at home. Some parents do not readily accept the news that their child may be LGBTQ and might go so far as to force their child out of the home. Of course, if a student discloses that they may be suicidal, suffering parental abuse, or at risk of hurting themselves or others, you are legally required to report these incidents to the proper authorities. However, when reporting it is important to emphasize the student's need for confidentiality. Ensure that the student is referred to a supportive school counsellor or psychologist. The counsellor or psychologist will determine what further steps are necessary to protect and support the student.

8. UPDATE SCHOOL POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Revisit your school dress code and ensure that it is flexible enough to allow a student to dress appropriately and in accordance with their gender identity. Create a school policy to ensure that all transsexual students can use the washroom that corresponds to their consistently asserted gender identity. If students do not feel safe using these washrooms, provide access to a private or staff washroom. Ensure locker room accessibility, which may include a separate or modified changing schedule or the use of a private changing area such as a washroom or staffroom or gym office (Y-Gap Project, 2009).

9. CONTINUE TO EDUCATE YOURSELF

Find people around you who are comfortable with LGBTQ issues and talk to them. Challenge your own assumptions and interrogate your own biases. Be open to making mistakes and learning from them. Remember what hurts more than being called names by students are the teachers who do nothing to help.

A CHECKLIST FOR CREATING A SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FOR LGBTQ STUDENTS

- Develop explicit policies and student codes of conduct, which expressly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.
- Provide professional development opportunities to further knowledge on sexual orientation and gender identity issues and concerns.
- Infuse sexual and gender minority perspectives in the curriculum, school, and classroom discussions.
- Develop inclusive library collections and open access to age-appropriate online information and community supports and services.
- Support and sustain gay-straight alliance (GSA) clubs in schools, which are inclusive of LGBTA students (see Wells, 2006).
- Require all teachers and adults to intervene, prevent, and report harassment, bullying, and violence in schools.
- Designate and make gender-neutral bathrooms and change room facilities publicly available.
- Identify in-school allies, advocates, and mentors for LGBTQ students.
- Require all school staff, parents, and students to respect and use a student's preferred name and chosen pronouns.
- Ensure that a student's preferred or chosen name is used in all school records.
- Respect the confidentiality of all LGBTQ students and their families.
- Educate parent councils about sexual orientation and LBGQTQ issues (McGuire & Conover-Williams, 2010).

WHAT CAN I DO TO CREATE AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM?

An inclusive classroom and school environment means that all students are made to feel safe, welcomed, and supported. Students need to know that there are adults in their school who will listen to and support them regardless of their actual or perceived differences. Think about the ways in which your understandings of LGBTQ issues may influence your teaching and the corresponding classroom environment (Rands, 2009). Ask yourself, how are issues of sexual orientation and gender represented in your classroom? How are these representations related to traditional social and cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity? How are LGBTQ issues represented and reinforced in your school and community? How do different cultural, ethnic, and faith-based contexts influence members of the LGBTQ community? What are the effects of these representations on youth who do not conform to traditional gender norms and sex role stereotypes?

The suggestions below represent a few important ways in which educators can signal their support for LGBTQ youth. While the strategies are not exhaustive, they represent a starting point from which educators can begin to challenge traditional beliefs of sexuality and gender and the power of normalization within school.

1. SIGNAL YOUR SUPPORT

Identify your classroom or office as a safe space to talk about issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Place a small rainbow flag on your desk, or post a pink triangle, gender symbol, or rainbow sticker in your office or on your filing cabinet. This will signal that you know and care about LGBTQ youth. Other ways to be inclusive include discussing current events involving issues around sexual orientation and gender identity in the media, on television, and in film. Identify a staff person or persons within your school, and at the school division level, who can serve as a safe contact, resource person, and ally for LGBTQ, and questioning youth.

2. CHALLENGE LGBTQ COMMENTS AND JOKES

Never laugh at an offending joke. Consider directly challenging all inappropriate comments, thereby signaling a caring attitude and identifying yourself as a safe person to talk to. Correspondingly, given the context, you may wish to challenge a comment in private, thereby providing opportunity for a more-in-depth and nuanced discussion. A good class activity is to ask students to list all the racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic terms they can think of and then discuss and demystify the messages and stereotypes they often convey.

3. IDENTIFY LGBTQ PEOPLE IN SOCIETY

Help bring recognition to the lives of LGBTQ people. Many LGBTQ individuals have provided important contributions to society through their careers and professions. LGBTQ people have existed throughout history and in a wide variety of cultures, occupations, and religions around the world.

GAY STRAIGHT ALLIANCE – GSA

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.

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.

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 division 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 division 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.

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 division'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 meeting (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. A 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 web space for student groups, consider developing a website for your GSA and advertise the web link.

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
- 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
- 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)
 - 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 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 about 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.

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, pg. 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, pg. 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 Chart 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 fact, both the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Saskatchewan Code of Human Rights explicitly include sexual orientation as a protected ground against discrimination. Teachers need to be aware of their own ethical conduct and teach in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of trans-identified students as well as all other minorities.

GSA's 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/division 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 GSA's 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 GSA's?

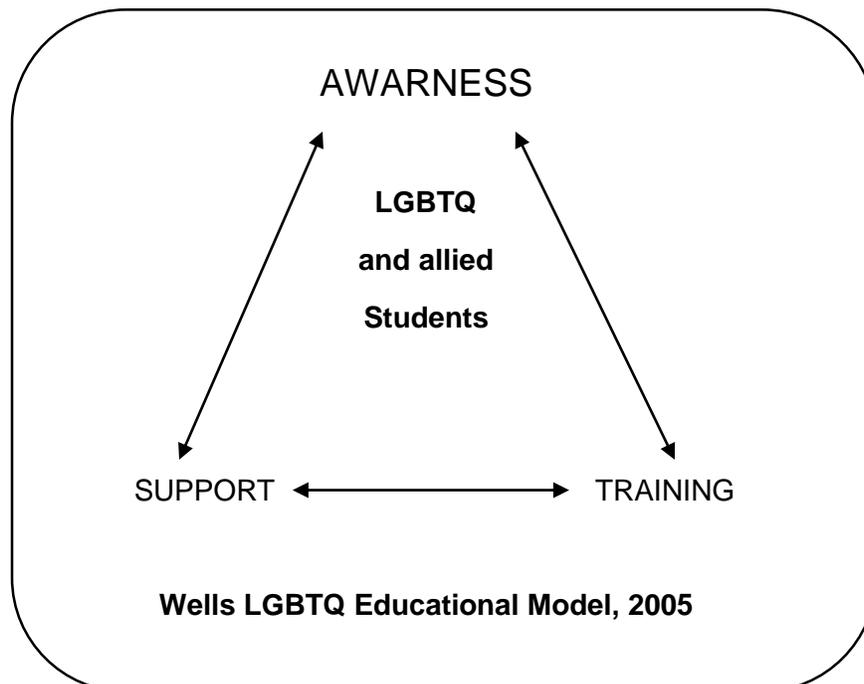
Some students and teachers may feel that it is important for a GSA to be an LGBTQ-only space. After all, every other space in school is designed for heterosexual students! Rather than exclude straight-identified students, though, perhaps the focus should be on the more important issues: Why do straight students want to be a part of a GSA? (May 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. GSA's 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 ATAs 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 on 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.



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