



# **GSA ADVISOR HANDBOOK**



**FROM THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF GSA NETWORKS**

# GSA ADVISOR HANDBOOK

## FROM THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF GSA NETWORKS



Photo courtesy of Gay-Straight Alliance Network

The National Association of GSA Networks would like to thank:

**Graphic Designer:**

Yiqing Shao, [yiqing.shao@gmail.com](mailto:yiqing.shao@gmail.com)

**Authors:**

Allison Buehler, *Mazzoni Center, PA*  
Saben Littlefield, *Outright Vermont, VT*  
Kathy Marsocci, *LGBT Center of Raleigh, NC*  
Tim Michael, *GSA For Safe Schools, WI*  
Kirsten Oshinsky, *LGBT Center of Raleigh, NC*  
Daniel Solis, *Gay-Straight Alliance Network*  
Laura Wadden, *Gay-Straight Alliance Network*

**Editors:**

Danielle Askini  
Renee Bracey Sherman, *Gay-Straight Alliance Network*  
Marcus Busby, *Gay-Straight Alliance Network*  
Amanda Harris, *Gay-Straight Alliance Network*  
Kelly Lewis, *Gay-Straight Alliance Network*  
Javi Pinedo, *Gay-Straight Alliance Network*  
Elana Rosenberg, *Youth Pride Inc., RI*

Participants at the 2011 National Gathering of the  
National Association of GSA Networks

And to all the countless advisors who gave input and shared  
their experiences to make this handbook a success. Thank you!

**2011**  
**NATIONAL**  
**ASSOCIATION**  
**OF GSA**  
**NETWORKS**

[www.gsanetwork.org/advisor-handbook](http://www.gsanetwork.org/advisor-handbook)

# Letter

Dear GSA Advisors,

The National Association of GSA Networks is a group of 33 state and regional networks of GSAs. Our purpose is to support the growth of the GSA movement by connecting state and regional networks to each other for information-sharing, networking and peer exchange. We know that for most of you, playing the part of faculty advisor to a Gay-Straight Alliance is a volunteer role, a role that often adds extra hours to your work week. And a role that often adds experiences and challenges that advisors of other clubs may not encounter. We, the members of the National Association of GSA Networks, deeply appreciate GSA advisors and the work that you do. We created this handbook to support your work and it has been a labor of love.

We also know that many of you say “yes” to being a GSA advisor without prior knowledge or training on what the job will entail. Our goal in writing this handbook was to provide new GSA advisors with a basic foundation on which to build, and more seasoned GSA advisors with new ideas and suggestions to perhaps take their students’ club to a new level.

This handbook includes an introduction to GSAs, sample activities, frequent issues that arise, and some thoughts on the various roles an advisor might play. We wanted it to be comprehensive while not overwhelming, and we made every effort to include many voices in compiling the information it contains. In addition to the staff of GSA Networks and GSA-serving organizations around the country, advisors and students, both current and former, were involved in the writing and editing of this handbook.

*Research tells us that Gay-Straight Alliances and similar clubs play a crucial role in improving school climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) students in our schools: According to GLSEN’s 2009 National School Climate Survey, the presence of a GSA in a school was directly related to more positive experiences for LGBTQQ students, hearing fewer homophobic remarks, missing school less because of safety concerns, less harassment due to one’s real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, and a greater sense of belonging at school.*

*Additionally, a student’s ability to name just one supportive staff member is directly related to missing less school due to feeling unsafe, greater academic achievement, higher future academic aspirations, and a greater sense of belonging at school.*

As an advisor to a Gay-Straight Alliance, you may very well be the only supportive person to students at your school. Thank you for being that one person.

We hope that you find this resource useful and that you will share your thoughts and feedback with us. We are very interested in making this handbook as helpful and accessible as possible and we rely on you to help us achieve that goal.

Thank you for all that you do.

In Solidarity,  
The National Association of GSA Networks\*

# Index

<b>1. About GSAs</b>	<b>Page 3</b>
a. What Is a GSA?	3
b. What Do GSAs Do?	3
c. Role of the Advisor	4
<b>2. Getting Started</b>	<b>Page 5</b>
a. First Things First	5
b. First Meeting	6
c. How to Advertise Your Meetings	7
d. Troubleshooting	8
<b>3. Your Role in a GSA</b>	<b>Page 9</b>
a. Guiding Principles for GSA Advisors	9
b. GSA Advisor General Roles	10
c. Co-Advisors	11
d. Possible Leadership Structures	11
e. Facilitation	12
<b>4. What to Do in Your GSA</b>	<b>Page 13</b>
a. Sample Calendar	13
b. GSA Activities	14
c. Striving to Make Your GSA Inclusive	15
<b>5. Sustaining Your GSA Over Time</b>	<b>Page 17</b>
a. Transitioning Leadership	17
b. Fundraising	18
c. Documentation	18
<b>6. Frequent Issues</b>	<b>Page 19</b>
a. Talking to Parents/Guardians/Families About the GSA	19
b. Talking to Administrators, Teachers, Counselors and Other Staff	19
c. Bringing in Guest Speakers and Outside Groups	19
d. Conflict Resolution	20
e. Religion and GSAs	20
f. Legal Protections	20
<b>7. Resources</b>	<b>Page 21</b>
a. Job Protections	21
b. Protecting Yourself	21
c. Physical and Mental Health Resources	22
d. Scholarships	22
<b>8. Appendix</b>	<b>Page 23</b>
a. LGBTQQ-Related Fiction Reading List	23
b. LGBTQQ-Related Nonfiction Reading List	25
c. LGBTQQ-Related Movie and Video List	25
d. Letter on GSAs from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan	26



# 1. About GSAs

---

## In this section:

- a. What Is a GSA?
  - b. What Do GSAs Do?
  - c. Role of the Advisor
- 



## What Is a GSA?

GSA usually stands for Gay-Straight Alliance, but it can also stand for Gender and Sexuality Alliance (which is a much more inclusive name). GSAs are school clubs in which students can talk and learn about sexual orientation, gender identity, and some of the issues that surround them. They're set up just like any other student group, with a faculty advisor and regular meetings. Everyone is welcome—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) students, as well as straight students, students with LGBTQQ families, and students who don't have or need a label for their sexual orientations or gender identities.

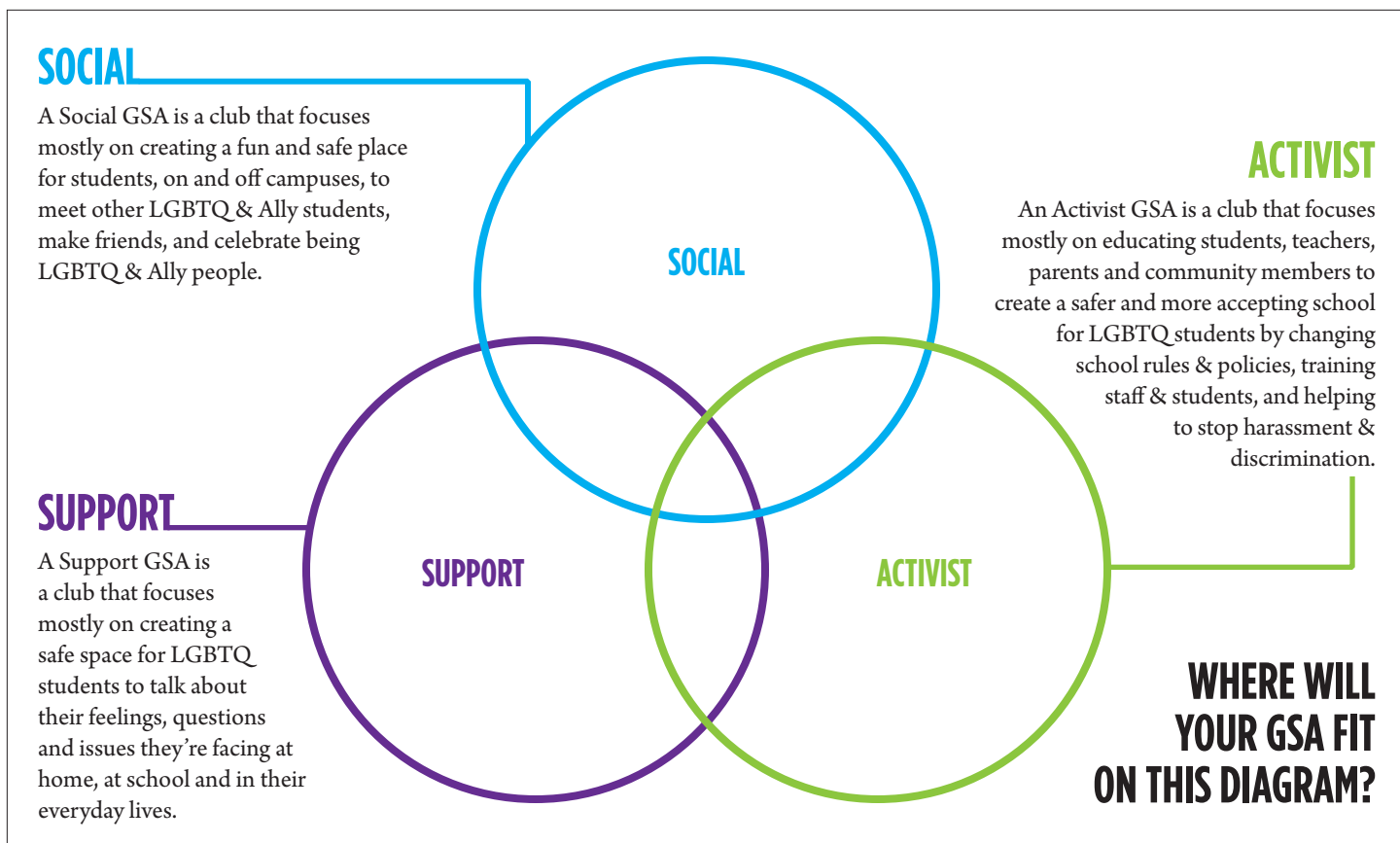
GSAs play a vital role in making schools safer for LGBTQQ students by providing supportive and accepting spaces as well as doing broader organizing work against homophobia and transphobia in school.

## What Do GSAs Do?

Depending on your GSA's mission and goals, activities will change week-to-week, month-to-month and year-to-year. There are three common types of GSAs, which all meet the different needs of youth in different types of school climates.

- Social GSAs are generally helpful for youth trying to meet other LGBTQ & Ally students and make friends
- Support GSAs are for students who are trying to create safe spaces to talk about the various issues they face
- Activist GSAs are for those youth who are actively working to improve their school climate

All of these types of GSAs make school safer for LGBTQQ youth. Many GSAs begin as social or support GSAs and over time start to do more activism. It is important to move toward doing more activism because it improves school climate and policies for current youth in the school, as well as affects institutional change for future LGBTQQ youth.



## Role of the Advisor

As the Advisor for your GSA, it is appropriate for you to help the students identify what activities and focus the GSA will have. In our experience, the most effective GSAs mix all three kinds of activities so as to meet the widest range of needs for both the students in the GSA, and to balance creating a safe and fun space for students as well as helping to make policy and cultural changes in the school. At times, as the advisor you will need to help facilitate discussions where the students talk about what they're interested in working on and what needs they see not being met at the school. Remember to help them think beyond just the needs of the club members and to take a look at the school as a whole and what changes can be made to better support LGBTQQ students now and in the future.



# 2. Getting Started

---

## In this section:

- a. First Things First
  - b. First Meeting
  - c. How to Advertise Your Meetings
  - d. Troubleshooting
- 

There are many things to keep in mind when working with a new or existing GSA. This section covers such topics as, “First Things First”, “First Meeting”, “How to Advertise Your Meetings”, and “Troubleshooting”.

### First Things First

#### Know Your Justification for Starting a GSA

Some of the people you have to talk to along the way may ask you why you want to start a GSA. That’s not a bad question to ask yourself. Under the law, you don’t have to have a reason to start a non-curricular club, but it’s important to be able to rationally explain your reasons for wanting a GSA to people who oppose you, or just want to know more about what the club is all about. Is anti- LGBTQQ harassment a problem at your school and you want to stop it? Do LGBTQQ students or allies want a safe, supportive space where they can be themselves? Those are both really good reasons to start a GSA.

#### Research the Law

Be sure to research the laws for starting non-curricular clubs and anti-discrimination in your state. If you encounter any resistance later on, knowing your legal rights to start a GSA and talk about LGBTQQ issues in school can go a long way to helping you overcome it. Check out the local ACLU in your state or find a GSA Network in your state. Remember that students have the right to form a GSA! See the letter from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in the Appendix for more information (page 26).

#### Follow Guidelines

Starting a GSA is just like starting any other school club. Get a copy of your student handbook, and look up your school’s requirements for student organizations so that you can be sure to follow the rules carefully. If your school doesn’t have easy access to a student handbook, be sure to check in with your Activities Director or Associated Student Body Advisor about the rules for starting a club. Some of the things you may have to do are find a faculty advisor or write a consti-



tution or mission statement. Be sure to do everything you're supposed to do according to the school's rules so as to avoid slowing down the approval process.

### Prepare and Turn In Any Necessary Paperwork

Make sure you follow the rules thoroughly and correctly. This is a good time to address any concerns or arguments your administrator may have brought up earlier.

Some tips as you prepare any paperwork or applications to start your group:

- Keep dated and signed copies of any forms or other paperwork turned in for your club application.
- Keep notes regarding when you turned paperwork in, and to whom, as well as any conversations you have with school officials about starting the club.
- Keep record of all documentation that has been returned to you. This should include responses from administration *in writing* that have been signed by an administrator.

If your school gives you any trouble later about starting your GSA, then at least they won't be able to say it's because you didn't sign a required form or made some other mistake with your application.

### Inform Administration of Your Plans

Tell administrators what you are doing right away and include GSA members/student leaders in that process. You may also consider providing administrators a copy of the "Dear Colleague Letter" from the U.S. Secretary of Education (copy in appendix, page 26). It can be very helpful to have an administrator on your side. They can work as liaisons on your behalf with other teachers, parent groups, community members, and the school board. **If an administrator is resistant to the GSA, let them know that forming a GSA club is protected under the Federal Equal Access Act.**

### Pick a Meeting Place

You may want to find a meeting place that is off the beaten track at school and

offers some level of privacy or confidentiality. A high-profile meeting place may discourage reluctant participants who are worried about being outed as members of the GSA.

---

*"If an administrator is resistant to the GSA, let them know that forming a GSA club is protected under the Federal Equal Access Act."*

---

### Advertise

Support students in figuring out the best way to advertise at your school. It may be a combination of school bulletin announcements, flyers, starting a Facebook Fan-page, and word-of-mouth. If the flyers are defaced or torn down, do not be discouraged. Keep putting them back up. Eventually, whoever is tearing them down will give up.

Besides, advertising for your group and having words up such as "gay, lesbian,

bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning" or "end transphobia" or "discuss sexual orientation" can be part of educating the school and can actually make other students feel safer—even if they never attend a single meeting.

Remember that there are straight allies in your school who may be interested in working with your group. Don't forget to reach out to siblings of LGBTQQ students, and students who have LGBTQQ parents/guardians. Remember to reach out to straight allies as well. There are probably many people in your school who don't at all identify as LGBTQQ, but would still be willing to help out. It can often be easier to reach out to these members, as well.

See "How to Advertise Your Meetings" below for a variety of ways in which your group may consider getting word around the school about the GSA (whether it is a new GSA or a group that is looking for more ways to spread the word).

### Hold Your Meeting

You may want to start out with a student-led discussion about why people feel having this group is important. You can also help students brainstorm things the club would like to do this year. See "Your First Meeting" below for ideas on what you might help your members do at your first meeting.

### First Meeting

During the first meeting (or first few meetings) of the GSA, there are several items that should be discussed among group members, in order to determine the tone and direction of the group. And don't forget! Meetings should be run by the students..

### Group Agreements

Many groups have group agreements in order to ensure that group discussions are safe, confidential, and respectful. Many groups have a group agreement that no assumptions or labels are used about a group member's sexual orientation or gender identity. This can help make straight allies and transgender students feel comfortable about attending the club.





Photo courtesy of Gay-Straight Alliance Network

### Get to Know One Another

During the first several meetings of the GSA, it is important to allow students time to get to know one another in non-threatening, low-risk ways. Consider asking your student leaders to bring a couple of ideas for icebreakers to the first meeting and then have them ask group members to bring new activities for the following weeks. Example: M&M Game - Bring a bag of M&Ms (or any other candy that has several different colors for individual pieces of candy). Ask each person to take as many pieces of candy as they would like. Once everyone has taken their ideal amount, tell group members that for each piece of candy that is “x” color, they need to answer “y” question. For example, “For every yellow piece of candy, share a band that you really like” or “For every blue piece of candy, list a favorite article of clothing that you own.”

### Determining What Type of GSA You Want to Be

Every group is different and every group has different needs. However, determining what type of group the students want to have is an important step to building student buy-in within the group. This may also be helpful in developing a mission statement for the group. It is important for members to know what type of group they are joining. If the group is

a social group, but that is not made clear to all members (new and returning), a student who wants to focus solely on activism may become frustrated or irritated with the group because it is not meeting their needs. GSAs can also decide that they want to do different types of activities in all three of the categories: support, social and activist.

*“Having goals, short-term and long-term, will keep students motivated and focused when the group meets.”*

Group types may shift over time. It is important to keep a pulse on the direction of the group over the year. With each new year, the direction might change!

Consider encouraging students to use GSA for Safe School’s Determining your “GSA Type” Activity ([http://www.gsa-forsafeschools.org/docs/Elements\\_GSA.pdf](http://www.gsa-forsafeschools.org/docs/Elements_GSA.pdf)) with the group to help steer its direction.

### Plan for the Future

Help your members develop an action plan. Encourage students to brainstorm activities and set goals for what the GSA wants to work towards. Having goals, short-term and long-term, will keep students motivated and focused when the group meets.

### How to Advertise Your Meetings

Inevitably, the question comes up: “How do we get more students to attend GSA Meetings?”

Below are several ideas to assist the GSA and who knows, more ideas may form from talking about these:

- Provide food at your meeting
- Put an announcement in the daily bulletin or assembly, read over intercom
- Advertise at club day—have a table and pass out ribbons or lollipops with a sticker with the name of your GSA
- Participate in school pride or spirit week at your school
- Set up an information table at lunch or special events in a visible place
- Reach out to straight allies – you’d be surprised how many there are
- Pass out rainbow ribbons or GSA buttons to GSA supporters
- Make flyers or posters about specific meetings, topics, or events and post around campus. Example: Make flyers defining what a straight ally is with information about your GSA at the bottom
- Ask teachers to permanently post your group’s general flyer in their classroom
- Hold a “bring-a-friend day” at your GSA meeting
- Make presentations at other clubs’ meetings about your group; invite these clubs to make presentations at your GSA meeting
- Send representatives to classes to make an announcement about your group’s meetings or activities
- Make a website, MySpace, or Facebook Fan-page for your GSA

Note: Consider making fliers/signs on the computer so that they can easily be re-printed.

## Troubleshooting

Common Arguments Against GSAs—and Why They're Wrong

**“WE CAN'T LET OUR STUDENTS HAVE A CLUB THAT'S ABOUT SEX.”**

GSAs are not about sex. GSAs are about valuing all people regardless of whether they're lesbian, gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning. GSAs are like any other club; they offer students with a common interest a chance to connect and give students a safe place from the day-to-day grind of school. They're about creating a supportive space where students can be themselves without fear, and about making schools safer for *all* students by promoting respect for everyone. A GSA meeting is no more about sex than the homecoming dance or any other school-sponsored activity. Note that GSAs can and should be a place where GSA members can learn and talk about sexual health that is relevant to LGBTQQ students. LGBTQQ students don't often get information that is relevant to them and the GSA can be an important place to support students in finding that information or learning about it in the GSA.

**“WE CAN'T LET OUTSIDERS COME IN AND START THIS KIND OF CLUB IN OUR SCHOOL.”**

GSAs are not formed by outsiders. GSAs are student-led and student organized. There are a few organizations that have created contact lists and lose coalitions of the many GSA clubs across the country, but all of the clubs are still organized by students. According to the federal Equal Access Act, schools must support any kind of clubs that students start.

**“IT'S JUST TOO CONTROVERSIAL.”**

Sure, a GSA may be controversial, but if the students in the GSA aren't disrupting school, then the school can't use that as an excuse to silence them. If other students, parents, or community members are in an uproar over a GSA, the school's responsibility is to address those people's concerns—not shut down a group that is peacefully doing its thing just because some people don't like it. Besides, when a GSA becomes a point of contention in a community, it really only proves the need for the GSA to exist in the first place.

**“IF WE LET STUDENTS START A GSA, THEN WE'D HAVE TO LET STUDENTS FORM ANY OTHER KIND OF CLUB THEY WANT. WHAT IF THEY WANTED TO START A KKK CLUB?”**

If a club's purpose is to harass or intimidate other students, then the club is disruptive to the educational process and the school can stop it from forming, so this kind of argument just doesn't fly. Letting students start a GSA doesn't mean that extreme sorts of clubs are going to actually form on campus. Have a lot of students been approaching your school about starting a KKK club? We really doubt it!

Moving Through Barriers

If your school turns you down, tells you that you need to change the name of your GSA, or tries to place restrictions on the GSA that it doesn't place on other clubs, you should contact the ACLU or GSA Network in your state. The ACLU might be able to help! Try this resource for more ideas and information: [www.gsanetwork.org/resources/building-you-gsa/dealing-hostility-opposition](http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/building-you-gsa/dealing-hostility-opposition).

Sources:

ACLU's Tips on Starting a GSA

[http://www.aclu.org/lgbt-rights\\_hiv-aids/tips-starting-gsa](http://www.aclu.org/lgbt-rights_hiv-aids/tips-starting-gsa)

Gay-Straight Alliance Network's 10 Steps for Starting a GSA

<http://gsanetwork.org/resources/building-your-gsa/10-steps-starting-gsa>

Gay-Straight Alliance Network's How to Get More Members and Allies

<http://gsanetwork.org/resources/building-your-gsa/how-get-more-members-and-allies>

# 3. Your Role in a GSA

## In this section:

- a. Guiding Principles for GSA Advisors
- b. GSA Advisor General Roles
- c. Co-Advisors
- d. Possible Leadership Structures
- e. Facilitation

As a GSA Advisor, you are vital to ensuring that these life-saving clubs not only exist from year to year but that they grow and thrive. Students need guidance in organizing GSA activities and campaigns, mentoring in building the strength of the club, and connection to on campus and off campus resources. In many ways, a good advisor is the foundation that the students can build on to have a strong, empowered and effective GSA club that is not only providing a safe place for its members, but that is also transforming the school culture.

## Guiding Principles for GSA Advisors

To help guide you in supporting your students as they run their GSA, there are some key principles to remember. As an important ally to GSA leaders, working with these principles will ensure that you help your students succeed. These principles are:

### Youth Leadership

Always remember that GSAs exist for students to have a safe place to be themselves and to have an organized way to reduce homophobia and transphobia in their schools. As a student-led club, the GSA must always be directed by students with adults supporting their ideas and leadership. In practice, this means students run their own meetings, set their own agendas, decide which issues they want to learn about and tackle, and make all important decisions. As an adult supporting this process, we know this can be tough for you! However, GSAs work best when students are in the driver's seat and their advisors help them co-pilot the club. Allow yourself to learn from your students and you may be surprised what you'll learn!



Photo courtesy of Gay-Straight Alliance Network

### Youth Empowerment

Making sure that students have the skills and confidence to run their club is a critical part of the work a GSA Advisor does. Building the capacity of students to run their club, think critically, and plan effectively will not only ensure that your GSA is run well, it will also help build the confidence and abilities of your students. In practice, this means you will help students learn how to facilitate their own meetings, how to plan events, and how to speak to adults about their issues and concerns, to name just a few examples. This can also mean as an adult stepping back and letting the students make some mistakes and guiding them to learn from those mistakes.

### Building for the Future

As the Advisor, you will be one of the most constant and stable parts of your GSA. Help the current students think, plan and act not just for this school year or the next, but also for many years down the road. Working for social justice in our schools takes time and we need strong, well-led and well-organized GSAs to lead this movement. You can help your students build for the future by raising funds for next year, creating strong structures in the club that will ensure consistent and good student leadership, or creating an archive of GSA records, events, campaigns, and actions so that future leaders have access to the history of your club.

### Appropriate Boundaries

As an adult working with youth, it is crucial that you maintain supportive and healthy relationships with the students in your GSA. As you know, school professionals working directly with students are state mandated reporters. Make sure you know what it means to be a mandated reporter in your state. **You may not be able to guarantee confidentiality with your students on a variety of issues including students' sexual activity, risk for harm both self-imposed or imposed by others, suicidal thoughts or behavior, or alcohol and other drug use.** Additionally, make sure you know what your school's policy is on sharing cell phone numbers, personal e-mails, and being "friends" on Facebook and other social networking sites. GSA advisors are often the "cool" teachers; consider what it means to be friendly but not a friend with your students. It is best to let students know and remind them where these boundaries fall so that no miscommunication occurs.



## GSA Advisor General Roles

As a GSA Advisor, you will most likely need to fill a number of differing roles, sometimes at the same time! GSAs are different from school to school, so be prepared to be flexible and pay close attention to the needs of your students. Adaptability is perhaps the quality you'll need the most as a GSA Advisor. You can expect to:

- Provide and identify regular opportunities for skill building, leadership, and learning
- Teach students how to navigate the ins and outs of your school system in terms of laws and policies, and serve as a liaison between faculty and the GSA
- Train students to resolve conflict among officers and within the club when it arises
- Support students in fostering a safe environment for all students to participate, including challenging language and behavior from within the GSA that perpetuates discrimination
- Assist students in managing club funds
- Educate and support students in keeping records of meetings and decisions and only if need be, keeping records for the GSA
- Set students up to succeed, but allow for little failures as teachable moments that are followed with conversations that help them reflect and learn
- Support changes within the GSA – which may include shifting goals or the mission of the group or being more than one “type” of GSA.

### ADVISOR ROLES SPECIFIC TO A SUPPORT GSA

A Support GSA works to create a non-judgmental, safe and nurturing place where students can share their experiences, learn about resources in their school and off campus, connect with others like them, and build peer support. Support GSAs do activities like: movie night, icebreaker activities, board games, trust exercises, sharing circles, arts & crafts, etc. *Remember that it is up to the students to decide which type(s) of group they will have.*

- Provide coaching and facilitation support for student leaders
- Support identity development; seek out resources on building trust, communication, and empathy amongst your students
- Help students find activities, movies, social outings, local resources, etc.
- Educate yourself to the needs and unique experiences of LGBTQQ and ally youth
- Seek out resources for mental health, coping skills, and peer mentoring, etc.
- Help students find appropriate support at school (a supportive counselor, for example) and in the community (a local PFLAG chapter, for example)

### ADVISOR ROLES SPECIFIC TO AN SOCIAL GSA

A Social GSA primarily works to create a fun, safe and welcoming place where students can make friends, connect with others like them, and build peer support. *Remember that it is up to the students to decide which type(s) of group they will have.*

- Provide coaching and facilitation support for student leaders
- Support identity development; seek out resources on building trust, communication, and empathy amongst your students
- Help students find activities, movies, social outings, local resources, etc.
- Educate yourself to the needs and unique experiences of LGBTQQ and ally youth

### ADVISOR ROLES SPECIFIC TO AN ACTIVIST GSA

An Activist GSA primarily works to transform their school into a safe and welcoming school free of harassment and discrimination against LGBTQQ and Ally people. Activist GSAs help educate students, staff and parents on the issues facing the LGBTQQ and Ally communities, change school policies and practices to end harassment and discrimination, and train students and staff on how to be allies. Activist GSAs connect with resources on and off campus to increase the tools and support they have to change their school. *Remember that it is up to the students to decide which type(s) of group they will have.*

- Support students learning about their legal rights and strategies that can work to make their school safer for LGBTQQ students
- Encourage students to learn not only about LGBTQQ issues, but also make the connections between other oppressions and the unique histories and movements of other oppressed groups
- Help students organize events, displays, and long term campaigns
- Help students create event time lines that are realistic and in line with school policies and procedures
- Educate yourself on possible GSA events, as well as LGBTQQ issues, current events, and laws
- Help students make connections between GSA movements and other liberation movements and encourage coalition building and collaboration
- Help students find resources, movies, books, lesson plans, etc.
- Make connections with outside organizations or speakers, or point students in their direction
- Educate yourself on LGBTQQ issues, current events, people, history, etc.



## Co-Advisors

Finding another adult staff member to serve as a Co-Advisor for the club is a great way to double the support your students get! It also helps to avoid burnout from tasks that come along with the various hats you wear as an Advisor.

Having a Co-Advisor also helps to:

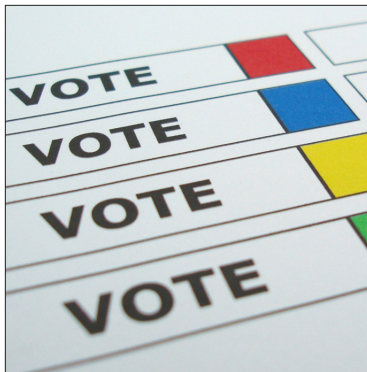
- Guarantee the longevity of the GSA since transition periods are easier if one advisor were to leave
- Lessen the workload and ease the time commitment
- Co-Advisors can sit in on sub-committees, potentially allowing more work to be done
- You have a peer! Someone else to field questions, issues, and help problem solve
- You have an additional support person for students, especially helpful if a student needs one-on-one time

## Possible Leadership Structures

There are a number of different ways that a GSA can organize itself to be the most effective. We offer some models that are commonly used by GSAs to successfully run themselves. What works best for one GSA in terms of leadership structure may not work for another. In addition, what works best for your GSA this year may not work the following year. Work with your students to consider the pros and cons of each leadership structure and help them reevaluate what kind of structure they want for the following year.

### HIERARCHY-BASED LEADERSHIP

This structure has generally four leadership positions: President, Vice President, Treasurer and Secretary, to which students are annually elected. These “execs” oversee the club and run the meetings. They also meet regularly outside of club time in “officer meetings” to make decisions about the club such as agendas for future meetings and possible event ideas. This format can be useful for getting things done because it has well-defined roles and designates a clear chain of responsibility. However, it can also lead to potential conflicts, as non-officer members might feel excluded from decision-making. It also has the potential to lead to a weaker GSA if the officers aren’t well organized or committed to the club’s mission.



### COMMITTEE-BASED LEADERSHIP

This structure involves the formation of specific committees to address particular GSA objectives or needs. Each committee is generally led by a committee “chair” who summarizes committee activities to the entire club at the regular meetings. Example committees include an event committee, fundraising committee, education committee, etc. This model usually works best for larger clubs. To combine this structure with the one above, consider having committee chairs meet as a leadership board.

### BOARD-BASED LEADERSHIP

This structure has a “board” of people who lead the GSA. Each board member has a defined leadership role that covers a major area of responsibility such as Facilitator or Chair, Publicity Specialist, Event Coordinator, Fundraising Director, and Class Representa-



tives. This model tends to be more egalitarian than the hierarchy-based structure; while leadership positions are well defined, board members make decisions and report to the club as a group instead of a President. Some of its drawbacks are that it can be easy for the students to drop responsibilities and not be held accountable.

### COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Some GSAs choose to never establish an official leadership team or structure. There is no set hierarchy in this type of club, and tasks and responsibilities are shared and delegated on a volunteer basis. The group may function with a “majority rules” decision-

making process, or attempt to work towards consensus when deciding what kind of projects to work on and when to meet. Consensus means that everyone discusses their ideas and if someone disagrees or has concerns, the group works to resolve the issue instead of just outvoting them. This model works well for smaller clubs where hierarchical leadership may not make sense.

## Facilitation

Running a GSA meeting is a very important job for students. As a GSA Advisor, your role is to support students before, during, and after the club meeting.

Some tips to make sure students are ready to facilitate their meetings well are:

### Before

- Help students understand what it means to facilitate a meeting. Come up with a definition of what facilitation means during an officers' meeting, as well as the expectations of facilitating a meeting. For ideas, check out GSA Network's How to Have a Kick-Ass GSA Resource Guide (<http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/building-your-gsa/how-have-kick-ass-gsa>).
- Check your ageism and the language that you use. You may want to avoid the following phrases.
  - "You'll understand when you're my age"
  - "You're so \_\_\_\_\_ for your age"
  - "Puppy love"
  - "Kids" (referring to students or other youth)
  - "Real world" (referring to life outside high school or college)
- Agree on signals or code words for

*"Sit out of the way during the meeting and take notes on their facilitation with an eye towards what skills they need to develop to be stronger facilitators."*

---

students to use when they need your help. This can help them feel supported and it sets a clear way for you to get involved without overstepping your boundaries.

- Let students know that you'll be taking notes to give them feedback and pointers for improving their skills. Make it clear that you're not judging them but rather giving them information to help improve their skills as facilitators.
- Role model good facilitation skills before meetings. Help students pay close attention to active listening, which is a critical part of facilitation.

- Organize trainings for your student leaders on facilitation skills. Contact your local GSA Network for help with this.

### During

- Sit out of the way during the meeting and take notes on their facilitation with an eye towards what skills they need to develop to be stronger facilitators.
- Only step in to directly facilitate if the students use the signal or code word you all agreed ahead of time.
- Support the students in whatever logistical details they might need – setting out food and snacks, passing out sign in sheet.

### After

- At the next officers or leadership meeting, review with the students your feedback and suggestions for improvement. Be patient and clear with your feedback, being sure to provide specific suggestions for strengthening their skills.
- Help the students with action items from the previous club meeting and assist them in creating an agenda for the coming club meeting.

# 4. What to Do in Your GSA

## In this section:

- a. Sample Calendar
- b. GSA Activities
- c. Striving to Make Your GSA Inclusive

Keep in mind while reading the calendar and activities sections that these are only recommendations. Students leaders should only implement what they feel would work best at the school. Supporting students in figuring out how a GSA would fit into the school environment is a difficult task but is crucial and needs to be done as early as possible.

Depending on your school's policies, it may be best to have your weekly or biweekly GSA meetings at either lunchtime or after school. Your GSA's level of activity will vary depending on the time of the year, so it's best to encourage students to come up with a calendar of events that the GSA plans to do. Below is a sample GSA calendar for a given school year:

Month	Time	Topic	Speaker
Ongoing	TBD	Anti-Slur Campaign	Community LGBTQQ Network
September	Lunch	Meet and Greet / Why be a member?	Community LGBTQQ Network
	PM	Activism and Involvement Latina/Latino History Month	
October	Lunch	Ally Week	School Counselor
	PM	LGBTQ History Month	
November	Lunch	GSA Informational Lunch for Teachers	Transgender Guest Speaker
	PM	Transgender Awareness Transgender Day of Remembrance	
December	Lunch	World AIDS Day (12/1) Legal Rights	Alumni
	PM	Alumni Homecoming / Holiday Cookie Party	
January	Lunch	No Name-Calling Week	Location TBD
	PM	Black History Month Social Event with Other GSAs from Other Schools	
February	Lunch	Discussion on Healthy Relationships	Local Religious Leader
	PM	Balancing Religion and Sexuality & Gender	
March	Lunch	LGBTQQ Roles in the Media	
April	Lunch	Day of Silence	Alumni
	PM	Talking to Your Family	
May	Lunch	AIDS Walk	
	PM	End-of-the-Year Movie Party Harvey Milk Day Pride Celebration	





Photo by Edward Dunkin Photography

The calendar reflects topics that could be used in either a short lunchtime setting or for a longer after school meeting. Lunch topics can be modified to become informational sessions conducted for students beyond the GSA, by GSA members.

**Possible Structure of Lunchtime Meetings: [officers meet the first half / whole group meets the second]**

1. Announcements and information from officers
2. Discuss monthly topic information
3. Committee reports: this month and next
4. Potluck lunch

*Note: Encourage student leaders to have separate leadership meetings, whether at lunch or another time.*

**Possible Structure of After School Meetings: [whole group]**

1. Refreshments
2. Announcements and introductions.
3. Guest Speaker(s) and/or Activities

**GSA Activities**

One of the most common questions people have about the GSA movement

is “What do GSAs *do*, exactly?” This is a question that all GSAs have to contemplate for themselves. While every GSA gets to determine what “kind” of GSA they will be and what they will focus on, many GSAs find it helpful to hear what other GSAs are doing or have done. Here is just a short list of activities GSAs can participate in or organize for their club:

***Note that students are the ones who should be organizing!***

**Social Activities**

Use games, icebreakers, or other team-building activities to get to know one another better; watch movies, TV shows, or listen to music together; take group outings or field trips; organize a BBQ or potluck; throw a party and invite other students and student club members to attend; have an arts & crafts day to give members a chance to share their skills and express themselves through art; or just sit around and talk with one another!

**Support Activities**

Create posters and pamphlets for the school that have information about local and national resources for issues that

young people face, such as mental health, self-harm, body image, and support for LGBTQQ identities; invite members of PFLAG to come and visit the GSA and talk about their group; invite a school guidance counselor or social worker to visit with the GSA and present on a topic and provide one-on-one support if needed; participate in regular “appreciations”, during which club members take turns saying nice and positive things about one another.

**Educational Activities**

Assign discussion topics to GSA members to research and bring to the club to teach back; invite guest speakers to come talk to the GSA; find LGBTQQ-themed books to read together and discuss; petition your school library to add more LGBTQQ-themed books; create displays for the school hallways on significant LGBTQQ people and events in history; watch documentary or biographical movies with LGBTQQ themes; create a world map with information about LGBTQQ liberation movements in other countries; lead classroom trainings on LGBTQQ issues, or lead trainings for your school staff on how to make classrooms more inclusive.





Photo courtesy of Gay-Straight Alliance Network

## Activist Activities

Organize Days of Action, such as Day of Silence or Transgender Day of Remembrance; create an awareness campaign in your school to challenge people's use of hurtful language (this is a great opportunity to work with other clubs, too!); work with your school administration to pass better policies in your district around harassment, bullying, lesson plans, and inclusion; march in a local Pride Parade with your GSA; hold a fundraiser and donate the proceeds to a local non-profit working on a cause that the GSA members care about; hold a GSA lobby day and visit with your elected officials to educate them about LG-BTQQ issues and ask them to support legislation that supports the LGBTQ community.

## Striving to Make Your GSA Inclusive

GSA clubs play a critical role in helping make schools safer and more accepting for LGBTQ youth. Individuals in the LG-BTQQ community come from all segments of

*“Individuals in the LGBTQ community come from all segments of society, representing the spectrum of human diversity.”*

society, representing the spectrum of human diversity. A primary role of the faculty advisor is to help the club maintain and promote diversity and inclusiveness across race, class, gender, ability, religion, etc.

As a GSA club, there may be more that you and the student leaders could do to make sure your club is representative of the actual make-up of your school community. Below are some tips to help you get started in supporting your students to make your GSA welcoming to all. For more information and tools, visit <http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/creating-inclusive-gsas>.

Before your club is ever established, look

at the make-up of the student leadership interested in forming the club (whether it is new or being re-started after a hiatus) to determine if any LGBTQ population is being left out. Involving students in the organizing of the club's activities and its leadership is a vital step to ensuring that the club is inclusive and welcoming from the start. It also ensures that the GSAs goals are ones that represent the students that you serve.

Multi-issue organizing is a strong and powerful way to incorporate all aspects of a community and the people it is made up of. The LGBTQ youth movement cannot survive unless it includes people of all backgrounds and addresses issues of sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and environmental injustice. We must link ourselves together to create a multi issue social justice movement that incorporates the needs and rights of multiple communities.

However, many GSAs have struggled with multi-issue organizing because of a lack of internal diversity. There are a number of reasons why students of different backgrounds may not be as actively involved with GSAs as white students. GSA organizers from around the

San Francisco Bay Area came up with these ideas about why many GSAs are disproportionately white:

- Perception that Gay = White: Most national LGBTQQ leaders and famous queer folks are white, and people of color are often under-represented at LGBTQQ events.
- Tokenization: If a GSA is already mostly or all white, students may feel that being the only nonwhite person at meetings would put pressure on them to educate the rest of the club about diversity or racism.
- Language barriers: Especially if your school has a large population of students who do not speak English as a primary language, creating all of the GSA's flyers and materials in English may send a message that the club would not be a comfortable place for some students.
- Cultural barriers: Sexual orientation and homophobia are understood and acknowledged differently by different cultures. Many organizations that deal with LGBTQQ issues are ethnocentric and fail to recognize that sexual orientation and homophobia may have different associations and implications for people with different backgrounds. However, it's also important not to make comparisons about which communities are "more homophobic" than others; these broad generalizations perpetuate racism and may lead some members to believe that their community has "succeeded" in eliminating their own biases.
- Prioritizing Identities: Many LGBTQQ youth of color have described the alienating experience of having to choose one identity over another. For example, if they've been part of a racial/ethnic club at school, they may feel forced to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity. Conversely, if they've attended the GSA, they've felt forced to ignore or downplay their racial/ethnic identity.

If a GSA is truly successful, it will become a force for building coalitions within the school that support LGBTQQ students regardless of the class or activity the students are engaged in.



Educating teachers, administrators, students, parents and the community is our responsibility. Invite these people, along with faculty advisors from other clubs, to be guests at your meetings. Far too often GSAs are seen as organizations that seek to promote a singular agenda of tolerance for our LGBTQQ youth rather than our much wider anti-oppression message. The most effective way to increase tolerance is to decrease ignorance.

Other important things to think about:

Is the club providing the necessary resources for low-income student to attend the meetings? If your meetings take place after school, and your school does not run a "late" or activity bus, consider creating a student carpool. If your club collects dues or has event and activities for which you charge fees, scholarships should be made available to those demonstrating need.

Does your GSA include youth with LGBTQQ parents? These students are in most schools and may not realize that our GSAs are here to support them, too. Be sure you are reaching out to these students from the start of your club, as well as in your projects. A common concern arises when the straight allies begin to outnumber the LGBTQQ members. Ask your LGBTQQ members what they need from the club and what can be done to improve their experience.

Are you and your GSA members using inclusive language and practices? Lead the students in a discussion of derogatory terms

and behaviors. Help them to find the origin, meaning and derivation of these terms. Which terms are still commonly used and why? Which terms do they find offensive and which terms do they choose to identify with? How does language impact the many communities at your school? If students are interested in reducing slurs, you can help them organize an anti-slur campaign and build coalitions with other student groups (<http://www.gsanetwork.org/get-involved/change-your-school/campaigns/take-it-back-anti-slur-campaign>).

Make sure to review the policies of your school and school district for language or practices that may be discriminatory towards your LGBTQQ students and staff. Is your school dress code gender neutral? Does it outline clear and consistent expectations for dress that is not gender specific? (... straps on *girl's* tops should be wider than ...) Are safe, gender-neutral restrooms and locker rooms available for LGBTQQ students and staff? If you find these issues to be prevalent at your school, begin a discussion with your principals and coaches to identify possible solutions that may be implemented at little or no cost.

Learn more:  
<http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/creating-inclusive-gsas>  
<http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/coalition-building>  
<http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/creating-inclusive-gsas/creating-inclusive-gsas-basics>



# 5. Sustaining Your GSA Over Time

## In this section:

- a. Transitioning Leadership
- b. Fundraising
- c. Documentation

Advisors play a key role in maintaining GSAs and continuing their work. Sometimes GSA activity will ebb and flow based on involvement of the students and the time of year, and advisors can help maintain the GSA by supporting students to be more effective leaders.

Specifically, advisors need to emphasize student leadership in activities that sustain GSAs over time, such as transitioning leadership, fundraising, and documentation. Note: If there is a slump in GSA activity, it is a chance to check-in with GSA officers and ask if they want to revisit the GSA's mission statement.

## Transitioning Leadership

As each school year comes to an end, many GSA advisors worry about what will happen to the GSA club once old officers leave. It is important to create a strategy for passing the torch of leadership so that the GSA stays strong for future years. Regardless of your club's leadership structure, current student leaders have a short-term goal every year of finding a reliable and passionate group of individuals to lead the club.

Here are some suggestions for your student leaders to transition the leadership. Remember that it is important that you support your students as they learn how to do the transition themselves!

### Structure of Your GSA

Encourage students to share leadership so that younger members can build their leadership skills. Some ideas include:

- Rotate who facilitates your GSA meetings
- Hold regular officer meetings



- Have a co-officer system. Plan elections early for old/new officer overlap and possibilities for co-facilitators

Good communication between officers ensures that leadership transitions will be smoother and easier.

### Training

No one is born a leader. We all need help and training to get there. Encourage students to run a GSA Training Day or attend leadership summits with local organizations. Some things to train the GSA on are:

- Facilitation
- Days of Action
- Campaigns
- How Your School Works
- Students' Legal Rights
- Planning Events
- Coalition Building

### Resources/Documents

Keeping a Resource Binder can be helpful while trying to manage a lot of different activities. Important things to include in the binder:

- Local and national resources (<http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources>)
- GSA Constitution
- GSA Mission Statement
- Past Meeting Agendas
- Ground Rules for meetings
- Past Event Planning Sheets
- Past Flyers
- All School Policies and Complaint Forms
- Old Officer Contact Information
- Officers' Statements: These are written summaries of how the year went for the GSA, written by all the officers. It includes what the GSA did, successes, challenges, areas for improvement, and incomplete projects. Over time, these statements will record the history of the GSA.

## Fundraising

Your GSA club will probably have a lot of great ideas and projects in mind, but not enough money to support them. It is important to educate all of your GSA leaders to help them understand how fundraising works. For tips on how to support students' learning on how to plan a fundraising event check out [GSA Network's Fundraising Resources](http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/building-your-gsa/fundraising-your-gsa) (<http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/building-your-gsa/fundraising-your-gsa>).

First, it is vital to learn your school's fundraising policies and procedures. One idea is to invite a Student Government Advisor to a GSA meeting to explain the policies and procedures to all GSA members.

Below are some ways to support students to do successful GSA fundraising:

- Have a GSA meeting dedicated to understanding what fundraising is.
- Brainstorm ideas of how to fundraise, such as:
  - Selling rainbow pastries
  - Team up with the Drama/Theater club to sponsor a play highlighting LGBTQ issues, charge admission and then split the profits
  - Sponsor a competition (essay writing, poem, etc) and have local businesses donate items/money for winners
  - Local businesses could sponsor

a fundraiser, such as Starbucks donates 20% of all of the purchases made during a specific time.

- Silent auction
- Students can mail letters or call parents, teachers, local businesses, and community members to ask for donations.

## Documentation

Documentation is important because it helps facilitate a smooth leadership transition. It can help resolve conflict, make a case for legal issues if needed, and provide a historical record. See the above notes on building a GSA Resource Binder and what to include.



# 6. Frequent Issues for GSA Advisors

---

## In this section:

- a. Talking to Parents/Guardians/Families About the GSA
  - b. Talking to Administrators, Teachers, Counselors and Other Staff
  - c. Bringing in Guest Speakers and Outside Groups
  - d. Conflict Resolution
  - e. Religion and GSAs
  - f. Legal Protection
- 

### Talking to Parents/Guardians/ Families About the GSA

- Anticipate concerns, questions, and possible resistance (ACLU has a set of talking points about countering frequently heard arguments about GSAs: <http://gbge.acclu.org/schools/common-arguments-against-gsasand-why-theyre-wrong>)
- Be prepared to educate about what a GSA is and does (refer to “About GSAs” section of handbook), and to address potential misconceptions that they might have about GSAs
- Emphasize the skills and abilities that GSA membership can help to foster in its members: organizing, social justice, facilitating, inter-group dialogue, conflict resolution, interpersonal intelligence, event planning, public speaking, etc.
- Know your school’s/district’s policies that either implicitly or explicitly support GSAs, and be able to direct parents/guardians/families to more information
- Know the laws in your state around students’ privacy rights and what you do and don’t have to tell parents/guardians/families. This is important so you don’t inadvertently out a student as a member of the GSA.
- Have parent/guardian/family-specific resources available for GSA members’ families in a variety of languages (Family Acceptance project, PFLAG, COLAGE, Somos Family, etc.). Note that in many cases, it is not required that parents/guardians know that students are part of a GSA.
- Invite supportive families to a GSA meeting or event

### Talking to Administrators, Teachers, Counselors and Other Staff

If you need to talk to administrators or other teachers, keep these tips in mind:

- Be clear what you’re asking for and make sure that you’re asking the right person. For example, you might need to talk to the Student Activities Coordinator regarding an issue with the GSA. It might not be necessary to ask the principal directly for a GSA because activities are not in the principal’s purview.
- Do you have assumptions about how an administrator, counselor or teacher will react? Even homophobic or transphobic administrators may want to learn more about LGBTQQ issues or allow a GSA. They may care about bullying/harassment but do not know a lot about LGBTQQ issues.
- Work to find common ground. Stressing the need to create a safe and accessible school for all students can help create common ground between you and other parties.
- Bring LGBTQQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, & Questioning) 101 materials with you, including local resources. Bring a proposed mission statement.
- Find adult allies affiliated with the school and ask them to attend the meeting with you.
- Reach out to other community-based organizations that you could work with in terms of participating in trainings and education of others in the school.

It can be very difficult to start a GSA and for some, it may mean risking your job. If you’re concerned about job security, here are a few tips:

- Learn the rules of your school – what laws protect you. Learn about the laws that protect discussion of LGBTQQ topics in your school, district and state.
- Resources: Lambda Legal, Southern Poverty Law Center, National Council of La Raza, American Civil Liberties Union
- If possible, connect with other GSA advisors in your district.
- Write it down. Let the ACLU or another legal group know what you’re doing.
- If you are part of a union, ask your union representative for help.

### Bringing in Guest Speakers and Outside Groups

- Find out your school’s policies on bringing in guest speakers (i.e. do they need background clearances on file, administration permission, etc) and follow those policies carefully.
- Make sure to have students review what guest speakers will be presenting.
- Keep in mind that in order for the Equal Access Act to apply, the group must be student-led, and cannot be founded or led by anyone from outside the school. If you are getting technical assistance and support in running your GSA from staff of an outside group, be sure that they did not found the group and that they do

not have control over all of the group's activities.

- Make sure your guest speaker knows protocols and procedures for visiting your school (where to sign in, what ID to bring, where to meet you, which entrance to use, etc.)
- Be sure that your guest speaker knows why they are there and what their role will be, as well as how many students/staff to expect for the occasion
- Be sure that your guest speaker knows of any parameters or limitations on the content of their speech (i.e., a sexual health educator does a workshop for the GSA on safer sex, and gets in trouble for distributing condoms because the school does not allow it.)
- Always be in the room with any guest; do not leave them unattended with students or alone. This is for everyone's protection and comfort.
- Looking for potential guest speakers? Inquire with:
  - Local GSA Network organizations
  - Local chapters of ACLU, PFLAG, State Equality Organization, GLSEN
  - Local LGBTQQ Community centers, youth programs, health centers, faith communities
  - Your school's alumnae
  - Local college LGBTQQ student groups
  - Supportive parents/guardians/families of your GSA's members
  - Other organizations working on social justice or improving school safety

## Conflict Resolution

No matter if you're a rock star GSA Advisor, you are bound to have conflicts. Conflict is normal. The conflict *outcome* is affected by the way the people involved in the conflict resolve the situation. There are lots of types of conflicts in GSAs: conflicts between students, between you and students or between the GSA and other people inside or outside of your school. Here are some tips to resolve conflict:

- Use the peer mediation resources available to you – a lot of schools

### C.O.I.N. Model: Giving Feedback

*Adapted from Plumblin  
Coaching & Consulting, Inc.*

**Context** – When are you referring to?

What was the situation that you are referring to?

**Observation** – Just the facts: What did the person say or do?

**Impact** – What was the impact of that person's actions on you?

**Next Steps** – What would you hope the person would do in the future? Without judgment, what would you like the person to change about they say or do in future similar situations?

have peer mediation resources and a counselor trained in this skill

- Use 'I' statements, such as, "I feel angry when I am kept waiting because I value my time and feel that I am not a priority if others do not value my time." Instead of, "Why can't you ever be on time?"

Scenario: Pat (GSA President) and Jason (GSA Vice President) have a conflict because of a mutual friend's Facebook post about immigration. They have not been coming to meetings and the GSA has suffered because of their conflict.

Steps that you can follow:

1. Utilize the C.O.I.N. model pictured above
2. Ask to meet both students privately at the same time
3. Allow each student to share their side of the conflict. Make sure that each student uses 'I' statements (see above).
4. Your role as GSA Advisor is to explain their impact on the GSA and other students
5. Help the students find common ground. You can even agree to disagree and make sure to value all opinions
6. Bring it back to group agreements and encourage the youth to follow those group agreements
7. Brainstorm solutions and next steps to solve the conflict together. Agree on which next steps the group will follow.

## Religion and GSAs

If religion is an issue for your GSA, then you are not alone. A lot of GSAs face conflict from outside religious groups or conflict from religious parents/guardians/families, administrators, and students. These conflicts often fit into one of three categories:

1. Religious groups, or individual members of a religion, are hostile toward the GSA and try to limit its activities
2. LGBTQQ and ally students have internal conflicts because they feel as if they need to give up religion in order to be LGBTQQ or an ally
3. LGBTQQ students or allies denounce or make fun of religion and make it difficult for religious students to attend the GSA

Part of your role as an advisor is to talk openly about religion in order to promote discussion of religion in the LGBTQQ community and discussion of LGBTQQ issues in the religious community. This will help break down stereotypes that say students must choose between religion and being LGBTQQ or an ally. Facilitating this kind of dialogue is not always easy! Here are some tips:

- Bring outside speakers from affirming religious groups and places of worship
- Watch a relevant movie, such as "All God's Children" and host a discussion after the movie
- Take steps to build coalitions with religious school groups. Try co-hosting a guest panel of speakers on LGBTQQ issues and religion.
- Affirming places of worship are often very excited to talk to students, so refer students to those places if you feel overwhelmed by students' requests for counseling
- If students are religion-bashing in your GSA, stop them and have a discussion! Students of faith, regardless of whether they are LGBTQQ or ally youth, should feel safe and welcome in your GSA.

## Legal Protections

If you have questions about legal protections, please see the Resources section on page 21.

# 7. Resources

---

## In this section:

- a. Job Protections
  - b. Protecting Yourself
  - c. Physical and Mental Health Resources
  - d. Scholarships
- 

## Job Protections

Whether you're a state or private employee, your protections as a GSA Advisor, staff ally, or as an LGBTQQ individual might differ from state to state and even from school district to school district. Below are some recommendations for making sure that you are protected:

- Start with your state's policies. Does your state offer anti-discrimination protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity for public and/or private employees? Check out your state government's website or check out Lambda Legal's state-by-state guide.
- Your state might not provide job protections, but your municipality might. Check your local government's website or contact a city or county official to find out.
- Check your district's policies. You should be able to find out about these on the district's website, but you should also check in with your union representative. Find a union representative that you trust, and inquire not just about existing policies, but about any other instances of how your district supports (or doesn't support) GSAs and their advisors. If you don't feel comfortable talking to a local union representative, contact your union's national headquarters.

In many cases, there might not be job protections for actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. This can be a difficult place to be and we admire your courage to continue to sponsor the GSA club. If you choose to organize in the face of adversity and do not have policies to protect you, you can try to organize in the

community or have the club meet outside of school. Build coalitions with other teachers and student groups or try to have multiple advisors. And you may need to step aside and let your students do the bulk of the work.

---

*“Document any noteworthy incident, based on what you have observed.”*

---

## Protecting Yourself

Document any noteworthy incident, based on what you have observed. A noteworthy incident is one that you think might be important later on; might have significant consequences that affect students, staff, or the school; violates school policy; triggers your mandatory reporting status. Even if you didn't witness the incident, but it was reported to you, document that it was reported to you and by whom. Your documentation should be as detailed as possible (names, dates, times, places, content), and should be kept in a safe, secure place. If you share the record, be sure to share a copy and keep the original, noting when and with whom you shared it, as well as any follow-up that occurs. Keep in mind that, as a school employee, your records—even anecdotal ones—belong to your employer.

Confidentiality best practices:

- Never promise blanket confidentiality
- Let your students know the limits of your confidentiality (based on your mandatory reporting status)
- If you err in a confidentiality-related

issue, err on the side of safety

- Exceptions to confidentiality (when mandatory reporting is triggered) usually include abuse, danger to self, and danger to others
- Rules and regulations differ from circuit to circuit and state to state, and levels of confidentiality are usually much higher for school counselors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, and home visitors than for teachers. Find out what the confidentiality rules are for your area and job title.
- If pushed into a corner on a confidentiality issue, make sure that your actions are based on your intent to protect and assist a student, and do not reflect an “intent to harm”
- You may have a “right to know” certain information about a student during the course of your work. Do not share this information with anyone who does not have the same right to know, and be sure that others do not overhear you sharing the information.
- Confidential material can be subpoenaed; make sure your documentation contains only factual, observable information

Distribution of materials—best practices from the 3rd circuit court:

- Must have approval from school administrator prior to distribution
- Must have a nexus with the students or the school
- Must be non-partisan and unrelated to labor negotiations or elections
- Does not seek to exploit students for the benefit of a profit-making organization
- Does not solicit money



Keep records of GSA meetings and content. Hold onto meeting agendas or minutes, sign-in sheets (if your school requires them), and other records. Not only can having an archive can be helpful to future GSA leaders and advisors, but if you get any push-back from administrators about the GSA and are asked to account for the topics discussed at GSA meetings, you have a record of that. For this same reason, don't keep detailed minutes about what individual students say during discussions. If you keep detailed notes, omit or redact students' names to protect their privacy.

### Protecting Yourself Online and with Social Media Use

Recommendations by the American Federation of Teachers; Teachers and Technology, How to Limit Your Risk (<http://www.aft.org/yourwork/tools4teachers/teach2teach/techrisks.cfm>):

- Remember that federal law requires schools to monitor and archive any and all e-mails that are sent to and from employee accounts
- Teachers are legally responsible for whatever they post online (pictures, text, video, etc.)
- "Anonymous" is rarely actually anonymous. Your identity is almost always knowable online.
- Law allows schools to monitor keystrokes and personal e-mail on school computers
- Google yourself! Type your name into the Google search in quotation marks, e.g., "Sally Smith." This will list all sites that mention you or anyone who shares your name. If any misinformation exists, contact the website owners immediately.
- Monitor social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace, etc.) regularly for "inappropriate" images, posts, etc. If a friend "tags" you in a photo, that photo is searchable and potentially viewable by anyone. You can remove the tag from any photo you have been tagged in.
- When communicating with students via the Internet use sites like Blackboard or Ning.com, and avoid Facebook and MySpace

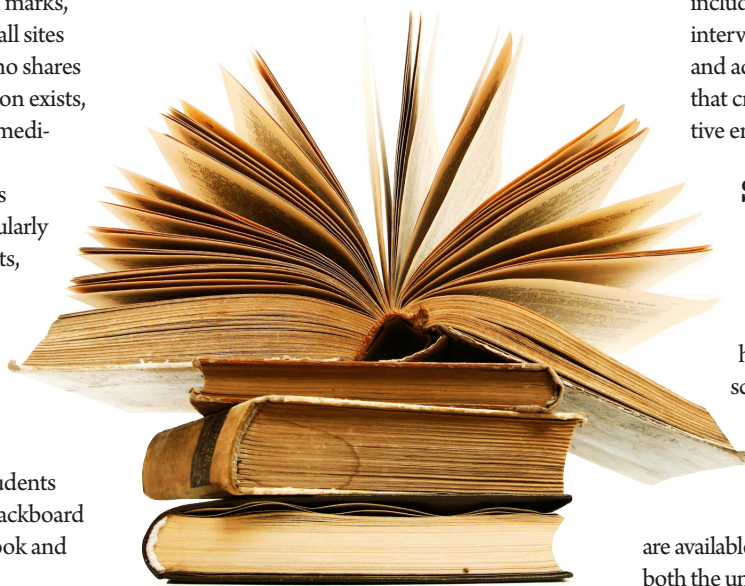
- Only use school-provided equipment to communicate with students electronically
- Make your Facebook or MySpace account private. Facebook has added a series of security and privacy features that teachers should use.
- Hide your Facebook profile from the internal Facebook search and from Google searches.
- Use the advanced Facebook Privacy features. In addition to making your profile and contact information private, Facebook also offers its users more advanced privacy settings.
- Some advisors create separate Facebook profiles for work and for personal use.
- Check with your school or union representative to find out whether your district has any regulations about staff and student online interaction

### For Further Information

For more information about your legal rights as an employee in your state, your rights as a GSA advisor, or your students' rights, please visit:

- Lambda Legal: [www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org)
- National Center for Lesbian Rights: [www.nclrights.org](http://www.nclrights.org)
- Transgender Law Center: [www.transgenderlawcenter.org](http://www.transgenderlawcenter.org)
- American Civil Liberties Union: [www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)

You can also inquire with your state's Equality organization or local ACLU chapter.



## Physical and Mental Health Resources

- Advocates for Youth ([www.advocatesforyouth.org](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org)) - Established in 1980 as the Center for Population Options, Advocates for Youth champions efforts to help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health. Advocates believes it can best serve the field by boldly advocating for a more positive and realistic approach to adolescent sexual health, and offers resources on a variety of topics relating to health issues and young people.
- Center for Disease Control (CDC) (<http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/>) - Collaborating to create the expertise, information, and tools that people and communities need to protect their health—through health promotion, prevention of disease, injury and disability, and preparedness for new health threats. The CDC has information specifically regarding LGBTQQ health.
- National Coalition for LGBT Health (<http://lgbthealth.webolutionary.com/content/resources>) - Features several health-related resources for LGBTQQ people. This is a site for information gathering (i.e. reports and fact sheets).
- The Trevor Project (<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>) - The Trevor Project is determined to end suicide among LGBTQQ youth by providing life-saving and life-affirming resources including our nationwide, 24/7 crisis intervention lifeline, digital community and advocacy/educational programs that create a safe, supportive and positive environment for everyone.

## Scholarships

The Human Right Campaign (HRC) ([http://www.hrc.org/issues/youth\\_and\\_campus\\_activism/8644.htm](http://www.hrc.org/issues/youth_and_campus_activism/8644.htm)) has posted an extensive list of scholarships that may be of interest to young people that you are working with—both national scholarships and state-level scholarships. These scholarships, fellowships and grants are available for LGBTQQ and allied students at both the undergraduate and graduate-level.

# 8. Appendix

---

## In this section:

- a. LGBTQQ-Related Fiction Reading List
  - b. LGBTQQ-Related Nonfiction Reading List
  - c. LGBTQQ-Related Movie and Video List
  - d. Letter on GSAs from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan
- 

### LGBTQQ-Related Fiction Reading List

*Absolutely, Positively Not* - David LaRachelle, 2005. 16-year old Stephen DeNarski does not want to come out. He dates as many girls as possible. He hangs out with the tough guys on the hockey team. All his attempts simply add to his frustration. Readers can sympathize with Stephen as the subject of “coming out” is dealt with humor and respect.

*Alice on the Outside* - Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, 1999. Alice gains a new appreciation of differences and an understanding of prejudice during Consciousness Raising Week. Sexuality and adolescent development are explored as Alice, a 14 year old eighth grader, begins to explore young adulthood. And the eagerly anticipated eighth-grade semi-formal brings its own share of small drama and excitement. Through the character of fourteen-year-old Alice, Naylor continues to explore this often-rocky terrain with honesty and humor.

*Almost Perfect* - Brian Kratcher, 2009. Logan Witherspoon is a high school senior. A sexy, funny new girl in town rocks his world when after their first kiss she reveals to him that biologically she is a boy. Navigating this new relationship reveals prejudices and misconceptions about transgendered people.

*Am I Blue, Coming Out from the Silence* - Marion Dane Bauer ed. 1994. This is a collection of short stories featuring gay and lesbian teens.

*Annie on My Mind* - Nancy Garden, 1982. Liza and Annie, both 17 attend different high schools. They meet at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and soon find that they have fallen in love. Both teens are confused by their

emotional and physical relationship and look for ways to explore their feelings. When the relationship is exposed in a very traumatic way, both are forever changed. Readers explore how both teens work through the realities of living in a straight world.

*Becoming Chloe* - Catherine Ryan Hyde, 2006. Jordy, a homeless, gay, and abused teen rescues Chloe from a brutal rape near the abandoned building where they both live. Both characters have been forced into hiding. The friendship that ensues between the two is entertaining and memorable. Because of Jordy’s actions, the two find themselves leaving NYC on a road trip of a lifetime to discover America and possibly new lives.

*Boy Girl Boy* - Ronald Koertge, 2005. During high school, three friends, Larry, Teresa and Elliot are inseparable. Each, however, holds secrets too difficult to share. This story explores the real meaning of friendship. As high school ends, all three are ready to begin separate lives.

*The Boy in the Dress* - David Walliams, 2008. Even though this novel is written as a children’s novel, there is a message for all who read the book. Being different is hard for 12 year old Dennis. He is being raised by his less than sensitive father and his 14-year old brother is his father’s son. Dennis likes football and fashion and that is a combination that is not always popular with the other boys. He meets Lisa and the two become best friends sharing their love of colors, fabric and sequins. The word transvestite is not used in the novel though the readers understand that Dennis seems to have a natural inclination towards wearing women’s clothes.

*Boy Meets Boy* - David Levithan, 2003. Paul lives in a world where being gay is OK. The GSA has more members than the football team. The

homecoming queen is also the star quarterback. With the stigma of sexual identity removed Paul can fall in love without fear.

*Crossing Lanes* - Paul Volponi, 2011. The main theme of this novel deals with the strength it takes to stand up to bullying. When a gay teen arrives at school it is not long before the football teams devises a plan to humiliate him. Difficult choices must be made. Is it better to remain popular or do the right thing?

*Deliver Us from Evie* - M.E. Kerr, 1994. Falling in love with the right one comes with many complications in this story of two lesbians living in a rural town. Two families must deal with their daughters in a realistic coming or age story.

*Dramarama* - E. Lockhart, 2008. Kindred spirits Demi and Sadye leave for summer drama theatre as BFF’s. It is not long before Demi finds a boyfriend. Sadye realizes things are changing her friendship Demi and their shared dreams of careers in the theatre might just be in jeopardy.

*Far From Xanadu* - Julie Anne Peters, 2007. It is obvious from the beginning of the novel that Mike Szabo, the only lesbian in her small rural Kansas town, is not hiding who she is. When Mike falls hopelessly in love with Xanadu, a straight, new girl in town, readers begin to see that Mike’s struggle is with self acceptance.

*Fat Hoochie Prom Queen* - Nico Medina, 2008. Madge and Bridget stopped being best friends when they were 8-years old. 10-years later during senior year Madge’s gay best friend Lucas dares Madge to confront Bridget about why she feels the need to run for Prom Queen. The response Madge gets begins a hilarious, often times off color Prom Queen Race between Madge and Bridget. Wonderful well developed characters.

*Freaks and Revelations* - Davida Wills Hurwin, 2009. Jason is a gay 13 year-old, Doug a hateful skinhead. The lives of both young men overlap in that both come from dysfunctional homes. Readers learn as the novel progresses about the effect hate has on their lives and society as a whole. The story leads up to a violent crime that changes the future of each character. This story of survival and forgiveness is based on the real life story of Matthew Boger and Timothy Zaal.

*Freak Show* - James St James, 2007. Billy Bloom is a 17-years old out and proud drag queen. After a falling out with their mother, she is sent to live with her ultra conservative father. After assessing her new ultra conservative surroundings she realizes that her once safe world is about to change. Thanks to one new friend Billy sets out to take a stand for the outcasts and underdogs of society

*Getting It* - Alex Sanchez, 2006. 15 year-old Carlos Amoroso is a virgin and unhappy about his status. Try as he might to hook up with the most gorgeous girl in school he continues to be disappointed since she doesn't know he even exists. Carlos decides to let Sal, an openly gay senior at his school, gives him an image makeover. In exchange Carlos agrees to help Sal form a Gay Straight Alliance at his Texas high school.

*Geography Club* - Brent Hartinger, 2003. Russel thinks that he is the only gay student at his high school. He goes online and meets another gay teen that turns out to be one of the school's star basketball players. He then begins to meet other gay and bisexual teens at school. They decide to start a club so they can meet without being noticed. Hence the Geography Club is formed. The club's participants begin the journey of self acceptance.

*grl2grl* - Julie Anne Peters, 2007. This collection of short stories deals with female sexuality. Stories explore young women navigating relationships and sexual identity.

*Hero* - Perry Moore, 2007. Thom Creed does not want to disappoint his father. First, he knows he is gay and his father openly has discussed his disapproval of that life style. Also Thom has the gift of being able to heal people. Thom has been invited to join the League, a group of superheroes, as an apprentice Thom's father was once a well respected member of the League but

now is an outcast. The truth about both Thom's secrets will hurt his father. When superheroes start dying, Thom must seek the help of outcast superheroes to solve the mystery.

*Hidden* - Tomas Mournian, 2011. Ahmed's parents send him to a psychiatric hospital to "cure" his gayness. When the opportunity arises, he escapes the hospital and its drugs and electric shock treatments. Luckily, he finds safety as a runaway in an underground network of safe houses.

*I am J* - Chris Beam, 2011. J always felt different. Born a girl, he felt like a boy. His confusion and fear make him try to become invisible and hide his female body. The story deals with the "trans" experience and what it means to be transgender. Self acceptance forces J to come out of hiding and readers come closer to understanding the difficult journey of choosing to make the transition.

*Jumpstart the World* - Catherine Ryan Hyde, 2010. 15-year old Elle's mom has a new boyfriend who doesn't want a teenager around. Her mom rents her an apartment across town where she is befriended by a couple living across the hall. It is not long before Elle develops a crush on Frank. Elle is stunned and confused when she finds out that biologically Frank is a woman.

*Kissing Kate* - Lauren Myracle, 2003. Lissa and Kate have been best friends forever. Then at a friend's party after Kate has had too much to drink she kisses Lissa and Lissa kisses her back. The girls now avoid each other and Lissa is left lonely and confused. The story takes readers on Lissa's journey of self acceptance and the meaning of true friendship.

*Last Exit to Normal* - Michael Harmon, 2008. Ben Campbell first has to deal with his father's announcement that he is gay. Of course, then his mother then leaves. A period of rebellion follows, and then he is introduced to his father's boy friend. If that was not enough turmoil in a teenager's life, the non-traditional family then moves to rural Montana.

*Love Drugged* - James Klise, 2010. Jamie Bates tries very hard to keep the fact that he is attracted to other guys a secret. However, when a classmate finds out the truth, Jamie begins doing damage control by beginning a relationship with the most beautiful girl in the school. Jamie finds out that this girl's father is a doctor and he has a pill that can "cure" his attraction to men. Jamie

ends up stealing pills hoping they will take care of his problem.

*Luna* - Julie Anne Peters, 2006. Liam is a transsexual teenager who desperately wants to be Luna, his secret identity. The story is told by his supportive younger sister who shares the funny, sad, embarrassing moments of their lives growing up.

*M or F?* - Lisa Papademetriou and Chris Tebbetts, 2005. Frannie falls for the boy of her dreams. Only problem is she is shy and awkward when around him. They begin to chat online and Frannie gets help from her friend Marcus. Marcus is pretending to be Frannie and, with her permission, an online relationship begins. At the beginning of this relationship Frannie is standing next to Marcus as he types. Then secretly Marcus assumes Frannie's screen name and the relationship takes on another dimension. Throughout the novel readers witness a test of what friendship means.

*Order of the Poison Oak* - Brent Hartinger, 2005. (Sequel to Geography Club) Russel is very happy to see the school year end. The newly formed Goodkind Gay Straight Bisexual Alliance has finished its first year of existence and its notoriety at school made its members targets of ongoing abuse. Russel and his friends from the Alliance get jobs as summer camp counselors at a camp for children who are disfigured burn victims. New lessons about what it means to be "different" will be learned during the time Russel spends with these children.

*The Perfect Family* - Katheryn Shay, 2010. The story reveals the internal struggles of the Davidson family members as they come to terms with the youngest son Jonathan's admission he is gay. Brian the older brother must face the harassment at school. Jonathan's father is a catholic and now must reexamine his faith. Jonathan's mother finds herself working hard to now protect her son and keep the family from falling apart.

*Pink* - Lili Wilkinson, 2009. Ava Simpson is struggling with her personal identity. Though she has always been gay she now has begun to experience self doubt. She decides to go to a new high school to create a new identity even though that means she must leave her girlfriend Chloe.

*Rainbow Boys* - Alex Sanchez, 2001. This is the first part of a three book series. Readers are



introduced to three seniors that through the course of the novel become forever intertwined. Jason, a star basketball player, has been questioning his sexuality for a while now, Kyle knows he is gay but has not come out to his family, and Nelson is the stereotypical gay guy out and taking the taunts and abuse at school and in the community. The three meet when Jason attends a gay support meeting and sees both his classmates Kyle and Nelson. The story alternates between each character as they reveal their thoughts and actions. Each struggles with the reality of being truthful to himself.

*Rainbow High* - Alex Sanchez, 2003. In this second book of the series Jason, Kyle and Nelson have tough decision to make as their senior year of high school comes to an end. Jason and Kyle's relationship will be put to the test as both boys have plans to attend different school next fall. The relationship is further strained when Kyle, who has not fully come out finds out Jason has finally comes out to the basketball team. Nelson had a relationship with a man he met online and now is dealing with the fact he might be HIV positive. All three face societal realities that are hurtful learning experiences.

*Rainbow Road* - Alex Sanchez, 2005. In the third and final book Jason, Kyle and Nelson agree with a good deal of trepidation to embark on a cross country road trip the summer after graduation. The three friends each begin a personal journey to discover the importance of friends and friendship.

*The Straight Road to Kylie* - Nico Medina, 2007. Jonathan Parish is a 17-year old a senior in high school and openly gay. He loves Kylie Minogue, the Australian pop singer. After drinking too much at a party one night, Jonathan sleeps with one of his friends, his friend Alexandra. Much to his dismay this news gets around school. He is approached by a popular girl in school that if he participates in a charade of sorts pretending to be her boyfriend that she would give him tickets to go see Kylie in concert in London. His desire to see Kylie seems to outweigh the fact that he will once again have to go back into the closet if he accepts the girl's proposal.

*Talk* - Kathe Koja, 2005. Kit Webster, a gay teen, gets the male lead in a school play titled Talk. Lindsay Walsh is the female lead. Not knowing Kit is gay, Lindsay believes she has finally found the right guy. Kit and Lindsay set out to find the

truth about themselves and begin dealing with the things they have been avoiding all their lives. The story is told in alternating chapters by the play's lead characters. Kit and Lindsay also set out to understand the meaning of censorship when a group of parents attempt to close the play because of its controversial nature.

*The Vast Fields of Ordinary* - Nick Burd, 2009. 18 year-old Dade's last summer before going off to college has not turned out to be as special as he thought it should be. His parents are headed for divorce, he breaks up with his long time boyfriend and he comes out when he meets the new love in his life. Stonewall Book Award for YA Literature 2010.

*Wide Awake* - David Levithan, 2006. In the not too distant future a gay, Jewish man is elected president of the United States. A controversy ensues when the governor of one state decides that the results from his state are invalid. Rallies and protests erupt in support of the gay candidate. Jimmy and Duncan, a gay couple, decide to get involved in this process. Their journey explores their relationship, their politics and their county.

*Will Grayson, Will Grayson* - John Green and David Levithan, 2010. Readers meet two teenagers with the same name. The characters are developed in alternating chapters. Will Grayson #1 tries to live his life by two rules. 1. Don't care too much 2. Shut up. He is straight and belongs to the GSA at his school. His best friend, Tiny Cooper, is out and proud and keeps Will from living by his rules. Will #2 is a depressed, gay teenager with few friends. He uses an online chat line to meet the love of his life. By chance both Wills happen to meet in a Chicago porn shop and the lives of the two begin to move in unexpected directions.

### LGBTQQ-Related Nonfiction Reading List

*Kicked Out* edited by Sassafra Lowrey, 2010. This is a collection of heartbreaking stories told by persons that have experienced the horrors of being kicked out of their homes only to find themselves left to survive homeless and living on the streets. Kids deal with the ultimate rejection by parents and family. Each story reveals how limited the options are for these kids once abandoned by the very persons that should be caring and nurturing.

### LGBTQQ-Related Movie and Video List

PG or PG-13 Non-Fiction / Documentary / Docu-drama

1. *A Girl Like Me - The Gwen Araujo Story* (2006)
2. *Beautiful Daughters* (2006)
3. *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin* (2003)
4. *Bullied* (2010)
5. *For The Bible Tells Me So* (2007)
6. *God and Gays: Bridging the Gap* (2006)
7. *In My Shoes: Stories of Youth With LGBT Parents* (2005)
8. *Red Without Blue* (2007)
9. *The Aggressives* (2005)
10. *The Laramie Project* (2002)
11. *Truth Takes Time* (2011)

PG or PG-13 Fiction / Drama / Comedy

1. *And The Band Played On* (1993)
2. *Big Eden* (2000)
3. *Camp* (2003)
4. *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002)
5. *Dirty Laundry* (2006)
6. *Far From Heaven* (2002)
7. *Kinky Boots* (2005)
8. *Philadelphia* (1993)
9. *Rent* (2005)
10. *To Wong Foo Thanks For Everything Julie Newmar* (1995)

Rated R

Please remember that viewing these movies with minors requires the written permission of their parent or guardian. Due to the confidential nature of membership in a GSA, many LGBTQQ students will have difficulty obtaining this consent.

1. *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)
2. *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999)
3. *Milk* (2008)
4. *Saving Face* (2004)
5. *Transamerica* (2005)

---

For more movie resources and free online movies, visit [Frameline Voices](http://www.frameline.org/now-showing/online/) (<http://www.frameline.org/now-showing/online/>).

## Letter on GSAs from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/110607.html>

June 14, 2011

Dear Colleagues:

Harassment and bullying are serious problems in our schools, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students are the targets of disproportionate shares of these problems. Thirty-two percent of students aged 12-18 experienced verbal or physical bullying during the 2007-2008 school year;<sup>1</sup> and, according to a recent survey, more than 90 percent of LGBT students in grades 6 through 12 reported being verbally harassed — and almost half reported being physically harassed — during the 2008-2009 school year.<sup>2</sup> High levels of harassment and bullying correlate with poorer educational outcomes, lower future aspirations, frequent school absenteeism, and lower grade-point averages.<sup>3</sup> Recent tragedies involving LGBT students and students perceived to be LGBT only underscore the need for safer schools.

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) and similar student-initiated groups addressing LGBT issues can play an important role in promoting safer schools and creating more welcoming learning environments. Nationwide, students are forming these groups in part to combat bullying and harassment of LGBT students and to promote understanding and respect in the school community. Although the efforts of these groups focus primarily on the needs of LGBT students, students who have LGBT family members and friends, and students who are perceived to be LGBT, messages of respect, tolerance, and inclusion benefit all our students. By encouraging dialogue and providing supportive resources, these groups can help make schools safe and affirming environments for everyone.

But in spite of the positive effect these groups can have in schools, some such groups have been unlawfully excluded from school grounds, prevented from forming, or denied access to school resources. These same barriers have sometimes been used to target religious and other student groups, leading Congress to pass the Equal Access Act.

In 1984, Congress passed and President Ronald Reagan signed into law the Equal Access Act, requiring public secondary schools to provide equal access for extracurricular clubs. Rooted in principles of equal treatment and freedom of expression, the Act protects student-initiated groups of all types. As one of my predecessors, Secretary Richard W.

Riley, pointed out in guidance concerning the Equal Access Act and religious clubs more than a decade ago, we “protect our own freedoms by respecting the freedom of others who differ from us.”<sup>4</sup> By allowing students to discuss difficult issues openly and honestly, in a civil manner, our schools become forums for combating ignorance, bigotry, hatred, and discrimination.

The Act requires public secondary schools to treat all student-initiated groups equally, regardless of the religious, political, philosophical, or other subject matters discussed at their meetings. Its protections apply to groups that address issues relating to LGBT students and matters involving sexual orientation and gender identity, just as they apply to religious and other student groups.

Today, the U.S. Department of Education’s General Counsel, Charles P. Rose, is issuing a set of legal guidelines affirming the principles that prevent unlawful discrimination against any student-initiated groups. We intend for these guidelines to provide schools with the information and resources they need to help ensure that all students, including LGBT and gender nonconforming students, have a safe place to learn, meet, share experiences, and discuss matters that are important to them.

Although specific implementation of the Equal Access Act depends upon contextual circumstances, these guidelines reflect basic obligations imposed on public school officials by the Act and the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The general rule, approved by the U.S. Supreme Court, is that a public high school that allows at least one noncurricular student group to meet on school grounds during noninstructional time (e.g., lunch, recess, or before or after school) may not deny similar access to other noncurricular student groups, regardless of the religious, political, philosophical, or other subject matters that the groups address.

I encourage every school district to make sure that its administrators, faculty members, staff, students, and parents are familiar with these principles in order to protect the rights of all students — regardless of religion, political or philosophical views, sexual orientation, or gender identity. I also urge school districts to use the guidelines to develop or improve district policies. In doing so, school officials may find it helpful to explain to the school community that the Equal Access Act

requires public schools to afford equal treatment to all noncurricular student organizations, including GSAs and other groups that focus on issues related to LGBT students, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Officials need not endorse any particular student organization, but federal law requires that they afford all student groups the same opportunities to form, to convene on school grounds, and to have access to the same resources available to other student groups.

The process of revising or developing an equal-access policy offers an opportunity for school officials to engage their community in an open dialogue on the equal treatment of all noncurricular student organizations. It is important to remember, therefore, that the Equal Access Act’s requirements are a bare legal minimum. I invite and encourage you to go beyond what the law requires in order to increase students’ sense of belonging in the school and to help students, teachers, and parents recognize the core values behind our principles of free speech. As noted in our [October 2010 Dear Colleague Letter](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.html) (<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.html>) and [December 2010 guidance](http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/secletter/101215.html) (<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/secletter/101215.html>) regarding anti-bullying policies, I applaud such policies as positive steps toward ensuring equal access to education for all students.

Thank you for your work on behalf of our nation’s children.

Sincerely,  
Arne Duncan

Enclosure: [MS Word 43KB](#)

1. Dinkes, R., Kemp, J., and Baum, K. (2010). Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2010. (NCES 2010-012/NCJ 228478). 42 National Center for Education Statistics: Washington, DC.

2. Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Diaz, E. M., and Bartkiewicz, M. J. (2010). The 2009 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation’s schools, 26, New York: GLSEN.

3. GLSEN, at 46-8.

4. U.S. Department of Education, “Secretary’s Guidelines on Religious Expression in Public Schools,” August 1995, <http://www2.ed.gov/Speeches/08-1995/religion.html>.









# 2011 NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF GSA NETWORKS

[www.gsanetwork.org/advisor-handbook](http://www.gsanetwork.org/advisor-handbook)

*The purpose of the National Association of GSA Networks is to support the growth of the GSA movement by connecting state and regional networks of GSA to each other for information-sharing, networking and peer exchange. See the full membership directory at <http://www.gsanetwork.org/national-directory> to find a National Association member in your region or state.*