GSAs and QSAs in Alberta Schools:

A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

The Alberta Teachers' Association

www.**teachers**.ab.ca

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A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

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Foreword

This guide draws upon current legislation, law, educational policy and research to develop a critical framework for creating and sustaining gay–straight student alliances or queer–straight student alliances (GSAs or QSAs) in Alberta schools. Practical strategies, suggestions and a list of frequently asked questions are provided to help school administrators, counsellors, teachers and students engage in this important social justice and human rights work. GSAs or QSAs are identified as a critical change agents that can help to create safe, caring and inclusive schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified and queer (LGBTQ) students and their allies.

Correspondingly, the three most significant factors in building healthy and resilient school communities for sexual and gender minorities students are identified as

1) development of school policies on inclusion,

2) professional development training and awareness building, and

3) the active and visible presence of GSAs or QSAs or associated support groups in schools.

Thank you to Kristopher Wells, the original author, and the teachers and students who contributed to this revision, as well as to Andrea Berg, secretary of DEHR, for editing this resource. Most of all, thank you to all the teachers who serve as teacher liaisons for GSAs and QSAs. You ensure that students have the opportunity to attend inclusive, welcoming, caring, safe and respectful schools.

Dr Gordon Thomas
Executive Secretary, Alberta Teachers' Association

Gay–straight alliances are a safe place for students to get support they sometimes cannot get at home.

Introduction

The information presented in this guidebook is designed to provide teachers who are initiating GSAs or QSAs with basic information on a complex and important issue.

Specifically, the goals of this resource are to

- assist educators in creating welcoming, caring, respectful and safe spaces for sexual and gender minority and allied students;
- create dialogue and build awareness about the health needs and safety concerns of sexual and gender minority and allied students;
- build the resiliency of sexual and gender minority and allied students; and
- develop the capacity of educators to support and sustain gay–straight student alliances or queer–straight student alliances (GSAs or QSAs) in their schools.

Please visit the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity section of the ATA website for additional information—go to www.teachers.ab.ca > For Members > Diversity, Equity and Human Rights > Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

Sexual and Gender Minority Terms and Definitions

What does LGBTQ mean?

LGBTQ is the acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and two-spirit, queer, and questioning. This collective term represents people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

Who do you love?
Who do you care for?
Who are you attracted to?
How do you see and define yourself?

These are some of the questions that form the basis of LGBTQ identities. The definitions used in this book to describe LGBTQ are continuing to evolve to reflect the complex nature of all members of the LGBTQ and other communities. The definitions on the following pages provide a starting point for what each term can mean.

Ally: A person, regardless of his or her sexual orientation, who supports the human, civil and sexual rights of sexual and gender minorities.

Agender/genderless/gender-free/gender neutral/non-gender/ungender: Those who identify as having no gender or being without any gender identity.

Asexual: Having no interest in or no desire for sexual activity, either within or outside of a relationship.

Bisexual: Someone who is attracted physically and emotionally to people of both the same and opposite sexes.

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

Closet: Hiding one's sexual orientation from others in the workplace, at school, at home and with friends.

Coming out: (1) The process through which sexual minority people recognize their sexual preferences and differences and integrate this knowledge into their personal and social lives. (2) The act of disclosing these things to others. Often refers to "coming out of the closet."

Gay: Someone who is physically and emotionally attracted to people of the same sex. *Gay* can include both males and females, but is commonly used to identify males only.

Gender identity: A person's internal sense or feeling of being male or female, which may or may not be the same as one's biological sex.

Gender fluid: An individual who has a gender identity that can change and switch.

Gender queer and nonbinary: A catch-all category for gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine—identities that are thus outside the gender binary and cisnormativity.

Heterosexism: The assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that this sexual orientation is superior.

Heterosexual: Someone who is physically and emotionally attracted to people of the opposite sex. Also referred to as *straight*.

Heteronormative: The belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders (man and woman) with natural roles in life. It asserts that heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation and norm. When other sexualities are acknowledged in this world view, they are seen as inferior or intrinsically wrong.

Homophobia: Fear and/or hatred of homosexuality in others, often exhibited by prejudice, discrimination, intimidation, bullying or acts of violence.

Homosexual: Someone who is physically and emotionally attracted to people of the same sex. Because the term is associated historically with a medical model of homosexuality and can have a negative connotation, most people prefer other terms, such as *lesbian, gay* and *bisexual*.

Intersex: A person who is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male.

Lesbian: A woman who is attracted physically and emotionally to other women.

Outing: The public disclosure of another person's sexual orientation without that person's permission or knowledge. This can be very disrespectful and is potentially dangerous to the outed person.

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

Pansexual: Sexual, emotional or romantic attraction toward people of *any* sex or gender identity.

Polysexuality: Sexual, emotional or romantic attraction toward *multiple* genders, but not all.

Queer: Historically, a negative term for homosexuality, but more recently reclaimed by the sexual minority movement to refer to itself.

Questioning: A person who is unsure of his or her sexual orientation.

Reclaimed language: Taking terms or symbols that have been used in a derogatory fashion and using them in a positive way to name one's self or one's experience. *Queer* is an example of a term that has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ community.

Romantic orientation: An individual's pattern of romantic attraction based on a person's gender(s) regardless of one's sexual orientation. *Aromantic* refers to individuals who do not experience romantic attraction toward individuals of any gender(s). *Biromantic* refers to individuals who experience romantic attraction toward both males and females.

Sexual orientation: A person's affection and sexual attraction to other persons. Like gender, sexual orientation can be expressed along a continuum.

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

Transphobia: Fear, discrimination or hatred against transgender people, specifically, or gender-nonconforming people more generally.

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

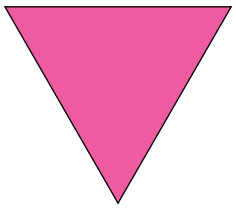
Two-spirit: Some Aboriginal people identify themselves as two-spirit rather than as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or transsexual. Historically, in many Aboriginal cultures, two-spirit persons were respected leaders and medicine people. Before colonization, two-spirit persons were often accorded special status based on their unique abilities to understand both male and female perspectives.

Please Note: This is by no means an exhaustive list but is intended to provide general awareness. Terms in the literature and in the queer community continue to evolve.

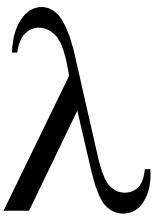
Symbols

Rainbow Flag: The first rainbow flag was designed in 1978 by Gilbert Baker, a San Francisco artist. Baker designed a flag with eight stripes—hot pink (sexuality), red (life), orange (healing), yellow (sun), green (nature), turquoise (art), indigo (harmony) and violet (spirit). Baker hand-dyed and sewed the material for the first flags himself, which flew at the 1978 San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Freedom Day Parade.

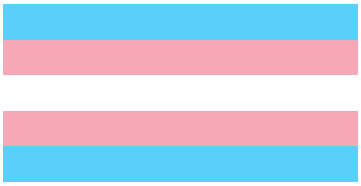
In November 1978, Harvey Milk, San Francisco's first openly gay council member, was assassinated. To demonstrate the community's strength and solidarity after this tragedy, the 1979 Pride Parade Committee decided to use Baker's flag. Due to mass production constraints, hot pink was dropped, and the turquoise stripe eliminated so the colours could be evenly distributed along the parade route—three colours on each side of the street. The six-striped version is now recognized by the International Congress of Flag Makers.



Pink Triangle: The Nazis required known male homosexuals to wear an inverted pink triangle (one tip pointing down) so that they could be quickly targeted for special abuse. Lesbians were assigned black upside-down triangles. In the 1970s, gay activists began using the pink triangle as a way of identifying themselves and at the same time calling attention to this long-forgotten chapter in gay history. In many instances, the triangle has been turned up (one tip pointing up) as a sign of reversing the fortunes of LGBTQ people.



Lambda: The Greek letter *L* was chosen by the Gay Activists Alliance in 1970 to become a symbol of the gay civil rights movement to represent liberation. Greek Spartans believed that Lambda represented unity.

	Bisexual Pride
	Transgender Symbol
	**Transgender Flag**
	Safe Space represents a commitment to equitable (fair) access, dignity and safety for all people of all orientations and identities. Individuals and organizations can provide safe spaces.
	Ally

Sexual and Gender Minority Educational Issues at a Glance

Health and Safety Concerns

Research indicates that there are serious consequences for many sexual minority students in our schools, including

1) truancy or dropping out,
2) drug and alcohol abuse,
3) withdrawal from social and school activities,
4) running away from home,
5) turning to prostitution and/or living on the streets,
6) depression, and/or
7) increased suicide ideation or suicide attempts.

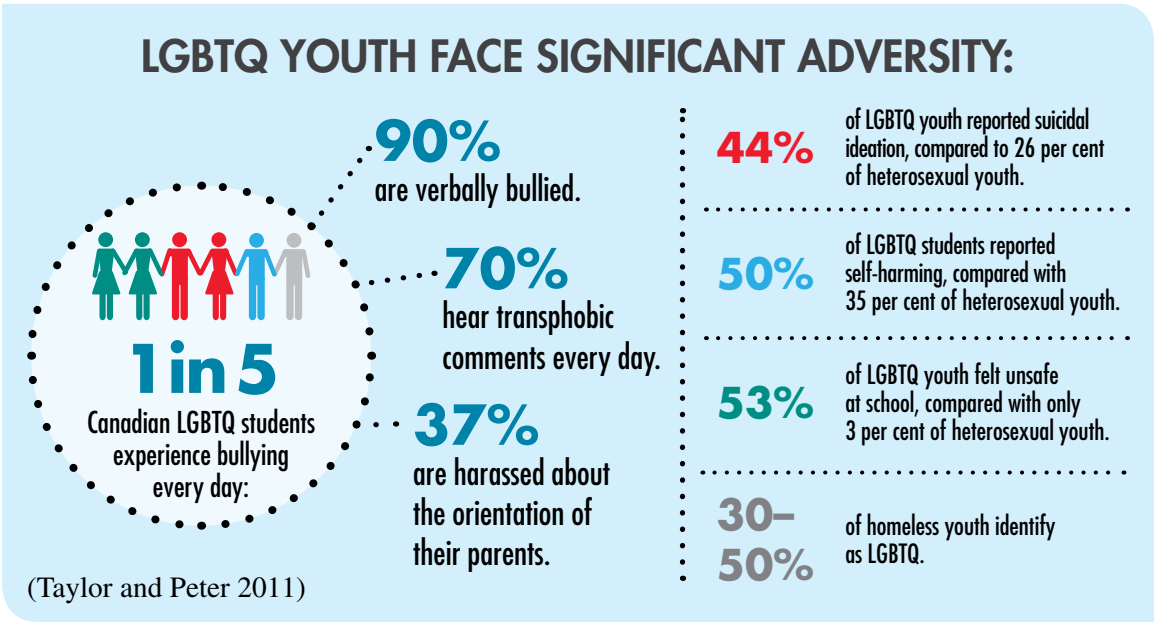
(Friend 1993, 1998; Ryan and Futterman 1998)

A study of 1,598 adolescents from five high schools in Ontario found that "sexual minority adolescents reported significantly higher rates of bullying and sexual harassment than did heterosexual adolescents."

(Public Health Agency of Canada 2014)

Homophobia and Harassment

Students may be harassed for being "gay" based on their presumed sexual orientation or not conforming to gender expectations, though the harassers may know nothing of their victims' *actual* sexual orientation or gender identity. The victimized students may not be certain of their



(Taylor and Peter 2011)

sexual orientation or gender identity themselves. Many students use words like *faggot* and *homo* without a clear understanding of how they may be affecting their peers. Often tolerated in schools, these words are one aspect of homophobic bullying and, if left unchecked, further reinforce the hostility, intolerance and negative perceptions of sexual and gender minorities.

Alberta Education defines *bullying* as a conscious, willful, deliberate, repeated and hostile activity marked by an imbalance of power, intent to harm and/or threat of aggression. It can be verbal (name-calling, put-downs, threats, homophobic bullying, transphobic bullying), social (exclusion, gossip, ganging up), physical (hitting, damaging property) or cyberbullying (using the computer to harass or threaten). It can occur within a peer group or between groups. It can occur at school and in sports (https://education.alberta.ca/teachers/safeschools/bullying-prevention.aspx).
The impacts of bullying and cyberbullying on the mental health of youth can be life-long and devastating. Alberta Education has created a number of tipsheets on homophobic and transphobic bullying that can be found at https://education.alberta.ca.

The webiste www.nohomophobes.com provides a live feed of all homophobic slurs made on Twitter.

Mental Health

Research indicates that experiences of discrimination, stigmatization, violence and the associated negative mental health outcomes disproportionately impact the physical, emotional and educational lives of sexual and gender minority youth.

Stigma, prejudice and discrimination can create a hostile and stressful social environment for sexual and gender minority youth. This can lead to youth developing expectations of rejection, internalized homophobia, feelings of shame, negative coping mechanisms, and hiding their sexual orientation or gender identity.

You can refer students to the Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868

One Canadian study found that lesbian, gay and bisexual youth, when compared to their heterosexual peers, were more likely to

- have had suicidal thoughts and a history of suicide attempts,
- experience greater physical and sexual abuse,
- have higher rates of harassment in school and discrimination in the community,
- have run away from home once or more in the past year,
- be sexually experienced and have either been pregnant or to have gotten someone pregnant,
- be current smokers and have tried alcohol, or used other drugs,
- report higher rates of emotional distress,
- participate less frequently in sports and physical activity,
- report higher levels of computer usage/time, and
- feel less cared about by parents/caregivers and less connected to their families.

(Public Health Agency of Canada 2014)

Suicide

Research studies focused on adolescent health consistently indicate that suicide is one of the leading causes of death of today's youth. For sexual minority youth, suicide *is* the number-one cause of death. Research identifies that sexual minority youth are 1.5 to 7 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. Transgender youth are at an even greater risk to die by suicide. In one 2010 study in Ontario, 47 per cent of trans youth had thought about suicide and 19 per cent had attempted suicide in the preceding year (Scanlon et al 2010). Key risk factors for adolescent suicide, in general, include feelings of hopelessness, a history of family dysfunction, sexual abuse, substance abuse, and the recent or attempted suicide of a family member or close friend. In addition to these general risk factors, sexual and gender minority youth also face other risk factors, including younger age of disclosure/coming out, lack of family acceptance and more frequent interpersonal conflict (such as bullying) regarding their sexuality or gender identity.

Schools that have established GSAs for three years or more show a reduced rate of suicidal ideations and promote mental health in ALL students, not just those who participate in the GSA (UBC study, http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ijcyfs/article/view/12856).

Coming Out

Important note:
A teacher should never reveal a student's sexual orientation or gender identity to a parent or colleague without the express consent of that student.

Research shows that for many youth sexual identity is firmly established in early childhood (Ryan and Futterman 1998). Some students report having had a sense of their sexual orientation and gender identity in elementary school. As society becomes increasingly more accepting of sexual and gender minority persons, youth are beginning to come out at younger ages. For example, the average age for self-identification as a lesbian or gay person now occurs at the age of 16 (Peterkin and Risdon 2003; Ryan and Futterman 1998). Unfortunately, as sexual and gender minority students become more visible they may also become increased targets for victimization. As a result, it is important that teachers at all grade levels support sexual and gender minority students by helping them to develop a positive self-identity and a sense of feeling safe and cared for at school. Furthermore, many students have LGBTQ parents or siblings. It is important for these students to feel that their families and identities are a valued and visible part of the classroom and larger school community.

Family Supports

Next to the family, schools play one of the most important roles in the lives of students. Unfortunately, some sexual and gender minority students may come from families that are not supportive of their sexual orientation or gender identity. It is important to note that ***parental permission or notification is not required for a student to participate in a GSA or QSA***. Unlike other minority students whose families can help them positively reframe experiences of discrimination, many sexual and gender minority youth are not out to family and some have families that are unsupportive and even discriminatory. LGBTQ youth are one of the few invisible minorities in schools. Often these students will not come out and be visible unless they feel their school is a safe environment. Because of the risk involved to the student, a teacher should never reveal a student's sexual orientation or gender identity to a parent or colleague without the express consent of that student. Unwanted disclosures or breaches of confidentiality, whether at school or home, can have potentially devastating and possibly life-threatening consequences.

While it is important to respect a student's confidentiality, if you suspect that a student may be suicidal or is being subjected to abuse it is your professional obligation to ensure that the student receives immediate attention and support. At minimum, you must refer the student to a school counsellor or administrator, and that person will help to determine what further steps are necessary to protect the student.

PFLAG Canada (www.pflagcanada.ca), formerly known as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, is Canada's only national organization that helps all Canadians with issues of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. PFLAG Canada supports, educates and provides resources to all individuals with questions or concerns, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. PFLAG also provides comprehensive resources to parents including the document "When Sons and Daughters Come Out," which can be accessed at www.pflagcanada.ca/pdfs/glb-mychild.pdf**.**

Additional supports for families can be found in the "Resources for GSAs and QSAs" section of this handbook.

Building Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe Learning Environments

Several important factors can help teachers build resilient school-based communities and, in turn, reduce the health and safety concerns of sexual and gender minority youth. These protective and preventive factors include

- positive relationships between teachers, parents and other caregivers;
- school environments that value and embrace diversity;
- clear policies and guidelines that protect students from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity;
- visible allies and LGBTQ role models; and
- the establishment and support of school-based GSAs or QSAs (Griffin et al 2004; Lee 2002).

Supportive school environments make a tremendous difference in the health and achievement of all students.

These factors strongly correlate with increased academic achievement, improved health and wellness, and positive social development. Supportive school environments make a tremendous difference in the health and achievement of all students. When schools fail to address homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism, that can lead to substantial ramifications for LGBTQ students, their families and the larger society. Schools must be places where LGBTQ youth and their families are accepted and supported, not threatened and isolated. Canadian courts have found that schools that fail to address homophobia and heterosexism can be considered to be in serious breach of their professional responsibilities and to be engaging in a form of educational malpractice.

Addressing the root causes of violence in schools requires a collaborative school and community approach that involves students, teachers, administrators, parents, community-based agencies and youth outreach programs. GSAs or QSAs demonstrate one important example of a school-based collaborative initiative that values the unique contributions and diversity of all of its students, teachers and families.

(Adapted from *Creating Safe Spaces for GLBTQ Youth: A Toolkit* [www.advocatesforyouth.org])

What Are Gay–Straight Alliances?

Gay–straight student alliances or queer–straight student alliances (GSAs or QSAs) are student-run and teacher-supported school-based groups that work to create welcoming, caring, respectful and safe spaces for sexual and gender minority students and their allies in schools. Essentially, GSAs or QSAs are designed to provide a safe space that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging. The purpose of a GSA or QSA is for students to meet, socialize and support one another as they discuss their feelings and experiences related to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

Importantly, GSAs or QSAs are a confidential space in which *no* assumptions are made about anyone's sexual orientation or gender identity. Some members of a GSA may be sexual and gender minority students or teachers, while others may have sexual and gender minority friends or family and want to become supportive allies. As a result, assumptions about a person's sexual orientation or gender identity (whether the person is perceived as heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual or trans-identified) should never be made. *Parental consent or notification is not required to participate in a GSA or QSA.* In fact, "outing" students can place them at great risk.

Gay–straight alliances ARE

- student clubs started and run by students, for students,
- treated like any other student club in the school,
- a safe place for students to get support they sometimes cannot find at home,
- a good way to end the social and emotional isolation endured by some LGBTQ students,
- an effective way to educate the school community about human rights, equality and diversity, and
- shown to decrease bullying, violence and risky behaviours.

Gay–straight alliances are NOT

- sex/dating clubs,
- an official endorsement of homosexuality,
- only for LGBTQ students, or
- anti-faith or anti-religious.

(Macgillivray 2007)

GSAs or QSAs have been active in Alberta schools for over 15 years. The first known GSA anywhere started in 1989, in Concord, Massachusetts. Alberta's first GSA was established in 2000, at Lindsay Thurber Comprehensive High School, in Red Deer. This GSA was formed as part of the school's highly successful STOP (Students and Teachers Opposing Prejudice) human rights program.

People choose to use gender-neutral pronouns for all kinds of reasons. Some examples:

- To demonstrate a nonbinary, trans*, gender queer, agender, gender fluid, creative, and/or gender questioning identity
- To indicate that gender is not relevant in many contexts, or to make a political statement about gender
- To act in solidarity with a friend or loved one who uses gender-neutral pronouns

Labelling students' sexual orientation or gender identity is not the purpose of the GSA or QSA. Instead of asking specifically how students identify, it is more respectful to ask "What pronoun (or name) do you prefer?"

Pronoun Reference Sheet

She	Her	Her	Hers	Herself
He	Him	His	His	Himself
They	Them	Their	Theirs	Themselves
Ze	Zir	Zir	Zirs	Zirself
Xe	Xem	Xyr	Xyrself	Xemself
Ze	Hir	Hir	Hirs	Hirself
Per	Per	Per	Pers	Perself

—www.su.ualberta.ca/services/thelanding

Why Are GSAs and QSAs Important in Alberta Schools?

Quote from a Teacher:

"As a teacher, I have found that having a GSA has changed the culture of our school and made it a far safer space for students. I have especially noticed this in the language students are using in the halls. I know it hasn't completely eliminated homophobic slurs but I rarely ever hear students saying, 'That's so gay' any more."

(Middle school teacher in Edmonton, 2015)

Contemporary research demonstrates that discrimination is rare in schools that actively promote an appreciation of difference and a sense of community. For example, the California Safe Schools Coalition issued a report on the impact of GSAs or QSAs in California schools. This 2004 report found that in schools where GSAs or QSAs had been established, students describe feeling

- safer at school,
- less likely to be harassed for their differences,
- more likely to have supportive adults who want them to succeed, and
- more likely to say that teachers treat them more fairly and with greater respect.

(California Safe Schools Coalition and 4-H Center for Youth Development 2004, 20)

Corresponding to the findings above, another recent study reveals that student involvement in GSAs or QSAs is reflected in increased academic achievement, improved attendance, enhanced work ethic, a sense of empowerment and an increased sense of hope for students' academic future (Lee 2002). Importantly, GSA participants highlighted how "their involvement in the Alliance positively affected relationships with school administrators, teachers, family and peers" (Lee 2002). Students in this study also spoke of new friendships, higher self-esteem, increased visibility and improved relationships at home and in school.

In Alberta, recent consultations with GSAs and QSAs have revealed that they identify their alliances as important spaces that focus on "building a safe, accepting environment for all students" (Straight and Gay Alliance [SAGA] 2005), which includes initiatives to address human rights, peer support and inclusive education. One such GSA describes itself as "a group open to all students and staff who would like either to come with questions or support or simply to see what we are about. We offer a place of safety and support in allowing all students to be themselves and to deal with issues arising from their sexuality as well as from the many social challenges they face both in and out of school. We meet socially and at times will have videos and/or guest speakers as well as many other activities that promote an openness and spirit of tolerance for all peoples" (SAGA 2005).

GSAs in Catholic Schools

The sacredness of the individual and the promotion of social justice are inherent in faith-based schools.

The cornerstone of many faith-based schools is a shared foundational belief in the sacredness of the individual and that all children are loved by God and are individually unique, and that the school has a responsibility to create a safe, caring community in which each student is welcomed, respected and supported in all aspects of their academic, psychological, physical, moral and spiritual development (Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta [CCSSA] 2015).

This is consistent with the core values of faith doctrines in which human dignity and social justice are paramount. GSAs and QSAs should be formed in a manner that reflects the characteristics of safe and caring schools: a respectful and caring school culture with a focus on teaching and learning and fostering positive relationships in a safe and secure environment. This fits within the founding principles for human [rights], which recognize the sanctity and dignity of human life: respect for and worth of all persons regardless of their gender, race, belief system, sexual orientation or family circumstance; social relationships characterized by generosity, mutual respect, and service to others especially the marginalized and the oppressed (CCSSA 2015).

Embracing diversity and developing student resilience are a natural part of promoting growth and understanding guided by a shared responsibility of the faith community.

Fostering mutual trust and respect is part of the compassion central to faith-based schools to honour and protect the rights and beliefs of individuals in a fair and equitable manner.

Protecting students from harassment, discrimination and bullying is embedded in the provincial *School Act* regulations, which establish an expectation that GSAs are a natural extension of these human rights principles to LGBTQ youth.

While school jurisdictions may each want to establish their own protocols for the establishment of GSAs in their schools, clear policies and guidelines should be made available to teaching staff.

The sacredness of the individual and the promotion of social justice are inherent in faith-based schools. GSAs are part of an opportunity to build inclusive communities in which diversity is celebrated by creating appropriate strategies to meet the unique needs of our youth by serving and supporting some of our most vulnerable students.

10 Faith-Based Reasons to Support LGBTQ Inclusive Education

1) Human dignity is paramount.

2) The ideals of compassion, acceptance, peace and love are shared by most religions and peoples throughout the world. Many religions have incredible histories of involvement with social justice and peace movements, activism, and a sense of duty to marginalized peoples.

3) Most religions share the belief that one should treat others like one would like others to treat oneself.

4) LGBTQ inclusive education does not teach that someone's religious values are wrong.

5) LGBTQ inclusive education works toward ensuring that each student has a safe environment in which to learn. Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia foster, condone and willfully ignore violence and hate.

6) The impact of disapproval and lack of acceptance opens individuals who identify as LGBTQ to verbal, physical and emotional harassment, which are all forms of violence.

7) Sexual orientation is a prohibited ground of discrimination under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and under provincial and territorial human rights codes. Gender identity is also included as a prohibited ground in some provinces and territories.

8) Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia hurt us all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Often, anyone who is perceived to be LGBTQ is subjected to harassment and victimization. Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia enforce rigid gender roles and norms, deny individual expression, and perpetuate stereotypes, myths and misinformation.

9) LGBTQ inclusive education is not sex education. It is not about discussing or describing explicitly sexual activities. Support groups, such as gay–straight alliances (GSAs) that gather in schools, serve as safe places that allow students to meet and discuss issues relevant to their lives, communities and circumstances.

10) All human beings are valuable members of their communities regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

(http://mygsa.ca/setting-gsa/10-faith-based-reasons-support-lgbtq-inclusive-education)

GSAs and Creating Positive School Environments to Help Students to Grow into Resilience

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Since the 1998 Supreme Court of Canada decision in *Vriend v Alberta*, which granted equality rights to lesbian and gay Canadians, subsequent changes in law, legislation and institutional policymaking have provided increasing recognition and accommodation of sexual and gender minorities in Canadian culture and society. Sexual and gender minorities compose a diverse population including "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, questioning, queer, two-spirited and allies," as the LGBTTIQQ2SA acronym used by Pride Toronto indicates (Armstrong 2014). Despite growing protections and supports for this multivariate population, homo/bi/transphobia, heterosexism and genderism remain pervasive negative forces. Their impacts have particular effects on sexual and gender minority (SGM) students as they navigate life and learning in school settings. SGM students need school principals, teachers, counsellors and other caring professionals to help them build assets and thrive as they deal with adversity and trauma in their daily lives. When they are recognized and accommodated, SGM students can *grow into resilience,* which is a developmental process whereby they build strengths, capacities and assets (Grace 2015). Growing into resilience "can be understood as [building] the capacity … to deal effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to rebound from disappointments, mistakes, trauma, and adversity, to develop clear and realistic goals, to solve problems, to interact comfortably with others, and to treat oneself and others with respect and dignity" (Brooks 2005, 297). While allied school principals, teachers and counsellors are vital to enable this work, SGM teachers can be especially key in helping SGM students to succeed and be healthy. These significant adults should be encouraged and supported to be visible mentors and roles models for vulnerable SGM students who can emulate their strengths, social skills, good behaviours and abilities as they build assets needed to grow into resilience (Grace 2015).

Why is it still urgent to focus on SGM students as a diverse population in schools? Many reasons can be found in *Every Class in Every School: Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools* (Taylor and Peter 2011). This Egale Canada report discusses the prevalence of SGM students in Canadian classrooms, providing clear evidence of the effects of significant homophobic and transphobic harassment and bullying on this vulnerable constituency. Among key findings, the report includes the following:

- Transgender and other gender-nonconforming youth, SGM youth of colour, and female SGM youth experience magnified discrimination in schools.
- Both SGM and non-SGM students are disappointed with school staff members and their lack of knowledge of homo/bi/transphobia as well as their failure to address anti-SGM harassment and

bullying. This demonstrates the need for school staff members to participate in sex-and-gender diversity and sensitivity training.

Regarding educational policymaking, *Every Class in Every School* found that

- generic safe school policies that do not include anti-homophobia guidelines are ineffective in providing safer climates for SGM youth;
- having specific anti-homophobia policies reduces incidents of harassment and bullying based on nonheterosexual orientation; and
- specific anti-homophobia policies, however, do not appear to reduce harassment and bullying based on gender identity, thus signalling a need for schools to develop anti-transphobia policies to advance inclusion of trans-identified and other gender nonconforming students.

Indeed, addressing the needs of gender minority students should be a pressing issue in schools today. Toronto's Youth Gender Action Project (2009) points to the need for schools to address ignorance of students' gender identities, the unresponsiveness of teachers, the lack of mentors, the lack of library and other resources, unchecked harassment and violence, trans-invisibility in the curriculum, and the absence of policies that accommodate their affirmed genders regarding dress, washroom use, locker room use, sports participation and other gender-based aspects of schooling.

When school environments are safer and more inclusive for SGM students, with less physical and verbal victimization and more visible and supportive school personnel, there are positive effects on student achievement and mental health (Heck et al 2014; McCabe 2014; Scharrón-del Río, Dragowski and Phillips 2014). To assist in creating safer school environments, schools need to have inclusive gay–straight alliances that focus on both gender identity and sexual orientation. Following the Out and Proud affirmation guidelines developed by the Children's Aid Society of Toronto (2012), these GSAs should be positive environments where every youth is heard, accepted and accommodated. Teachers who are gay–straight alliance (GSA) club advisors are integral in shaping these environments. They can be advocates for SGM students, educating teacher colleagues and the entire student population as they share knowledge about SGM issues and concerns (McCabe 2014). Their efforts can help vulnerable SGM students to grow into resilience. In sum, SGM students want GSAs to be safe spaces where they can connect with peers to advocate and educate in their quest to be and belong (Grace 2015). GSAs are vital so that SGM youth and allied peers have a safe space to learn about and validate their differences as they deal with the tide of homo/bi/transphobic bullying still prevalent in schools. As Grace and Wells relate, GSAs can help participating students to

- learn about their sexual and gender identities in environments where affirmation and accommodation are emphasized;
- communicate and interact in safe environments where teachers and other students acknowledge and support them; and
- advocate for self and others in SGM communities as they connect and collaborate with peers and significant adults (Grace, 2015).

In tandem, these functions of GSAs build a "strategy of resilience" for SGM youth (Scourfield, Roen and McDermott 2008, 332). When SGM students have GSAs in their schools, they have social spaces to build understanding of self and others across sexual and gender differences. As places to gather and share, GSAs can assist students to overcome feelings of fear and isolation as they socialize and grow into resilience.

Important Guiding Legislation, Policies and Regulations

Schools should promote and support environments that contribute positively to students' physical, psychological and emotional development. This responsibility extends to all students regardless of race, ethnicity, ability, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. The following legal and legislative policies provide a framework that supports the establishment of student organizations that promote equity and anti-discrimination including GSAs.

1. **Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms**

   http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-15.html

   > **Section 15(1)** Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

   Although section 15(1) of the Charter does not explicitly make reference to sexual orientation in its equality provisions, the courts have regarded sexual orientation as analogous to the other personal characteristics listed. The inclusion and the accommodation of difference are the spirit of section 15.

2. ***Alberta Bill of Rights***

   www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/A14.pdf

   > **Recognition and declaration of rights and freedoms**
   >
   > 1. It is hereby recognized and declared that in Alberta there exist without discrimination by reason of race, national origin, colour, religion, **sexual orientation, sex, gender identity or gender expression** [emphasis added], the following human rights and fundamental freedoms, namely:
   >
   > (a) the right of the individual to liberty, security of the person and enjoyment of property, and the right not to be deprived thereof except by due process of law;
   >
   > (b) the right of the individual to equality before the law and the protection of the law;
   >
   > (c) freedom of religion;
   >
   > (d) freedom of speech;
   >
   > (e) freedom of assembly and association;
   >
   > (f) freedom of the press;
   >
   > (g) the right of parents to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children.

3. ***Alberta Human Rights Act***

www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/A25P5.pdf

> **Preamble**
>
> WHEREAS it is recognized in Alberta as a fundamental principle and as a matter of public policy that all persons are equal in: dignity, rights and responsibilities without regard to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income, family status or sexual orientation …

Of particular interest to educational professionals is that, under the act, discrimination based on sexual orientation is prohibited in *all* of the following areas:

- Public statements, publications, notices, signs, symbols, emblems or other representations that indicate discrimination or the intent to discriminate or expose individuals or groups to hatred or contempt
- Goods, services, tenancy or facilities that are customarily available to the public
- Employment practices (refusing to hire, promote or provide equal treatment to someone because of his or her sexual orientation. Employees have the right to work in an environment free of harassment based on their sexual orientation.)
- Employment applications or advertisements
- Membership in trade unions, employers' organizations or occupational organizations

4. **The *Education Act* (proposed implementation September 2015)**

www.qp.gov.ab.ca/documents/Acts/e00p3.pdf

> **Preamble, p 10 (and added to the Preamble of *School Act* effective June 1, 2015)**
>
> WHEREAS students are entitled to welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and positive sense of self …

Support for student organizations (and added to *School Act* section 16 effective June 1, 2015)

> **Section 35.1**(1) If one or more students attending a school operated by a board request a staff member employed by the board for support to establish a voluntary student organization, or to lead an activity intended to promote a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging, the principal of the school shall
>
> (a) permit the establishment of the student organization or the holding of the activity at the school, and

(b) designate a staff member to serve as the staff liaison to facilitate the establishment, and the ongoing operation, of the student organization or to assist in organizing the activity.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1), an organization or activity includes an organization or activity that promotes equality and nondiscrimination with respect to, without limitation, race, religious belief, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, family status or sexual orientation, including but not limited to organizations such as gay-straight alliances, diversity clubs, anti-racism clubs and anti-bullying clubs.

(3) The students may select a respectful and inclusive name for the organization, including the name "gay–straight alliance" or "queer–straight alliance", after consulting with the principal.

(4) The principal shall immediately inform the board and the Minister if no staff member is available to serve as a staff liaison referred to in subsection (1), and if so informed, the Minister shall appoint a responsible adult to work with the requesting students in organizing the activity or to facilitate the establishment, and the ongoing operation, of the student organization at the school.

(5) If a staff member indicates to a principal a willingness to act as a staff liaison under subsection (1),

(a) a principal shall not inform a board or the Minister under subsection (4) that no staff member is available to serve as a staff liaison, and

(b) that staff member shall be deemed to be available to serve as the staff liaison.

Notice to parent (and added to the *School Act* Section 50.1 effective June 1, 2015)

Section 58.1(1) A board shall provide notice to a parent of a student where courses, programs of study or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises, include subject-matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion or human sexuality.

(2) Where a teacher or other person providing instruction, teaching a course or program of study or using the instructional materials referred to in subsection (1) receives a written request signed by a parent of a student that the student be excluded from the instruction, course or program of study or use of instructional materials, the teacher or other person shall, in accordance with the request of the parent, permit the student, without academic penalty,

(a) to leave the classroom or place where the instruction, course or program of study is taking place or the instructional materials are being used for the duration of the part of the instruction, course or program of study, or the use of the instructional materials, that includes the subject-matter referred to in subsection (1), or

(b) to remain in the classroom or place without taking part in the instruction, course or program of study or using the instructional materials.

(3) This section does not apply to incidental or indirect references to religion, religious themes or human sexuality in a course, program of study, instruction or exercises or in the use of instructional materials.*

*This section of the *School Act* was formerly included in the *Alberta Human Rights Act*. Teachers have expressed concern that this regulation has caused a chilling effect on all classroom conversations related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Board Responsibilities (and added to the *School Act* section 45.1 effective June 1, 2015)

Section 33 (1)(d) ensure that each student enrolled in a school operated by the board and each staff member employed by the board is provided a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging.

(2) A board shall establish, implement and maintain a policy respecting the board's obligation under subsection (1)(d) to provide a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that includes the establishment of a code of conduct for students that addresses bullying behaviour.

(3) The code of conduct established under subsection (2) must

(d) contain the following elements:

(i) a statement of purpose that provides a rationale for the code of conduct, with a focus on welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments;

(ii) one or more statements that address the prohibited ground of discrimination set out in the *Alberta Human Rights Act*;

(iii) one or more statements about what is acceptable behaviour and what is unacceptable behaviour, whether or not it occurs within the school building, during the school day or by electronic means;

(iv) one or more statements about the consequences of unacceptable behaviour, which must take account of the student's age, maturity and individual circumstances, and which must ensure that support is provided for students who are impacted by inappropriate behaviour, as well as for students who engage in inappropriate behaviour,

5. Alberta Education *Guide to Education 2015-2016*

http://education.alberta.ca/media/15225880/guide_to_ed_2015.pdf

Controversial Issues (p 79)

Controversial issues are those topics that are publicly sensitive and upon which there is no consensus of values or beliefs. They include topics on which reasonable people may sincerely disagree. Opportunities to deal with these issues are an integral part of student learning in Alberta.

Studying controversial issues is important in preparing students to participate responsibly in a democratic and pluralistic society. Such study provides opportunities to develop the ability to think clearly, to reason logically, to open-mindedly and respectfully examine different points of view and to make sound judgments.

Teachers, students and others participating in studies or discussions of controversial issues need to exercise sensitivity to ensure that students and others are not ridiculed, embarrassed or intimidated for positions that they hold on controversial issues.

Discussing or studying controversial issues provides opportunities to:

- represent alternative points of view, subject to the condition that information presented is not restricted by any federal or provincial law
- reflect the maturity, capabilities and educational needs of the students
- meet the requirements of provincially prescribed and approved courses and programs of study and education programs
- reflect the neighbourhood and community in which the school is located, as well as provincial, national and international contexts.

Controversial issues that have been anticipated by the teacher, and those that may arise incidentally during instruction, should be used by the teacher to promote critical inquiry and/or to teach thinking skills.

The school plays a supportive role to parents in the areas of values and moral development and shall handle parental decisions in regard to controversial issues with respect and sensitivity.

6. The ATA Code of Professional Conduct

Go to www.teachers.ab.ca > About the ATA > Upholding Professional Standards > Professional Conduct

In relation to pupils

#1 The teacher teaches in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of all persons without prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry, place of origin, place of residence, socioeconomic background or linguistic background.

#4 The teacher treats pupils with dignity and respect and is considerate of their circumstances.

7. The Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers

Go to www.teachers.ab.ca > Teaching in Alberta > Becoming a Teacher

Article 9 Teachers have the right to be protected against discrimination on the basis of prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry, place of origin, place of residence, socioeconomic background or linguistic background and have the responsibility to refrain from practising these forms of discrimination in their professional duties.

The Evolving Roles of School-Based GSAs or QSAs

Four major types of GSA or QSA and some of their most common characteristics are identified below (Griffin et al 2004). By no means is this a definitive list. It is important to note that the nature and role of GSAs or QSAs will evolve based on the needs and concerns of the students and teachers and the school context. Students should guide the purpose of the GSA or QSA and its activities.

GSAs or QSAs should not be understood as a one-size-fits-all approach that will provide a "magic cure" for homophobia and heterosexism in schools. Rather, GSAs or QSAs can be more accurately understood as one vital part of a systematic approach to reducing bullying and improving student safety and acceptance of differences. Without the active support of the entire school community (including school council and school board) GSAs or QSAs are likely to remain as isolated havens of safety for a small group of students.

Four Major Types and Roles of GSAs or QSAs

1) GSAs or QSAs for Counselling and Support

- Have limited school-based support
- Are counsellor led
- Focus on the individual student
- Offer psychological support services
- Are often invisible within the school
- Perceive the school climate as hostile
- Are a drop-in safe space

2) GSAs or QSAs that Provide Safe Spaces

- Are officially sanctioned student groups
- Have limited visible presence
- Focus on individual support and social activities for their members
- Include straight allies
- Focus on normalization and fitting in

3) GSAs or QSAs to Raise Visibility and Awareness

- Are student led and teacher supported
- Focus on student safety and human rights
- Have a visible schoolwide presence
- Are characterized by social, educational and political activities
- Initiate schoolwide educational activities and programs (eg, guest speakers, assemblies, pride week activities)
- Focus on building tolerance and understanding

4) GSAs or QSAs to Effect Educational and Social Change

- Build networks and coalitions with other school and community-based groups
- Focus on school climate and organizational change through outreach activities (eg, diversity days, staff training, inclusive curriculum)
- Have an anti-oppression educational mandate across intersections of difference (race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity etc)
- Strive to move beyond tolerance

At first glance, creating a GSA might seem like an overwhelming task filled with difficult challenges. One way to anticipate and overcome challenges is to build a strong coalition of support that includes students, teachers, administrators, counsellors and parents. By involving members from these key educational stakeholders, your GSA will develop a variety of strategic tools to educate the entire school community and, in turn, demonstrate that sexual and gender minority students and their families are to be valued and respected. Remember, even if your GSA helps make your school safer for only one student, your efforts will have been successful!

The students may select a respectful, inclusive name for their organization including the name "Gay–Straight Alliance", or "Queer-Straight Alliance", after consulting with the principal. (*School Act* 2015).

Some other names for the club may include:

- Spectrum Club
- Pride Club
- Diversity Club
- Human Rights Club
- Rainbow Alliance
- Students Against Prejudice
- Unity in Diversity
- One Voice
- Gamma Sigma Alpha
- Equality Club
- SAGA (Straight and Gay Alliance)

Ten Steps to Start a GSA or QSA in Your School

Suggestions and Strategies for Teachers and Students

1) Follow all school guidelines.

A GSA should be established in the same way that any other group in your school is formed. Check your student handbook or school policies to see what the school's rules are for creating student groups. Some schools may require students to go through a process for establishing a club; this could include writing a constitution or showing student interest through a petition.

2) Find a GSA advisor.

Find a teacher, administrator or school staff member who would be willing to serve as a supportive ally for your group.

3) Find other students.

Talk to a diverse range of students about the potential GSA or QSA. You may also check with existing clubs for students who might have an interest in issues of diversity (eg, Amnesty, multiculturalism, student council, global issues etc). School counsellors can be an important source of support and guidance. They will often know of students who might benefit from your school's GSA.

4) Speak to your school administration.

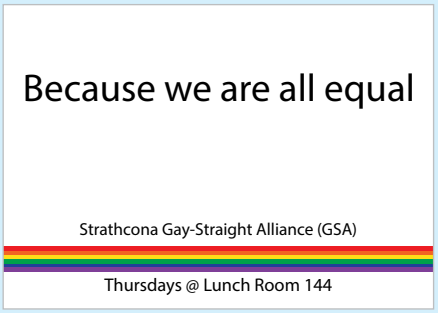
Administrators serve as important liaisons between students, teachers, parents, school boards and the larger community—be sure to include them in your planning. Encourage your school administrators to read this booklet and visit the ATA's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity webpage (www.teachers.ab.ca > Teaching in Alberta > Help Me Find … Diversity, Equity & Human Rights).

5) Pick a meeting space.

Hold your meetings in a safe and comfortable location in your school that is reasonably private. Remember that some students might feel uncomfortable and nervous when first attending meetings (Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia GALE BC 2004). Try to create an atmosphere that accommodates all individuals and comfort levels. Safety and confidentiality should always be primary concerns.

6) Advertise your group.

Work with your GSA advisor to discuss the best ways to advertise your GSA. Consider having a poster party to design flyers announcing your group meetings. Remember to emphasize that *all* students are welcome and encouraged to attend your GSA.



Advertising GSA groups and events, as in the posters to the left, encourages all students in the school to attend.

The simple presence of posters might help students feel safer at school, because they are a visible sign of acceptance. Some of these students might never attend your GSA. However, they will know that there is a safe space for them should they ever need it. Never underestimate the impact that your GSA can have.

Things to consider when advertising:

- Make sure your posters set a positive tone for your group.
- Include meeting times, locations and dates.
- Use LGBTQ affirming symbols on your posters, such as the rainbow flag or pink and black inverted triangles.
- Think about including a short description about what goes on at your meetings and be sure to highlight that supportive allies are welcome to attend.
- Emphasize that student confidentiality and safety are guaranteed.
- If your school has a webspace for student groups, consider developing a website for your GSA and advertise the weblink.

You may wish to advertise your club in your school newsletter. Below is a sample newsletter article.

Spruce Avenue Gay–Straight Alliance

Spruce Avenue is very lucky to have one of the few junior high GSAs in Edmonton! The GSA is intended to provide a safe, caring and bully-free space for all students no matter their sexual orientation, gender, gender identity or background. GSA meetings are held every Tuesday at lunch, with GSA round-table meetings once a month for students from across the metro Edmonton area. If parents would like further information, please feel free to contact the GSA teacher advisor, Mr R, or Principal H.

7) Plan your first meeting.

Select a meeting time that is convenient for most of your participants. Revisit the group's mission statement and brainstorm possible activities and topics of discussion for future meetings. Some GSAs or QSAs hold meetings on a weekly basis; others, monthly. Determine what kind of schedule will work best for your group. If your GSA has a budget, don't forget to bring snacks to your meetings. Everyone loves free food! Don't be discouraged if there are only a few students at the first meeting. Many successful GSAs or QSAs started with a small group of committed members.

8) Hold your first meeting!

You may want to start with a discussion about why people feel the group is needed or important. You may want to develop a mission or vision statement to help to focus your group and, in turn, demonstrate how serious and important your group is to the school community. Organize your GSA's mission and value statements to include principles related to diversity, human rights and social justice. Find out your school's or district's educational priorities and demonstrate how your GSA helps to live them out.

9) Establish ground rules.

Think about establishing specific ground rules for group discussions that reaffirm responsible and respectful behaviours. Reinforce the importance of straight allies in your group and make an extra effort to make your GSA welcoming to trans-identified, two-spirit, and youth from differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In addition to creating a welcoming environment, work together to develop and establish a group philosophy or mini charter of rights and freedoms that can be posted, or read at the beginning of each meeting.

Keep a positive and supportive tone in your group meetings and remember to emphasize the importance of equal participation (by students and advisors), confidentiality, safety and the right of individuals to make mistakes and learn from them. Be clear that gossip and labels have no place in your group.

Examples of ground rules:

EXAMPLE A

What is said here stays here. What is learned here can leave here.

All students are welcome no matter their sex at birth, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression or background.

EXAMPLE B

GSA Ground Rules

1. Be respectful. This is a safe space for all, so everyone's ideas, identity and boundaries need to be honoured. This includes no putdowns, not interrupting one another in discussions and no peer pressure.

2. Be kind. Support one another in your diversity. This includes differing circumstances and opinions of all.

3. What is said in the GSA stays in the GSA. Keeping what is said in our GSA meetings confidential is very important for all who attend, for safety and to maintain trust.

10) Plan for the future.

Work with your GSA to develop an action plan that will help make your group an active and sustainable presence in your school. Your action plan might include long- and short-range goals and priorities. Possible activities include

- showing age-appropriate LGBTQ-themed movies—the National Film Board of Canada is one good source,
- inviting guest speakers,
- holding joint meetings with other school groups,
- writing articles for the school newspaper or website,
- networking with local LGBTQ community groups,
- undertaking a web search on LGBTQ youth issues,
- visiting your school library and suggesting potential LGBTQ student resources,
- creating a bulletin board display about LGBTQ history,
- starting an LGBTQ book club or reading group,
- inviting LGBTQ school alumni to speak to your group, and
- planning activities to celebrate special days, such as
    - National Coming Out Day (October 11),
    - the Day of Silence (April),
    - the National Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (May),
    - Transgender Day of Remembrance (November),
    - your local community Pride Week,
    - Pink T-Shirt Day—www.pinktshirtday.ca, and
    - Trans* Day of Remembrance—http://tdor.info,
- Power Flower Activity http://web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/courses/csafety/mod2/media/flower.htm,
- Genderbread Person—http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/03/the-genderbread-person-v2-0,
- Question Box—A question box gives GSA students an opportunity to ask questions that they may not otherwise feel comfortable asking. The box also gives the advisor a chance to look over questions for appropriateness before sharing answers.
- education on gay history and terminology
    - LGBTQ terminology—http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2013/01/a-comprehensive-list-of-lgbtq-term-definitions
    - flag lesson—http://mashable.com/2014/06/13/lgbt-pride-symbols
    - history lesson—www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/history.aspx; www.magazine.utoronto.ca/summer-2009/history-gay-lesbian-rights

More activities are listed in Appendix A. The possibilities are endless. Be creative and have fun!

Developing Plans for Your GSA and QSA

A vision helps to clarify your goals, which, in turn, can motivate your group's actions.

1) Assess and work with your school environment.

Consider developing a school climate survey. Does your GSA (or larger student body) perceive homophobia, transphobia or heterosexism to be a significant issue in your school?

Start with self-reflection and ask GSA members to think about their own school-based experiences. If members feel comfortable, ask them to share their experiences, either in a large group or with one or two other people. Your GSA might decide to explore common themes and concerns and use these experiences as teachable moments that could be brought to the attention of your school administration or counsellors. Be careful not to focus only on potential problems. Instead, celebrate and build upon the successes in your school.

2) Develop a vision statement.

A vision helps to clarify your goals, which, in turn, can motivate your group's actions. Start by brainstorming a "blue-sky" vision for your GSA and school. You could ask members to think about what an ideal school for LGBTQ youth would look like. Remind group members that there are no limits. They shouldn't worry about how to achieve the vision—they should concentrate on imagining it. For example, you could ask: What would this school look like? How would it feel to be an LGBTQ student in this ideal school? What would the school sound like? How would students and teachers treat each other?

3) Make your vision a reality.

- Identify resources or sources of support that can help you live out your vision.
- Set short-, medium- and long-term goals that will help you develop a road map to success and inclusion.
    - Clearly identify what your GSA wants to accomplish.
    - Describe how these goals reflect your vision or charter.
    - Discuss the supports that are needed to make this goal a reality.

Once you have identified one or two key goals, develop an action plan. You may decide to establish several smaller working groups to divide the tasks into manageable pieces. Remember to network with other school groups, teachers and community organizations. Consider making presentations to school staff or the school council to inform them of your goals. You might be surprised to find out that many different groups share your vision of a welcoming, safe, caring and respectful school.

4) Celebrate your successes along the way.

Remember, a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe school is every student's right *and* responsibility. Give back as much as you take from your school. Take the time to recognize and celebrate your accomplishments throughout the year, no matter how small or large. Throw your GSA a birthday party each year to celebrate your achievements and be proud of what you have accomplished!

Never forget that each vision requires thousands of tiny steps to become a reality. Don't be afraid to take the first small step on the road to inclusion. Hundreds of other students, teachers and school staff members will walk in your footsteps once you decide to begin the journey. Each step along the way can help to create another ally and open up more hearts and minds.

Tips for Sustaining Student Involvement in GSAs or QSAs

- **Prepare for student turnover** as a natural part of your GSA.
- **Remember** that long-term challenges require long-term goals and initiatives to effect significant change. Don't expect your GSA to change your school's culture overnight.
- **Build leadership capacity by** developing a mentoring program in which older and more involved students help to mentor and support younger ones. This mentoring program will help to develop the skills and confidence of the GSA's younger members so that they can step into leadership roles when older students graduate from school. Senior high school students could mentor a GSA in their junior high or elementary feeder schools.
- **Allow your GSA to be flexible** enough to meet the changing needs of students each year. Think of your GSA's activities as a spectrum of possibilities that will vary depending on individual comfort and experience levels. Some students will be most comfortable simply having a safe space to have lunch, while others might be interested in planning workshops and guest speakers for their school.
- **Invite straight allies to participate** in planning your GSA's activities and meetings. After all, creating a safe school is everyone's responsibility.
- **Network and build coalitions** with other student groups. Multi-issue organizing is a powerful way to demonstrate the connections between issues of sexism, racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of injustice (GSA Network 2004). Join forces with other student groups and mobilize your collective energies to improve your school community. As well, students in the GSA can provide advice to ensure that other school groups and their activities are inclusive.
- **Make your GSA inclusive** and celebrate internal diversity by welcoming Aboriginal students, students of colour and any other students who have experienced some form of oppression based on their actual or perceived differences. Internal diversity can be the greatest strength and most powerful force of your GSA.
- **Network with other GSAs** in your community through the Alberta GSA Network Facebook page.

Looking for funding? A GSA teacher supervisor can apply for a Diversity, Equity and Human Rights grant from the Alberta Teachers' Association for up to $2,000. Visit www.teachers.ab.ca for more information.

www.facebook.com/groups/AlbertaGSANetwork/

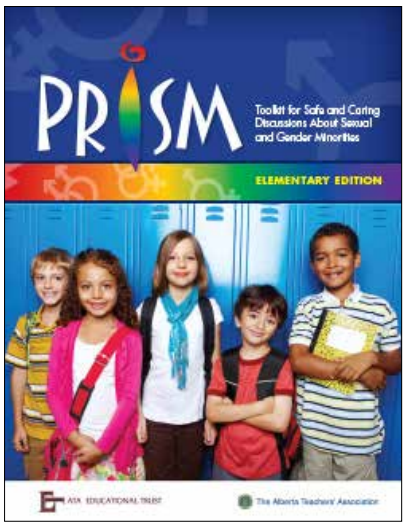
Perhaps the most important factor in sustaining the longevity of your GSA is to ensure that it is a safe, welcoming and confidential space where everyone is respected for their unique individual differences as they participate in an open, fun and safe environment.

GSAs and QSAs Throughout the Grades

Although once thought of as a club for high schools only, GSAs and QSAs are quickly becoming more common in both junior high and elementary schools. An age-appropriate approach and resources are critical in the success of GSAs or QSAs in the younger grades. Appendix B provides a list of age-appropriate considerations across the grades.

Research shows that sexual orientation and gender identity are established in early childhood (Ryan and Futterman 1998). Many students have a sense of their sexual orientation and gender identity as early as Grade 1. As a result, it is important that elementary teachers become aware of this developmental factor and provide the necessary resources and support to ensure that sexual minority students develop a positive self-identity. Furthermore, many students have LGBTQ parents or siblings. It is important for these students to feel that their families and identities are a valued and visible part of the school and classroom community.

In primary grades students need to learn about gender stereotypes, family diversity, and acceptance of difference and the celebration of diversity. The ATA's PRISM toolkit is an excellent resource for addressing these topics. The PRISM toolkit provides lesson plans and suggested resources with curricular links for Grades 1–6. It encourages safe and caring discussions about sexual and gender minorities. The PRISM toolkit for elementary grades is available at www.teachers.ab.ca. Complimentary hard copies are available upon request by calling 1-800-232-7208.



The PRISM toolkit for elementary grades is available at www.teachers.ab.ca.

Elementary GSAs can focus on identity development, rather than sexual orientation. The Edmonton Public Library and the Edmonton Public School Board have created a comprehensive reading list for all ages. These books could easily be integrated into the school's annual Read-In Week or throughout the year. Visit www.teachers.ab.ca > For Members > Professional Development > Diversity, Equity & Human Rights > Resources or http://bit.ly/1GmCIuq to access this list of resources.

A GSA or QSA at the elementary level can provide excellent opportunities to build positive relationships with parents. A resource that provides support for LGBTQ parents to help create safe learning spaces for preschool-aged children is *Around the Rainbow—Toolkit for LGBTTQ Parents/Guardians*, written in 2006 and available from Family Services a la famille Ottawa (http://familyservicesottawa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Parent-Toolkit-2006-EN.pdf).

How to Make Your GSA or QSA Trans* Inclusive

Being trans* inclusive means that your student club and its members commit to an ongoing process of education, and that you make an effort to ensure that all of your club's activities and advocacy efforts are inclusive of transgender people and issues related to gender identity and gender expression. Although all student clubs should address these issues, it is even more important when using the acronym *LGBTQ*.

Historically, transgender students have faced severe and pervasive discrimination and harassment in their schools and communities. While much progressive educational work has been accomplished in relation to the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual students, trans-identified youth still face significant barriers within their schools. Many of these obstacles stem from a lack of knowledge, information and sensitivity about issues related to gender identity and expression. In 2003, the ATA became the first teachers' organization in Canada to include gender identity as a protected ground against discrimination in a professional code of ethical conduct. This change to the ATA's Code of Professional Conduct requires that all teachers teach in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of trans-identified students and all other minorities.

GSAs or QSAs can assist in meeting the needs of trans-identified youth by helping to educate their membership and, in turn, the entire school community about gender-identity educational issues. For example, a GSA might decide to assess school/district policies and codes of conduct to see if they include protections for trans-identified students. Students might also analyze the school's bathroom and locker room facilities to see if they are inclusive of trans-identified youth. For example, are there designated gender-neutral bathrooms or change rooms?

Tips to Make Your GSA More Trans* Friendly

- **What's your GSA's name?** Although your GSA may be trans* inclusive in a number of ways, the term *gay–straight alliance* may make transgender students feel left out. Change your name to something that includes everyone in the LGBTQ acronym. Be creative; maybe even make an acronym with the new name!
- **When your GSA asks for gender on a form or a survey, don't use checkboxes with *Male* or *Female*. Leave a blank line and allow people to write it in.** This allows people to identify themselves however they would like. Always question whether you even need this information and why you are asking for it. If you do decide to include a question about gender, consider noting that sharing this info is optional. Also, consider encouraging your school to do this for its forms as well.
- **Create a safe space for self-identification.** Make it a rule in your GSA that anyone can use their name and pronoun of choice, and other members will respect and use them. Make sure you know *when* and *where* people use these names and pronouns. (Just in the GSA? Just at school? Do their parents or teachers use them too?) Respect their confidentiality if these are identities they use only at GSA meetings—it may be their only place to do so comfortably.
- **Advocate for gender-neutral spaces in your school.** Places like washrooms, changing rooms and locker rooms can be unsafe, uncomfortable places for people who are transgender. While everyone has the right to be safe in every place at school, some people will find a gender-neutral space safer and more accessible, and it may allow them to participate in activities and events they may otherwise stay away from. In addition to gender-neutral spaces, trans* students should have the choice of which facilities to use.
- **Don't separate your GSA into "boys" and "girls" for activities.** For some this may seem harmless, but for students who are trans* or questioning their gender, this can be an alienating and even traumatizing situation. Challenge yourself to notice the ways that you gender things and ask yourself why. Consider reasons that gendering activities might be problematic for trans* as well as non-trans* participants.
- **Design and lead a gender sensitivity training opportunity for students and/or teachers at your school.** Get folks talking about gender categories and gender-related expectations (What do we expect from women and men? Are they different?)

(Stevens 2011)

Pronoun buttons can be used as safe space self-identification. Anyone can use their name and pronoun of choice and they define when and where they are used.

Considerations for Teacher Sponsors

Build as many diverse alliances as you can and involve a variety of individuals and groups in your initial planning phase.

Teachers who are interested in supporting GSAs or QSAs should work very closely with their school administrators and school councils. In some cases, these two key educational stakeholders may have common misconceptions or unfounded concerns about the nature and role of GSAs or QSAs in schools. An informed teacher can go a long way toward helping to dispel common stereotypes and, in turn, help to alleviate many of the perceived fears that are generated when a school begins to publicly address LGBTQ educational issues. If you are interested in becoming a GSA advisor or supportive ally, think about incorporating the following suggestions into your social justice work:

- If you know of other teachers who have been involved in GSAs or QSAs, contact them for advice. These teachers will have a wealth of information that might help your GSA avoid misunderstandings or early setbacks.
- The role of a teacher sponsor is to *facilitate*, not to lead, the student GSA or QSA. Develop leadership in your students by encouraging them to lead the meetings and plan activities.
- Be aware of a teacher's scope of practice and limitations and do not provide individual counselling to students. Instead, refer students to the school guidance counsellor or external professional services.
- Students in GSAs or QSAs may wish to create an online presence through a website or social media. Teachers are cautioned, however, against engaging in dialogue with students online.
- Remember that, like any other human rights and social justice initiatives, your GSA will take a time commitment, similar to other extracurricular activities. Build as many diverse alliances as you can and involve a variety of individuals and groups in your initial planning phase. No one teacher or student should be responsible for creating and sustaining a GSA. Everyone should take responsibility for developing a strong, vibrant and inclusive human rights culture in your school.

Teachers who have questions or concerns on matters related to gender or sexual minorities are strongly advised to call ATA Member Services at 1-800-232-7208 for personal, confidential advice and support.

Frequently Asked Questions About GSAs or QSAs

This section features frequently asked questions from teachers, administrators, counsellors, students and parents about GSAs or QSAs and LGBTQ educational issues. The answers and suggestions provided are not meant to offer a comprehensive analysis; rather, they are meant to stimulate dialogue, develop critical thinking and provide individuals with a broad range of possible responses to address many of the questions and concerns that arise as they begin to build an inclusive school environment.

My administrator/school council/school board does not support the establishment of a GSA or QSA. What can I do?

Alberta's *School Act* section 16.1 (2) provides for the establishment of a voluntary student organization or activities intended to promote equality and nondiscrimination with respect to, without limitation, race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, physical disability, mental disability, family status, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, including but not limited to gay–straight alliances, diversity clubs and antibullying clubs. The *School Act* requires that principals shall permit the establishment of these student organizations. The *School Act* section 16.1 (3) also states that students shall select a respectful and inclusive name for the organization, such as Gay–Straight Alliance or Queer–Straight Alliance, after consulting with the principal. The establishment of GSAs or QSAs by students is therefore supported in provincial legislation. Please contact ATA Member Services at 1-800-232-7208 for further advice if your administrator, school council or school board are unsupportive.

We don't have any sexual and gender minority students in our school. Do we need a GSA?

Sexual and gender minority students are in every school, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic class and society in the world. Many LGBTQ students simply choose not to make themselves visible when they perceive their school or family environment as a hostile or unwelcoming space. Current research indicates that between 2 and 10 per cent of individuals in North American society are nonheterosexual. In Canada, a recent demographic survey of more than 105,000 junior and senior high school students, conducted by the Toronto District School Board, found that 8 per cent of students in Grades 9 to 12 identified as nonheterosexual or questioning their orientation. Additionally, adolescent-health research indicates that the average age of coming out is now 15 or 16 (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca 2014). These research findings illustrate how the issues of sexual orientation and gender identity are relevant in Alberta schools.

Sexual orientation is determined by numerous factors including hormonal, genetic and environmental influence. Importantly, research suggests that poor parenting, sexual abuse and other adverse life events do not influence sexual orientation (Public Health Agency of Canada 2014).

Do GSAs or QSAs try to convert heterosexual students to an LGBTQ lifestyle?

No. A student's sexual orientation or gender identity is not a lifestyle choice. Sexual orientation is usually established at a very early stage in a child's developmental process. Some students report knowing that they were different from others as early as age five or six. Other students state that they did not become aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity until they were much older. Importantly, a person's sexual orientation is not simply an either/or, binary choice. Research findings and historical literature indicate that human sexuality and expressions of gender can most accurately be understood as operating along a broad continuum that ranges from an individual identifying as exclusively heterosexual to exclusively nonheterosexual, or masculine to gender queer to feminine. The exact determinants of what makes someone self-identify as heterosexual or nonheterosexual are not yet completely understood. However, contemporary research suggests that a person's sexual orientation is most likely *not* simply determined by any one single factor or influence but, instead, is determined by numerous factors including hormonal, genetic and environmental influence. Importantly, research suggests that poor parenting, sexual abuse and other adverse life events do not influence sexual orientation (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca 2014). In 1973, the American Psychological Association reclassified homosexuality from a mental disorder to a form of normal sexual orientation and identity expression. Counselling or educational practices that suggest that a student's sexual orientation can be changed or "cured" through the use of reparative or other such conversion therapies have been denounced by the American and Canadian psychological associations, as well as by many teachers' organizations across Canada, as a serious breach of a member's ethical conduct and professional responsibilities. Recently, the Government of Ontario declared attempts to cure, fix or change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity illegal.

Will people assume that I am also LGBTQ if I am involved as a teacher–sponsor with the GSA or QSA?

Maybe. Some people might think that only LGBTQ persons will promote equal rights for sexual or gender minority people. This is a common fallacy. Were African-Americans and African-Canadians the only persons involved in the civil rights movement? Did women work for equality without the support of men? Sexual or gender minority issues and concerns are first and foremost a civil and human rights issue and, as such, need to be addressed and supported by *all* teachers and school administrators.

How can I support LGBTQ students from an immigrant population that may not be inclusive or welcoming to sexual or gender minorities?

Due to religious and/or societal norms, the countries of origin for some students may not be accepting of sexual or gender minorities. Students from these countries may be at an increased

risk for feeling isolated by their families and communities. As in all circumstances, it is important to protect the students' confidentiality unless they are at physical or psychological risk. Try to connect with your district's intercultural consultants for support and ensure that the language used in the GSA is welcoming for everyone.

Why would straight students want to become a member or be involved with a GSA or QSA?

Some students and teachers may feel that it is important for a GSA or QSA to be an LGBTQ-only space. After all, every other space in school is designed for heterosexual students! Rather than exclude straight-identified students, though, perhaps the focus should be on the more important issue: Why do straight students want to be a part of a GSA? (Mayo 2004). There are a variety of responses to this question. Some students have LGBTQ parents, friends or family members. Others might be interested in joining a GSA or QSA simply because they are tired of the social pressures of trying to fit in. In many ways a GSA is one of the few sanctioned school spaces where students can openly question understandings of sexuality, challenge gender roles and expectations, and feel safe and valued for their differences. GSAs or QSAs don't force people to find their place in the mainstream. Instead, they are spaces that encourage students to actively question the value of rigid codes of identity and gender expression. Once students begin to ask these and other critical questions, heterosexism, classism, racism and other forms of unearned privilege quickly surface as important issues for discussion. By engaging in discussions that link multiple isms, new and powerful allies are created in the process of people simply getting to know one another. Research supports the power and potential impact of alliances by demonstrating what we already know to be true: simply getting to know an LGBTQ person is one of the most significant ways to reduce discrimination and prejudice. Without the active participation of straight-identified students, important opportunities for individual learning and alliance building are lost.

I am a supportive ally. How do I support students in starting a GSA or QSA in my school?

One of the first and most important steps in creating allies is to begin educating yourself, the school administration and other school staff members about the significant health and safety needs of sexual and gender minority students. This important awareness building can occur in a variety of ways that range from simple strategies, such as watching educational videos from the National Film Board, to reading information on the ATA's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity webpage (www.teachers.ab.ca). Alternatively, a more encompassing approach might be to consider asking your administration to book one of the ATA's professional development workshops on sexual orientation and gender identity for the school staff. See page 49 of this handbook for a description of the ATA's workshop.

GSAs or QSAs have been most successfully embraced and supported in schools that have built a strong and vibrant human rights culture. These GSAs or QSAs demonstrate how supporting LGBTQ students and their families is an important extension of the school's human rights work. Allied teachers who believe in social justice initiatives can help interested students develop a proposal to create their own GSA. Clearly defining the GSA's mission, philosophy and goals

in that proposal can highlight the importance of addressing student health and safety needs and concerns as the core mandate of the GSA. Successful GSA proposals also emphasize how the school's GSA will serve as an important educational vehicle for all students, school staff and parents to learn about and appreciate diversity as one of the school's greatest strengths.

Below is one conceptual model that can help you begin to build an inclusive and supportive human rights culture in your school.

Awareness You can begin to build awareness in your school by improving your school's library resources, using and modelling inclusive language in your classroom and challenging misconceptions and stereotypes about LGBTQ people. One powerful way to build awareness and an atmosphere of respect is to seize upon the teachable moment when it arises in your classroom. For example, when a student calls another student a "fag" or "dyke," use this opportunity to talk about the inappropriateness of derogatory remarks and the history behind such words.

fYrefly in Schools is a program that engages a unique peer-to-peer educational model to deliver participatory workshops led by experienced facilitators to develop awareness of the lived realities of LGBTQ youth. It is offered free to junior and senior high schools and community groups in Edmonton and Calgary. For more information, go to www.fyrefly.ualberta.ca/fyreflyinschools.

Training To help educate your students about sexual orientation and gender identity, consider bringing in local youth or adult guest speakers to your classroom or school. Encourage your colleagues to attend LGBTQ sessions at teachers' conventions and conferences. Approach your school administration and ask them to consider making LGBTQ educational issues a schoolwide professional development goal.

Support Develop a human rights culture in your school and work with your school council and administration to create communities of support for sexual and gender minority and allied students, teachers and same-gender parented families. Remember that it is also vitally important to provide support for the teacher advisors of GSAs or QSAs as well as for the students. It is always important to reaffirm that GSAs or QSAs are confidential and supportive spaces for all students and teachers regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Emphasize that you don't have to be a sexual and gender minority person to facilitate or support a GSA. In fact, allied teachers or teachers who are committed to social justice educational initiatives are often in the best position to demonstrate that sexual orientation and gender identity issues are important educational issues that should be addressed by everyone, including heterosexual teachers, administrators, counsellors, parents and students.

Resources for GSAs and QSAs

A Selection of LGBTQ Titles from the ATA Library

ATA members can borrow resources from the ATA library. The ATA library's page on sexual minorities and gender variance can be found at www.teachers.ab.ca/For%20Members/Programs%20and%20Services/ATA%20Library/Pages/Sexual-Minorities.aspx.

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Tryl, Luke. nd. *Primary Best Practice Guide: How Primary Schools Are Celebrating Difference and Tackling Homophobia.* London, UK: Stonewall.

Toronto District School Board. 2011. *Challenging Homophobia and Heterosexism: A K–12 Curriculum Resource Guide.* Toronto, Ont: Toronto District School Board.

Wells, Kristopher and Roberts, Gayle and Allan, Carol. 2012. *Supporting Transgender and Transsexual Students in K–12 Schools: A Guide for Educators*. Ottawa, Ont: Canadian Teachers' Federation.

Web Resources

- ATA's Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Committee—www.teachers.ab.ca/For%20Members/Professional%20Development/Diversity%20and%20Human%20Rights/Pages/Index.aspx or http://tinyurl.com/2dzo9sn
- Public Health Agency of Canada: *Sexual Orientation in Schools Questions and Answers*, 2014—www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/std-mts/rp/so-os/index-eng.php or http://tinyurl.com/nyzrjca
- PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)—www.pflagcanada.ca
- Pride Centre of Edmonton—www.pridecentreofedmonton.org
- The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network—www.glsen.org
- The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities—www.safeandcaring.ca
- Safe Schools Coalition—www.safeschoolscoalition.org
- Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services—www.ismss.ualberta.ca
- Huffington Post—www.huffingtonpost.com/gay-voices

- Government of Alberta tips sheets on Creating Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe Learning Environments on the following topics:

  - Gay–Straight or Queer–Straight Alliances in Schools
  - Starting a Gay–Straight Alliance or Queer–Straight Alliance in Your School

  —https://education.alberta.ca

- LGBT Feed—www.lgbtfeed.com
- NoHomophobes.com—www.nohomophobes.com
- I Dig Your Girlfriend—http://idigyourgirlfriend.com
- GSA Network—www.gsanetwork.org
- Government of Alberta—www.bullyfreealberta.ca
- Suicide Prevention, Awareness and Support
  - Kids Help Phone—www.kidshelpphone.ca
  - The Centre for Suicide Prevention—www.suicideinfo.ca
- Alberta Health Services—www.albertahealthservices.ca

Workshops

PRISM: Professionals Respecting Individual Sexual (and Gender) Minorities

Description: The Alberta *School Act* was amended in 2015 to ensure that schools will be welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self. These amendments also provide students the opportunity to establish a gay–straight alliance, diversity club and/or antibullying club that promotes equality and nondiscrimination. This workshop offered by The Alberta Teachers' Association will help school leaders and teachers understand the issues of gender and sexual minority individuals, develop strategies to build an inclusive school community (elementary and secondary), and establish and support the operation of a gay–straight alliance upon student request. Participants in this workshop will receive a copy of the recently revised *GSAs and QSAs in Alberta Schools: A Guide for Teachers* and the *PRISM Toolkit for Safe and Caring Discussions About Sexual and Gender Minorities* (Elementary Edition). This workshop will be tailored to address the school context and goals of participants.

Length: 90 minutes or half-day

For further booking information please contact ATA Professional Development at 1-800-232-7208 or pdworkshops@ata.ab.ca.

Alberta Gay–Straight Alliance Conference

The Alberta Gay–Straight Alliance Conference, which started in 2012, is designed to support K–12 students and teachers to learn the skills, tools and strategies to help start, strengthen and sustain GSAs in their schools. The conference alternates each year between Edmonton and Calgary and is organized by the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services in the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, and sponsored by the Alberta Teachers' Association. The conference is also supported by many educational and community partners who believe in the importance of creating welcoming, respectful and inclusive school communities that support diversity, equity and human rights. To learn more about the conference and how you can register to attend, please visit www.ismss.ualberta.ca/GSAConference.

Calgary Sexual Health Centre

Calgary Sexual Health Centre offers professional development workshops to schools and community groups on topics ranging from comprehensive sexual health; sexual harassment/boundaries; cultural awareness and diversity; creating safe and respectful schools and workplaces for LGBTQ students, staff and coworkers; supporting gay–straight alliances; and responding to bullying. For a full list of topics, please visit www.calgarysexualhealth.ca.

Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services

The Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS) offers a wide range of research-informed professional development opportunities for schools, community groups, corporations and professional accreditation. Uniquely, iSMSS also offers undergraduate and graduate courses focused on LGBTQ educational issues and provides over $8,000 in scholarships each year to support LGBTQ undergraduate and graduate research and advocacy. Professional development sessions can be customized to the needs of your school or organization; topics include the following:

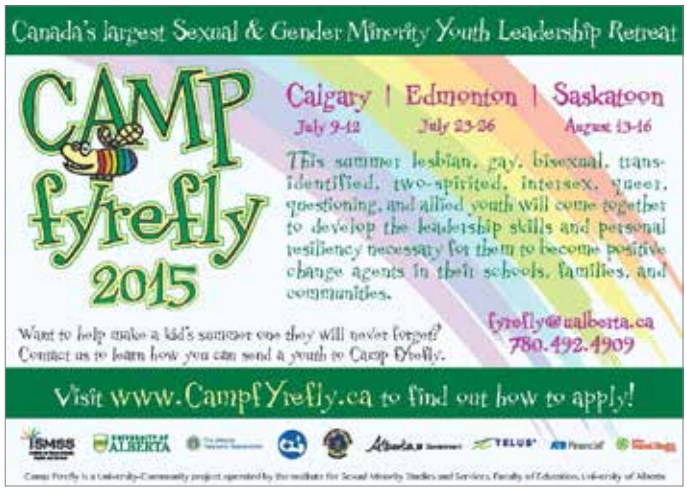
- Research Trends and Issues on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Canadian Schools
- Supporting Mental Health in LGBTQ Children and Adolescents
- Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying
- Homophobia, Masculinity, and School Violence
- Creating LGBTQ Inclusive Policies
- LGBTQ 101: An Introduction
- Starting and Sustaining Gay–Straight Alliances
- Supporting Transgender Students in K–12 Schools

For more information on professional development and training opportunities, please visit www.ismss.ualberta.ca.

Camp fYrefly

Camp fYrefly is a four-day residential-style summer leadership retreat for sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ) youth ages 14 to 24. Camp fYrefly exists because caring adults believe that all youth are entitled to a world that embraces diversity rather than fearing it. For four days each year, the camp creates that world for sexual and gender minority youth, a world that lives out the fYrefly acronym, which stands for fostering, youth, resiliency, energy, fun, leadership, yeah!

The camp, utilizing an arts-based educational philosophy, is jam-packed with dance, drama, music, writing, visual art, empowerment and reflection exercises, anti-oppression work, personal growth opportunities, healthy socialization, and in-depth learning activities about specific youth topics and social issues. All of this dynamic and interactive programming focuses on building and nurturing the leadership potential and personal resiliency of youth in an effort to help them become agents for positive social change in their schools, families and communities. Camp fYrefly is operated by the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services and supported by the Alberta Teachers' Association.



www.fyrefly.ualberta.ca/

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fYrefly in Schools

fYrefly in Schools engages a unique peer-to-peer educational model to deliver participatory workshops led by experienced facilitators that aim to (a) develop awareness of the lived realities and challenges of LGBTQ youth, (b) increase knowledge of social supports and community resources for LGBTQ youth, (c) equip young people with the skills to become human rights allies and minimize the negative impacts of homophobia and transphobia in their schools and communities, (d) decrease feelings of isolation, alienation and helplessness often experienced by LGBTQ youth, and (e) promote safer, more respectful and inclusive communities. Thanks to the generous support of funders, fYrefly in Schools is offered free to junior and senior high schools and community groups in Edmonton and Calgary.

www.fyrefly.ualberta.ca/fyreflyinschools

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APPENDIX A

Possible GSA Activities

Social Activities

1) Raise funds for a youth homeless shelter, HIV/AIDS research or a women's shelter.
2) Put different people in charge of coming up with a topic for the meeting.
3) Watch a video or news clip and discuss it.
4) Organize a pizza lunch party or school dance.
5) Perform community service (for example, volunteer at a soup kitchen, collect food for the local food bank, community clean-up, Hair Massacure, Terry Fox Run).
6) Organize an after-school field trip to the museum, an art gallery or a play.
7) Organize an LGBTQ prom for schools in the area.
8) Have a bring-a-friend day, when everyone brings someone new to the meeting—which helps to change others' minds about the group.
9) Host a board game day once a week as a chance to socialize and make new friends.
10) Make a craft.
11) Organize the best and most unusual social events in your school.

Educational Activities

1) Work with your school librarian to select LGBTQ-themed books for the library.
2) Organize guest speakers and/or panels of LGBTQ students to speak to teacher meetings.
3) Invite speakers to the school from the community, a local house of worship or a university.
4) Organize a book study or book talk with an author.
5) Celebrate recognition days such as Pink Shirt Day or Gay and Lesbian History Month.
6) Organize a Pride Week or LGBTQ Awareness event.
7) Host a GSA or diversity, equity and human rights conference at your school
8) Team up with other clubs in your school to promote awareness of racism, religious intolerance and other forms of oppression.
9) Put on a gay-themed play with the help of the drama teacher.
10) Make educational signs and posters to hang in various areas of the school.
11) Raise awareness about bullying and harassment with a Safe Spaces campaign.
12) Organize a meeting as a Q&A Day—students anonymously write down questions on any subject they want and then spend the rest of the meeting discussing questions and researching the answers.
13) Research topics related to LGBTQ life, culture, history or oppression and share the information with the group.
14) Invite parents who are interested in sharing and dialogue.
15) Attend the annual GSA conference for students.

16) Invite health professionals, police, lawyers, media reps and municipal leaders to make presentations on selected topics/ issues.

17) Discuss the LGBTQ characters or relationships in any current TV shows, books or movies (eg, *The Imitation Game*).

18) Talk about healthy dating and relationships.

19) Research the history of gay and lesbian rights.

Advocacy Activities

Lobby the school board to adopt a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

Organize a writing campaign to address local or provincial issues of concern.

Meet with your area's elected officials to discuss issues of concern.

Give out awards to students, staff or other persons who have made a positive contribution.

Survey students on issues of school safety, individual support and access to information.

Adapted from

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APPENDIX B

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Learning About Sexual Diversity at School—What Is Age Appropriate?

In primary grades, children need to learn things such as these:

P1. There aren't any "girl colours and boy colours" or "girl games and boy games." Those are stereotypes of what you have to like to be a girl or a boy. It's OK to be different.

P2. Families come in all different shapes and sizes, including, among many others, two-mommy and two-daddy families, and families with no kids at all (just grown-ups). Some people are born into their family and some are adopted or fostered or just loved into their family. Sometimes families live together and sometimes they don't. What makes a group of people a family is that they love and take care of one another.

P3. It is wrong to call people names or put them down ... for any reason, including being gay. Everybody in our school deserves to be treated with kindness. It's important to stick up for yourself (in ways that don't hurt others). It's important to stick up for your friends. It's also OK to ask adults to help you when people use put-downs. It is not "tattling" when you ask grown-ups to help you be safe. **EDUCATORS: If you hear students use words like *fag* or *dyke*, it's perfectly appropriate to add:** Words like *fag* and *dyke* are mean. The respectful words are *gay* and *lesbian*. A *gay* man is someone who loves another man best of all. A *lesbian* woman is someone who loves another woman best of all. *Heterosexuals* are people whose dearest love is of a different gender—a man who loves a woman or a woman who loves a man. People are *bisexual* or *bi* if they can fall in love with a woman *or* a man.

In intermediate grades, children *also* need to learn that

I1. A *stereotype* is a mental picture you have of someone just because they belong to a certain group of people. For example, you might think that all teenagers like a certain kind of music. That's ridiculous, but it probably isn't hurtful. Still, it's a stereotype. **A *prejudice* is a negative or hurtful stereotype.** If you believed that all teenagers shoplift, that would be hurtful thinking, so it is a prejudice.

I2. You can't tell if people are gay or lesbian by how they look or talk. Only some people fit the stereotypes; that's what makes them stereotypes. Some people who *aren't* gay also fit stereotypes about gay people. It's OK to be a gay or lesbian person and fit those stereotypes, but many gay and lesbian people don't.

I3. If you hear somebody put down gay people—or *any* people—you can tell them you think it's mean (unfair, unkind) and you can ask them to stop using *gay* as a put-down. If you see somebody getting picked on, you can let them know that you think they deserve to be treated better and, if necessary, you can ask an adult for help. **EDUCATORS: If you hear students use terms like "That's so gay!" it's perfectly appropriate to add:** You don't say things like "That's so gay!" to mean that you don't like something. It's wrong. It shows prejudice and it might hurt people ... maybe somebody whose mom or dad or another family member or friend is gay. We all probably know someone gay, even if we don't realize it.

I4. A lot of people are more masculine or feminine than the media says they're "supposed to" be. It's perfectly OK—and very common— not to fit those stereotypes. **EDUCATORS: If students ask about transgender people, it's perfectly appropriate to add:** Someone who feels as if their body is the wrong sex might call themselves *transgender.* Or if a boy or man isn't comfortable acting the way people think boys are supposed to act—or a girl or woman isn't comfortable being the way people expect girls to be—they might also call themselves *transgender*. These folks aren't necessarily gay or lesbian. Being gay and lesbian has to do with who you like romantically or sexually, who you get crushes on. Being transgender has to do with how masculine or feminine you feel or act when you're just being yourself.

I5. Most people have 2 sex chromosomes (XX if they're a girl and XY if they're a boy); some don't. Most girls have certain hormones that come from their ovaries and most boys have other hormones that come from their testicles. Girls also have some male hormones and boys also have some female hormones, just not as much as girls have. But there's a lot of diversity in people's bodies and they aren't all exactly the typical way you see in puberty videos. **EDUCATORS: If students ask about intersex people, it's perfectly appropriate to add:** If a person's body isn't exactly the way doctors expect a boy's body to be or the way they expect a girl's body to be—if their chromosomes or hormones or reproductive system are different—they might be what's called *intersex*.

In middle school, young teens *also* need to learn that

M1. Gay, lesbian and bi people usually want the same kinds of things in relationships that heterosexual people want. There's a stereotype that all they want from a partner is sex. Some do, of course, just like some straight people. But some gay, lesbian and bi teens have *never* had sex (with people of any gender). Your sexual orientation isn't what you do; it's how you feel. And anyone can choose to abstain.

M2. Gay men and lesbians are usually just as respectful of children and others as heterosexuals are. There's a stereotype that gay men molest children. That's nonsense. Most child molesters are heterosexual. Another stereotype is that gay people "recruit" or "come on to" heterosexuals. That's ridiculous. A person would just be setting themselves up for rejection if they flirted with someone who clearly wasn't interested.

M3. We don't know why some people are gay, lesbian or bisexual and others are heterosexual. Or why some of us are transgender and some are cisgender (comfortable within the range of typical gender expression). It may have something to do with a person's genes or their mom's hormones before they were born and it might be partly

developed after birth. But we know it's *not* whether they got abused or how they feel about their parents that causes a person to be gay or straight. And your parents' sexual orientations and gender identities have nothing to do with yours; if they're gay, that doesn't mean you necessarily will be.

M4. All people who have sex—no matter what sex or gender or sexual orientation they are—need to know how to make it safer. Everybody is capable of choosing to abstain and everybody who doesn't abstain can still reduce their risks. Gay and bisexual guys are more likely than average to ever have an HIV-positive partner, and that partner may not know that he's HIV-positive, so they need to be *especially* careful about prevention. The same is true for people with partners from harder hit parts of the world or who've ever used injection drugs.

M5. Some lesbian, gay, bi, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) people have made incredible contributions to this world. They've been scientists, diplomats, athletes, artists, soldiers and human rights activists. Some of the people in your history books were LGBTQ, but you never learned that about them either because of the prejudices of the people who wrote those books or because the person lived at a time when people didn't understand or talk about sexual diversity. **EDUCATORS: Find out more about LGBTQ role models at** LGBTHistoryMonth.com.

M6. There are LGBTQ people in all walks of life, of every race, rich and poor, old and young, all over the world. You know some, although you may not realize it if they don't happen to fit stereotypes or act out like the people on daytime talk shows. They're part of our schools, workplaces, families, communities of worship, sports teams, social service clubs etc. They've always been a part of your life.

In high school, teens *also* need to learn that

H1. Your *biological sex* is the way your body was made. Most people's bodies are male or female. Their chromosomes, their brains, their reproductive systems, their skeletons and their hormones are either male or female. But some people's bodies are different from the typical male or female; they're still male or female but they have important differences, too. They might have XXY chromosomes instead of the typical XX of a girl or XY of a boy. Or they might have been born with a reproductive system that looked different from other babies'. They're *intersex*; a doctor might say they had a "disorder of sexual development" or a DSD. Human sexuality is beautifully complex. Depending upon which sex differences you count, between 1 in 100 and 1 in 2,000 babies is born with a DSD.

H2. Your *gender identity* is who you feel as if you are on the *inside* (male, female, both, neither, flexible). Your *gender expression* has to do with how you act on the outside (how you walk, talk, sit, dress, etc … whether you're more masculine, feminine, some of both). Some folks call themselves *transgender* or *trans** because they were born biologically one sex, but emotionally another or because have just never really fit people's stereotypes about how boys or girls are supposed to act. People who identify as the *same* gender as their biological sex and who live comfortably *within* the range of "typical" for people of their sex (guys who are reasonably masculine, not necessarily pro athletes, but not especially feminine; girls who are reasonably feminine, not supermodels, but not especially masculine) are *cisgender.*

H3. Your *sexual orientation* has to do with whom you mostly find sexually and emotionally and romantically attractive (guys, girls or both). *Heterosexual* (straight) people like or fall in love mostly with people of a different gender—guys who like girls and vice versa. If a guy likes other guys best, he may call himself *gay***.** A girl who gets crushes mostly on other girls may consider herself *lesbian*. Somebody who could fall in love with a girl *or* a guy is *bisexual* or *bi*. It's not who you have sex with; it's who you think you'll want relationships with.

H4. Most experts say that you can't change your sexual orientation or gender identity through therapy. There's no proof that therapy can make a person's sexual *feelings* or feelings of *love* disappear or affect whether they feel like a boy or a girl on the inside. And therapy or religious programs that try to change people's gender identity or sexual orientation can be really harmful. Besides, many people wouldn't want to change those things about themselves.

…

H8. There are laws in the US and in some other countries that discriminate against LGBTQ individuals and families. According to a June 2009 report by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, homosexuality is a crime in more than 80 countries [though not in the United States]. In some places, that includes consenting sex between adults in the privacy of their own home … and in some places just attending a same-sex wedding. "In Nigeria, gay men presently face up to 14 years in jail if they live in the Christian areas of the country, and death by stoning in those parts of Nigeria that apply Sharia [Moslem] law. In Uganda in 2002, two lesbian women were arrested after having arranged a private engagement ceremony. They were not engaging in any sexual activity at the time of their arrest" (see www.iglhrc.org/cgi-bin/iowa/article/pressroom/iglhrcscommentaries/929.html).

H9. An LGBTQ equality and human rights movement has grown internationally since the 1950s. As with most social justice movements, youth have often led the way. See ways youth can work for change:

- American Civil Liberties Union: www.aclu.org/lgbt-rights
- Amplify Your Voice: amplifyyourvoice.org
- Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere: www.colage.org/programs/youth
- Gay Straight Alliance Network: www.gsanetwork.org
- International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission: www.iglhrc.org/cgi-bin/iowa/content/takeaction/index.html
- Lambda Legal: www.lambdalegal.org/publications/out-safe-respected
- National Gay & Lesbian Taskforce's Creating Change Conference: www.creatingchange.org
- Safe Schools Coalition: www.safeschoolscoalition.org/youth/activists.html
- Youth Resource: www.youthresource.com

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