

# Tips on Starting a GSA

Helpful information for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and straight high school students

**Why?** Gay/Straight Alliances, or GSA’s, are student-led and student-organized school clubs that aim to create a safe, welcoming, and accepting school environment for all youth, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. GSA’s provide a supportive environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students, as well as those who are perceived by others to be LGBT, are questioning their identity, have LGBT friends or family members, or just care about LGBT issues.

GSA’s help students work towards making schools safer for all students by providing support, educating others in their school about LGBT issues, and engaging in political activities like the national Day of Silence). GSA’s also allow LGBT and straight students to cooperatively address issues that affect all students, including harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Like any club, what a GSA does is up to its members, but it often includes things like pitching in on community service projects and getting together for social activities.

While school administrators sometimes balk at allowing students to start GSA’s, federal law guarantees that students at public high schools have the right to do so. Under the law, there are two types of clubs in public high schools: curricular clubs (those that relate directly to things that are taught in the school, like the Math Club), and non-curricular clubs (those that don’t relate directly to things that are taught in the school, such as the Key Club or Chess Club). The federal Equal Access Act says that if a public high school allows students to form any non-curricular clubs at all, then it must allow students to form any non-curricular club they want. The school also must treat all non-curricular clubs equally. If you're trying to start a GSA at your school and you encounter resistance, or if your school places limitations on what the GSA can do that it doesn’t place on other clubs, keep reading for tips on what to do.

**Starting a Gay/Straight Alliance**  
Here are the basic steps to starting a GSA at your school. Depending on where you live and what your school’s like, chances are you’ll be able to start your GSA with no problems – after all, thousands of GSA’s already exist across the United States. Sometimes, though, administrators, parents, or other students try to stand in the way of GSA’s. Just in case that happens at your school, we’re including information on how to handle opposition.

### 1. Know Your Justification for Starting a GSA

Some of the people you have to talk to along the way may ask you why you want to start a GSA. That’s not a bad question to ask yourself. Under the law, you don’t *have* to have a reason to start a non-curricular club, but it’s important to be able to rationally

explain your reasons for wanting a GSA to people who oppose you or just want to know more about what the club is all about. Is anti-gay harassment a problem at your school? Do LGBT students or allies who want a safe, supportive space where they can be themselves? Those are both really good reasons to start a GSA.

### 2. Find Out Your School’s Rules for Setting Up a Club

Starting a GSA is just like starting any other school club. Get a copy of your student handbook, and look up your school’s requirements for student organizations so that you can be sure to follow the rules carefully. Some of the things you may have to do are find a faculty advisor or write a constitution or mission statement. Be sure to do everything you’re supposed to do according to the school’s rules.

### 3. Find a Faculty Advisor or Sponsor

Almost all schools require that clubs have faculty advisors or sponsors. And even if your school doesn’t require one, it’s not a bad idea to have one. Ask a teacher (or – if your school allows them to be club advisors – a staff member like a counselor or librarian) who has shown herself or himself to be supportive of LGBT students to be the advisor or sponsor for your GSA. Your faculty advisor can help with things like writing a constitution and explaining why you want to start a GSA to others. Keep in mind that if your school isn’t very friendly to the idea of a GSA, some teachers who want to help may be more comfortable doing so in a more behind-the-scenes way.

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#### 4. Inform the Administration of Your Plans

Talk to your school principal or assistant principal and let him or her know that you plan to start a GSA. A supportive administrator can really help you move things along, and if he or she isn't supportive, then at least you'll know where he or she stands, which will help you figure out what to do next. If he or she says that a GSA won't be allowed, ask why so that you can prepare yourself to address his or her concerns, and tell him or her that preventing a GSA from forming is against the law under the federal Equal Access Act. You can take the time to respond to your administrator's arguments against forming a GSA in the next step.

#### 5. Prepare and Turn In Any Necessary Paperwork

Make sure you follow the rules thoroughly and correctly. This is a good time to address any concerns or arguments your administrator may have brought up earlier. If you anticipate problems with your application, you might want to get in contact with the ACLU now – we can offer suggestions and advice for how to prepare your application to form the club.

Keep dated copies of any forms or other paperwork you have to turn in for your club application, and keep notes on when and to whom you turned them in to as well as any conversations you have with school officials about starting the club. If your school gives you any trouble later on down the line about starting your GSA, then at least

they won't be able to say they're doing it because you didn't sign a required form or made some other mistake with your application.

#### 6. Start Meeting!

If your school turns you down, tells you that you need to change the name of your GSA, or tries to place restrictions on the GSA that it doesn't place on other clubs, you should contact the ACLU. We might be able to help!

#### 7. Common Arguments Against GSA's - and Why They're Wrong

*"We can't let our students have a club that's about sex."*

GSA's are *not* about sex. GSA's are about valuing all people regardless of whether they're gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, or questioning. GSA's are like any other club; they offer students with a common interest a chance to connect and give students a respite from the day-to-day grind of school. They're about creating a supportive space where students can be themselves without fear and making schools safer for all students by promoting respect for everyone. A GSA meeting is no more about sex than the homecoming dance or any other school-sponsored activity.

*"We can't let outsiders come in and start this kind of club in our school."*

GSA's aren't formed by outsiders. GSA's are student-led and student organized. While there are a couple of organizations that have tried to create contact lists or loose coalitions of the many GSA clubs across the country,

there is no big, evil national GSA conspiracy out there trying to get its hands on the youth of America. And according to the federal Equal Access Act, students can start any kind of non-curricular club at their schools that they want.

*"It's just too controversial."*

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

*"If we let students start a GSA, then we'd have to let students form any other kind of club they want. What if they wanted to start a KKK club?"*

If a club's purpose is to harass or intimidate other students, then the club is disruptive to the educational process and the school can stop it from forming – so this kind of argument just doesn't fly. Letting students start a GSA doesn't mean all those other crazy sorts of clubs principals say they're so scared of are going to actually materialize out of thin air. Have a lot of students been approaching your school about starting a KKK club? We really doubt it!

Got more questions? Do you need advice about getting your GSA started?

Has your school told you that you can't have a GSA, or is it treating your GSA differently from other clubs? Want someone to talk with about what you can do about it? Email us at [getequal@aclu.org](mailto:getequal@aclu.org)! It's confidential – we won't ever contact your school, your parents, your friends, or anyone else without your okay, and any communication between you and the ACLU is private.

