

Tips on Starting a GSA

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

Why?

Gay-Straight Alliances, or GSAs, 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. GSAs 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.

GSAs help make schools safer for all students by providing support, educating others in their school about LGBT issues, and engaging in awareness activities like the national Day of Silence. GSAs also allow LGBT and straight students to work together to take on issues that affect all students, including harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Research has shown that LGBT students hear fewer homophobic slurs, experience less harassment, have better attendance, and feel safer at schools that have GSAs. 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 GSAs, 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 – and it also has to treat all non-curricular clubs equally. If you're trying to start a GSA at your school and your administration tries to stop you, or if doesn't allow the GSA to do things that it lets other non-curricular clubs do, 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. Chances are you'll be able to start your GSA with no problems - after all, over 4,000 GSAs already exist in every state in the nation. Sometimes, though, administrators, parents, or other students try to stand in the way of GSAs. In case that happens at your school, we're including information on how to handle opposition.

1. Be Able to Explain Why You Want to Start 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 any 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 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. If it's not in the student handbook, ask an administrator, guidance counselor, or the faculty sponsor of an existing club what steps are required to start a club. 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

Most schools require that clubs have faculty advisors or sponsors. And even if your school doesn't require it, it's

not a bad idea to have one. Ask a teacher (or, if your school allows them to be club sponsors, 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 may be more comfortable helping in a more behind-the-scenes way.

4. Tell the Administration That You Want to Start a GSA

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 you stand, which

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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. Be respectful and don't get into a big fight about it – for now, just make note of what reasons he or she gives you. You can take the time to respond to your administrator's arguments against forming a GSA in the next step. See below for responses to some of the reasons school administrators say they won't allow a GSA.

5. Prepare and Turn In Any Necessary Paperwork

Make sure you follow the rules thoroughly and correctly. If you have to write a mission statement about your GSA, check out some examples from other GSAs around the U.S. 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 contact 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. Print out and keep copies of any emails you've exchanged with school officials about the GSA, too. If your school gives you any trouble later 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.

If the School Says No

If your school turns you down, tells

you that you have to change the name of your GSA or that it can't be focused on LGBT issues, tells you that students have to have parental permission to join the GSA when it doesn't require that for other clubs, or tries to tell you that the GSA can't do things that other clubs get to do like have a photo in the yearbook or make club announcements, you should contact the ACLU. We might be able to help!

If the School Says Yes...

6. Start Meeting!

Congratulations! Check out our library of resources on LGBT school issues at aclu.org/safeschools for links to materials that can help you come up with meeting topics and activities and more information on your rights.

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

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

GSAs are NOT about sex. GSAs are about valuing all people regardless of whether they're gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, or questioning. Like any other club GSAs 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. And several federal courts have ruled in favor of GSAs when schools have used this as an excuse to try to stop them from forming.

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

Outsiders don't form GSAs. GSAs are started and led by students. While there are a couple of organizations that have tried to create contact lists or loose coalitions of the over 4,000 GSA clubs.

across the country, GSAs aren't chapters of some larger organization. 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 it's illegal for schools to use that as an excuse to silence them. If other students, parents, or community members are in an uproar over a GSA, the school's responsibility is to address those people's concerns - not shut down a group that is peacefully doing its thing just because some people don't like it. Besides, when a GSA becomes a point of contention in a community, it really only proves the need for the GSA to exist in the first place. And again, several federal courts have ruled in favor of GSAs when schools have used this as an excuse to stop them from forming.

"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 some school say they're so scared of are going to 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? Contact us at aclu.org/safeschools!