

Gay-Straight Alliances

Promoting Student Resilience and Safer School Climates



BY V. PAUL POTEAT

Many students participate in a wide range of school- or community-based extracurricular programs. Although there is strong evidence such programs promote healthy development (e.g., 4-H, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Club),¹ programs that specifically serve sexual and gender minority students (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning [LGBTQ] students), and that address pressing issues affecting these students, have received far less attention than other programs. Yet LGBTQ students face enduring concerns at school.² Because of the potential for school-based extracurricular groups to shape school climate,

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address inequality, and affect student performance,³ there have been calls to identify programs and settings that may reduce discrimination against LGBTQ students, promote their well-being, and foster safe and affirming school environments.

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) show promise for accomplishing these goals. GSAs are school-based extracurricular groups that provide a setting for LGBTQ students and their peer allies to receive support, socialize with one another, learn about LGBTQ issues, and advocate for equity and justice in schools.⁴ As a result, GSAs aim not only to support their immediate members but also to improve the experiences of students within the whole school.⁵

As GSAs become increasingly present in middle and high schools across the United States,⁶ it is important to understand how they can be most effective. This article begins with an overview of GSAs and how they operate. Next, it reviews findings that show GSAs are tied to positive student outcomes, highlights some of the ways GSAs promote well-being, and offers suggestions for how they can benefit youth from many different backgrounds. It

then describes the roles and experiences of GSA advisors, as well as how they can support GSA members. The article concludes by noting how GSAs can partner with other school-based efforts to promote the well-being of LGBTQ students and contribute to better social and academic experiences for all students.

The Purpose of GSAs

GSAs and similar predecessor groups originated as extensions of out-of-school settings for LGBTQ youth beginning in the 1990s.⁷ This expansion was based on the recognition that LGBTQ students needed explicitly safe and supportive settings in their schools. Generally, they were started and led by school counselors or teachers and operated largely as groups in which LGBTQ students could receive social and emotional support.

Since that time, the aims and functions of GSAs have expanded and evolved to meet a growing range of student needs and interests. Now many of these alliances are typically youth-led, while adult advisors serve in a supportive role. Also, their efforts aim to benefit not only immediate members but also the larger school community.

Providing support for LGBTQ students continues to be one of GSAs' core functions. (To learn how a GSA supports students in one San Francisco high school, see pages 15 and 20.) This function remains crucial for several reasons: (a) much of the discrimination that LGBTQ youth experience occurs within schools,⁸ (b) GSAs may be one of the few school settings that explicitly support LGBTQ students, and (c) students may have limited access to LGBTQ-affirming settings outside of school, especially in communities where such settings do not exist at all.⁹

As with many extracurricular programs, GSAs enable students to socialize and make new friends. They may also provide students with LGBTQ-specific resources, such as referring them to supportive community agencies or hosting workshops on mental health and self-care.

Many GSAs now integrate advocacy efforts into their activities as well. These efforts seek to improve both the experiences of students who are not GSA members and the climate of the whole school. For example, GSAs may plan awareness-raising campaigns to draw attention to and counteract ongoing discrimination (e.g., Day of Silence or ThinkB4YouSpeak). Or they may focus on promoting inclusive school policies (e.g., specific anti-bullying policies that protect students on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity or expression, using gender-neutral graduation gowns, or adopting LGBTQ-inclusive curricula and library materials).

Youth program models and positive youth development models inform the various aims and functions of GSAs. These models highlight several qualities that are essential for programs to be effective:

- Providing a safe and structured environment for members,
- Providing opportunities to foster peer connection among members,
- Building upon individuals' strengths to promote self-confidence,
- Empowering members by offering opportunities to take on leadership roles, and
- Providing adult support and role modeling.¹⁰

GSAs embody these qualities in many of their functions—for example, providing a supportive setting for members and, for those that use the student-led and advisor-supported approach, allowing students to take on more leadership roles and greater ownership of their GSA.

As part of the continuing evolution of GSAs, some have begun to rebrand themselves as Gender-Sexuality Alliances to better convey their inclusive aspiration. More broadly, in recognition of the many intersecting sociocultural identities of students (e.g., LGBTQ students of color), more GSAs have tried to recognize how forms of oppression are interconnected. In doing so, they have worked to build coalitions with other groups to address multiple systems of oppression (e.g., racial, gender, or economic

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inequality).¹¹ Overall, in the past several decades of their existence, GSAs have evolved in order to respond to changes in the broader sociopolitical climate and in school policies and student populations, and to address emerging concerns that LGBTQ students face in their schools.

How GSAs Support Better Student Health and Educational Experiences

Students in schools with GSAs report lower mental and physical health concerns, greater overall well-being, less drug use, less truancy, and greater perceived school safety than students in schools without GSAs.¹² These findings now have been documented across a range of studies at local and national levels. Other studies have recorded feedback from GSA members who attribute instances of personal growth and empowerment, as well as a range of other positive experiences, to their GSA involvement.¹³

Notably, some research suggests that GSAs may also benefit those students who are not members. In one study, for example, members and nonmembers in schools with GSAs reported similar feelings of safety and levels of truancy, and both fared better than students in schools without GSAs.¹⁴ Such findings may speak to the advocacy efforts of GSAs to improve the experiences of all students in their schools. Collectively, the findings from these studies underscore the importance of GSAs in schools and show that their presence is tied to a range of factors that indicate better health and school-related experiences for all students.

What Makes GSAs Effective?

GSAs share a common mission, but they are not standardized programs. The members of each GSA largely determine its focus and how it will be run. For instance, GSAs vary in their emphasis on support and/or advocacy, the degree of structure to their meetings, and their leadership styles.¹⁵ By examining how GSAs differ along these and other dimensions, we can identify what practices and procedures might be most effective in promoting students' well-being.

Some GSAs still face varying degrees of hostility from teachers and administrators.

Research shows that students in GSAs that offer more support and engage in more advocacy report feeling greater self-esteem, an ability to accomplish goals, and an improved sense of purpose, agency, and empowerment.¹⁶ As such, it appears that both of these core GSA functions may be integral to how GSAs promote well-being among their members. Still, GSAs might want to consider not only the amount of support or advocacy they offer but also the sequence in which they offer them. Support and socializing opportunities may need to precede advocacy efforts, and then eventually both functions can happen simultaneously. For instance, socializing within the GSA may help build bonds among members, which ultimately will enable them to engage in larger advocacy efforts.

Open climates, in which students voice differing views respectfully and have a say in what is done in the group, have been examined extensively in the traditional classroom setting and are associated with a range of desired outcomes, such as greater civic engagement and social competence.¹⁷ This type of climate is also important within GSAs: those with more open climates have more actively engaged members than those with less open climates.¹⁸ It could be valuable for GSA members to discuss periodically how they perceive their group's climate and to identify ways to cultivate and maintain respectful dialogue and interaction.

In addition to the immediate GSA climate, the broader school climate may enhance or impede the GSA's ability to promote well-being among members. Although, on average, students in schools with GSAs report safer school climates than students in schools without GSAs,¹⁹ some GSAs still face varying degrees of hostility from teachers and administrators.²⁰ Indeed, school systems sometimes attempt to prohibit the formation of GSAs.²¹ Some politically and religiously conservative schools have tried to ban GSAs, using abstinence-only policies to justify their actions, or

have required parental notification of students' membership in GSAs, largely to discourage students from joining.²² GSA members in less supportive schools report lower levels of well-being than GSA members in more supportive schools.²³ Thus, we cannot expect GSAs to be the sole source of support or means to improve students' experiences in school. Rather, GSAs should be a part of broader efforts to ensure the visibility, protection, respect, and success of LGBTQ students.

Youth program models underscore how organizational structures are key to ensuring that GSAs are effective.²⁴ Of note, some students have expressed aversion to joining their school's GSA due to its perceived disorganization.²⁵ Research that has examined organizational structure within GSAs has found that organized GSAs (a) demonstrate agenda setting, (b) have a designated person who facilitates meetings, and (c) continually address issues by conducting check-ins at the beginning of meetings and following up on discussions from prior meetings.²⁶

Findings show that more structure is associated with greater member engagement to a point, after which greater structure relates to less engagement. Because GSAs attempt to provide a range of simultaneous services to members, some degree of structure may be necessary to coordinate these services and ensure their consistency and quality. The amount of structure, however, may need to vary so that it is neither too rigid to prevent unanticipated issues from being addressed nor inadequate for a necessary level of cohesion. As a result, adult advisors and youth leaders may want to check with members about how they perceive the structure within their GSA to find the right balance.

Research finds that structure can enhance the benefits of GSAs. Specifically, the connection between receiving support and feeling a greater sense of agency is even stronger for students who are members of GSAs with adequate structure.²⁷ Having a sufficient amount of structure may ensure that students with pressing concerns can be heard, given sufficient time to receive support, and given greater continuity of care. This same enhancing effect has been found for advocacy: engaging in more of it has an even stronger connection to a greater sense of agency among students in GSAs with adequate structure. Advocacy efforts in GSAs often require coordination among many students and can take multiple meetings to plan. Sufficient structure may ensure the sustainability of members' efforts. It seems, then, that organizational structure might magnify the extent to which certain GSA functions (e.g., support or advocacy) promote members' well-being.

Finally, leadership roles vary across GSAs.²⁸ In some, several students serve as elected officers (e.g., a GSA president or treasurer); in others, leadership responsibilities are distributed across members according to specific tasks throughout the year. Also, different kinds of leadership exist within GSAs, such as organizational leadership (e.g., taking the lead on planning an event) and relational leadership (e.g., being the first to give emotional support to another member). We need to give greater attention to leadership styles in GSAs because an important part of youth programs is placing youth in leadership roles.²⁹

Do GSAs Benefit Some Students More Than Others?

GSAs face a formidable challenge: how to flexibly meet a range of needs and interests of students from diverse backgrounds

to promote their well-being. Although the focus of GSAs centers on sexual orientation and gender identity, members also come with experiences shaped by their other sociocultural identities (e.g., their ethnicity, race, religion, or social class). In addition, members differ from one another in why they join and how they participate. Unfortunately, because most studies have treated GSA members as a homogenous group, limited attention has been paid to the variability of students' experiences in GSAs or to whether GSAs benefit some students more than others.

Although scholars have called for greater attention to the experiences of youth of color within youth programs,³⁰ there is a dearth of research to indicate whether GSAs equally benefit students of color—of any gender identity or sexual orientation—and white students. Of the research that has been conducted, one study found that students of color perceived less support from their GSA than white students.³¹ GSAs must respond to the needs, strengths, and experiences of all students, including their members who are students of color. Doing so can help ensure that a GSA is inclusive, welcoming, and working toward the aspirational goal of addressing multiple systems of oppression.

While GSAs provide a range of opportunities for student members (i.e., supporting their peers, socializing with them, taking advantage of educational resources, and engaging in advocacy opportunities), members vary in their reasons for joining. Many members join to receive support (a core function of GSAs), while others join for more specific goals or out of self-interest (e.g., to place their membership on college applications). Given the many issues that GSAs seek to address within a limited amount of time—often a 30-minute to one-hour meeting per week—they may strain to adequately meet the needs of all students.

Some members may benefit more from their GSA involvement than others, depending on how well their own needs or interests align with what their GSA happens to offer. For example, students who joined because they wanted emotional support may benefit less from their involvement than members who joined for advocacy reasons, if their GSA emphasizes advocacy. This dynamic speaks to the importance of person-environment fit; a match of individual needs with environmental provisions produces better outcomes.³² As such, GSAs should conduct periodic needs assessments among members in order to identify the range of needs or interests represented within the group, and to determine the optimal amount of time or resources to devote to meeting them.

As for the demographics of GSA members, heterosexual students are a sizable constituency within many GSAs. Indeed, the membership of heterosexual allies within GSAs is one of their unique features. Often, heterosexual students join GSAs to learn more about LGBTQ issues, advocate for human rights, socialize with peers who are already GSA members, and support LGBTQ individuals.³³

Beyond their initial motivations for joining, several factors characterize heterosexual members who stay engaged in their GSA. For instance, heterosexual members who report having more positive feelings after attending their first several GSA meetings report greater ongoing active engagement in their GSA than others.³⁴ When they experience a welcoming reception

during these first meetings, they may feel more invested in the group and have a greater sense of belonging. Initially feeling welcomed by the GSA may be particularly important for heterosexual students, who may be cautious in joining a club they might perceive as primarily for sexual minority students. To meet the needs and interests of heterosexual members, GSAs might consider asking for their feedback to ensure they feel included.

The Important Roles of GSA Advisors

GSA advisors play a major role in supporting students. The youth mentoring literature shows a clear connection between the presence of supportive adult role models and healthy youth development.³⁵ A GSA advisor may be one of just a few affirming adults in a school who is accessible to LGBTQ youth. In addition, advisors can link students to larger community networks and also advocate for these students among other educators or administrators.³⁶ Advisors thus have much to offer students and can have a substantial impact on students' experiences within the GSA and their overall well-being.

Many advisors have noted their desire to support LGBTQ students as a strong motivation for becoming a GSA advisor, while others have pointed to their personal connections with

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LGBTQ individuals.³⁷ In addition to fulfilling a general advisory role during GSA meetings, advisors also support students when they experience parental rejection, relationship concerns, bullying, or mental health issues. They also provide students with referrals to other LGBTQ-affirming agencies; respond to acts of discrimination in the school; serve as a consultant to other teachers, staff, and administrators around LGBTQ issues; and plan and coordinate out-of-school events.³⁸

Heterosexual students are a sizable constituency within many GSAs.



Some advisors have noted barriers to their work—for example, administrator hostility to their GSA.³⁹ Often, they must handle the challenges of securing adequate resources for GSA activities as well as permission and funding to attend out-of-school events (e.g., student conferences). Furthermore, many advisors are not provided with formal training for their position.⁴⁰ Given that educators serve increasingly diverse racial and ethnic populations, with a growing number of students from different backgrounds, it is crucial that GSA advisors have access to training and adequate support.⁴¹ The convergence and concentration of diversity within GSAs requires advisors to be competent across many forms of diversity (e.g., race or ethnicity,

gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, or social class). Yet they may have few training opportunities to build their efficacy in providing culturally informed support for students whose identities and experiences may differ from their own.

Beyond advisors' one-on-one interactions with students, their knowledge and sense of efficacy around multiple forms of diversity could be important in their support of the GSA as a whole.⁴² While the primary focus of GSAs is on sexual orientation and gender, they also aim to address other forms of oppression.⁴³ Advisors should be able to support and guide students with regard to such issues as racial, economic, or religious discrimination as they intersect with sexual orientation or gender.

The power-sharing dynamics between advisors and student members can vary considerably across GSAs.⁴⁴ Some GSAs reflect more of a “top-down” and hierarchical decision-making process driven largely by advisors. For instance, advisors may choose the topic or issue they will discuss at a given meeting and may play a greater role in facilitating these discussions. In contrast, other GSAs reflect a horizontal power-sharing and decision-making process with more balance between advisors and students.

We have found that students who perceive having more control in decision making within their GSA and, notably, whose GSA advisors perceive that they themselves have more control in decision making, report the highest levels of well-being.⁴⁵ Although these are conflicting perceptions of who is in control, this finding may reflect the complexity in how students and advisors negotiate their roles in making GSA-related decisions and in ensuring the success of their GSA. Because it can be difficult for advisors and students to balance power and distribute responsibilities, GSAs (like other student groups) should allot sufficient time for advisors and students to engage in these conversations so that everyone feels responsible for the success of their GSA.

Although GSAs are uniquely positioned to promote the safety, well-being, and success of students across various sexual orientation and gender identities, it would be unreasonable to expect them to be the single way to address the many ongoing concerns faced by LGBTQ students in schools. Ideally, GSAs should be supported with additional efforts linked to safer school climates and student well-being, such as adopting antibullying policies that specify protection on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity or expression, ensuring the representation of LGBTQ individuals and issues within standard course curricula,* implementing complementary schoolwide programming (e.g., social-emotional learning programs), and hosting in-service trainings for teachers and staff on LGBTQ-related issues.† Taking on this larger constellation of approaches could positively affect students and schools.⁴⁶

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*In July 2016, the California State Board of Education voted on a new history/social science framework that includes the study of LGBTQ Americans and their contributions to this country. The vote makes California the first state in the nation to include LGBTQ history in public schools. For more on this vote, see www.lat.ms/29AFNP4.

†At its biennial convention in July 2016, the American Federation of Teachers passed a resolution in support of LGBTQ students and staff. To read the resolution, visit <http://go.aft.org/AE416link1>.

Gay-Straight Alliances

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Several large organizations, such as the Genders & Sexualities Alliance Network (www.gsanetwork.org) and GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, www.glsen.org), offer free materials for GSA advisors and students for establishing and sustaining a GSA. These materials offer a range of ideas for activities that can foster support and connection among members and address important LGBTQ-related issues. They also provide strategies for overcoming common challenges faced by GSAs.

As the number of GSAs continues to increase in schools that are geographically, socioeconomically, and culturally diverse, greater investment in them is required to ensure they can meet a growing range of students' needs. Alongside this investment, ongoing research must document how GSAs promote healthy outcomes for students. Together, research-based recommendations for best practices, institutional resources and support, and the dedicated efforts of educators who work with GSAs will all serve to maximize the benefits of these groups for the students and schools they serve. □

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