



# Why Should Your School Have A GSA?

## What is a GSA?

A Genders and Sexualities Alliance, or a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), is a student-run organization, typically in a high school or middle school, which provides a safe place for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, two-spirit (LGBTQ2S+) students, including individuals who are perceived to be LGBTQ2S+, and allies, to meet, socialize, explore hobbies/interests, talk about issues that are meaningful to the GSA, and provide support to LGBTQ2S+ youth through education and advocacy.

## What are the positive impacts of having GSAs in schools?

Schools provide students with opportunities to develop many important relationships, including those with friends, peers, teachers, and other members of the school community. Many students experience academic difficulties and mental health challenges when they do not feel safe or supported at school. Educational professionals have a responsibility to create welcoming, caring, respectful, equitable and safe

learning environments for all students, including those members of LGBTQ2S+ communities. GSAs are an effective and proven way to create positive and inclusive school climates for all students, and contribute to student learning, achievement, and well-being.

## Greater School Attachment and Connectedness

Heterosexual students report higher levels of school connectedness – the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals – and are less likely to skip class than their LGBTQ2S+ peers. For trans youth in particular, school connectedness has a significant positive impact on mental health. GSAs serve to enhance school connectedness, and encourage participation in the school community.

## Increased Safety and Decreased Incidents of Bullying

- All students who attend schools with GSAs report feeling safer, hearing fewer homophobic/transphobic remarks, experiencing less bullying and harassment, and trusting that adult members of the school community will intervene appropriately against bullying behaviours.

## Improved Mental Health and Student Well-Being

- GSAs significantly improve psychosocial well-being and self-esteem for LGBTQ2S+ youth, and help to foster an accepting, inclusive school climate. GSAs also work to decrease feelings of depression and despair for many youth who identify as LGBTQ2S+, which helps to reduce suicide ideation and attempts for these students.

LGBTQ2S+



## Higher Self-Esteem and Positive Identity Development

- GSA membership is associated with greater comfort with one's sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and overall positive identity development. GSAs create a space where students can feel affirmed by their peers and supported by a welcoming, caring, respectful, safe, and inclusive school culture.

## Improved Work Ethic & School Attendance

- Being a member of a GSA is associated with increased attendance and school achievement for LGBTQ2S+ youth, with trans youth especially reporting improved grades. By improving social connectedness, GSAs decrease the risk for LGBTQ2S+ youth to drop out of school or miss classes due to fear of bullying and harassment.

## Increased Sense of Empowerment, Pride, and Hope

- GSAs provide opportunities for LGBTQ2S+ students and allies to develop advocacy and leadership skills through different types of activities. LGBTQ2S+ students are motivated and empowered when they have a voice, feel part of a group, and are encouraged to enhance the rights of LGBTQ2S+ people in their communities.

- Challenging Heteronormativity and Increasing Visibility of LGBTQ2S+ Identities
- One powerful benefit of GSAs is the increased representation of visible LGBTQ2S+ identities and acceptance within the school. This visibility can help challenge dominant, and often stereotypical, sexual and gender norms. Through education and awareness, GSAs can create spaces for the celebration of diversity and varying experiences and expressions of identity within their schools.

## Building Positive Relationships

- GSAs provide safe spaces for students to develop positive relationships with both peers and school staff. When students can connect with peers experiencing similar issues, special bonds are created. Students may share, and support each other through, experiences like coming out to their families, exploring relationships and identities, and finding supportive friends and mentors.

## Addressing Sexism and Gender Stereotyping of All Students

- GSAs challenge stereotypes that hurt students of all genders, sexes, and sexual and romantic orientations. Remarks such as "You throw like a girl", "Boys don't cry", and "That's so gay" are often used to put people into rigid "gender boxes" that are demeaning to women and discourage men from exploring or expressing less stereotypical parts of their personalities. Gender oppression creates a significant boundary that inhibits all students from fully engaging and thriving in their schools. Sexism and gender stereotyping diminish feelings of safety, comfort, and support for all students – not just those who identify as LGBTQ2S+.

## Supporting Diverse Student Identities

- In addition to homophobic or transphobic bullying, students may experience discrimination or harassment based on race, ethnic or cultural origin, indigeneity, religion, family income, and physical and mental abilities. When these identities overlap or intersect for students, they may experience discrimination on multiple levels. GSAs can attempt to support their members in coping with their experiences by decreasing isolation and marginalization.



LGBTQ2S+