

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.

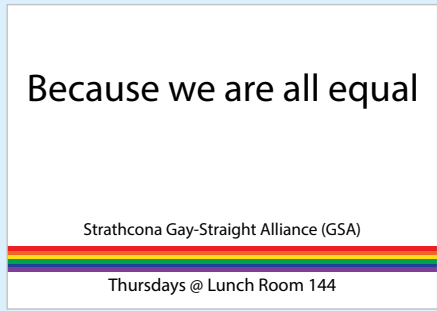
Administrators serve as important liaisons between students, teachers, parents, school boards and the larger community—be sure to include them in your planning. Encourage your school administrators to read this booklet and visit the ATA's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity webpage (www.teachers.ab.ca > 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!