

# Frequently Asked Questions About GSAs or QSAs

This section features frequently asked questions from teachers, administrators, counsellors, students and parents about GSAs or QSAs and LGBTQ educational issues. The answers and suggestions provided are not meant to offer a comprehensive analysis; rather, they are meant to stimulate dialogue, develop critical thinking and provide individuals with a broad range of possible responses to address many of the questions and concerns that arise as they begin to build an inclusive school environment.

## **My administrator/school council/school board does not support the establishment of a GSA or QSA. What can I do?**

Alberta's *School Act* section 16.1 (2) provides for the establishment of a voluntary student organization or activities intended to promote equality and nondiscrimination with respect to, without limitation, race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, physical disability, mental disability, family status, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, including but not limited to gay–straight alliances, diversity clubs and antibullying clubs. The *School Act* requires that principals shall permit the establishment of these student organizations. The *School Act* section 16.1 (3) also states that students shall select a respectful and inclusive name for the organization, such as Gay–Straight Alliance or Queer–Straight Alliance, after consulting with the principal. The establishment of GSAs or QSAs by students is therefore supported in provincial legislation. Please contact ATA Member Services at 1-800-232-7208 for further advice if your administrator, school council or school board are unsupportive.

## **We don't have any sexual and gender minority students in our school. Do we need a GSA?**

Sexual and gender minority students are in every school, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic class and society in the world. Many LGBTQ students simply choose not to make themselves visible when they perceive their school or family environment as a hostile or unwelcoming space. Current research indicates that between 2 and 10 per cent of individuals in North American society are nonheterosexual. In Canada, a recent demographic survey of more than 105,000 junior and senior high school students, conducted by the Toronto District School Board, found that 8 per cent of students in Grades 9 to 12 identified as nonheterosexual or questioning their orientation. Additionally, adolescent-health research indicates that the average age of coming out is now 15 or 16 ([www.phac-aspc.gc.ca](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca) 2014). These research findings illustrate how the issues of sexual orientation and gender identity are relevant in Alberta schools.

Sexual orientation is determined by numerous factors including hormonal, genetic and environmental influence. Importantly, research suggests that poor parenting, sexual abuse and other adverse life events do not influence sexual orientation (Public Health Agency of Canada 2014).

## **Do GSAs or QSAs try to convert heterosexual students to an LGBTQ lifestyle?**

No. A student's sexual orientation or gender identity is not a lifestyle choice. Sexual orientation is usually established at a very early stage in a child's developmental process. Some students report knowing that they were different from others as early as age five or six. Other students state that they did not become aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity until they were much older. Importantly, a person's sexual orientation is not simply an either/or, binary choice. Research findings and historical literature indicate that human sexuality and expressions of gender can most

accurately be understood as operating along a broad continuum that ranges from an individual identifying as exclusively heterosexual to exclusively nonheterosexual, or masculine to gender queer to feminine. The exact determinants of what makes someone self-identify as heterosexual or nonheterosexual are not yet completely understood. However, contemporary research suggests that a person's sexual orientation is most likely *not* simply determined by any one single factor or influence but, instead, is determined by numerous factors including hormonal, genetic and environmental influence. Importantly, research suggests that poor parenting, sexual abuse and other adverse life events do not influence sexual orientation (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca 2014). In 1973, the American Psychological Association reclassified homosexuality from a mental disorder to a form of normal sexual orientation and identity expression. Counselling or educational practices that suggest that a student's sexual orientation can be changed or "cured" through the use of reparative or other such conversion therapies have been denounced by the American and Canadian psychological associations, as well as by many teachers' organizations across Canada, as a serious breach of a member's ethical conduct and professional responsibilities. Recently, the Government of Ontario declared attempts to cure, fix or change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity illegal.

## **Will people assume that I am also LGBTQ if I am involved as a teacher-sponsor with the GSA or QSA?**

Maybe. Some people might think that only LGBTQ persons will promote equal rights for sexual or gender minority people. This is a common fallacy. Were African-Americans and African-Canadians the only persons involved in the civil rights movement? Did women work for equality without the support of men? Sexual or gender minority issues and concerns are first and foremost a civil and human rights issue and, as such, need to be addressed and supported by *all* teachers and school administrators.

## **How can I support LGBTQ students from an immigrant population that may not be inclusive or welcoming to sexual or gender minorities?**

Due to religious and/or societal norms, the countries of origin for some students may not be accepting of sexual or gender minorities. Students from these countries may be at an increased

risk for feeling isolated by their families and communities. As in all circumstances, it is important to protect the students' confidentiality unless they are at physical or psychological risk. Try to connect with your district's intercultural consultants for support and ensure that the language used in the GSA is welcoming for everyone.

## **Why would straight students want to become a member or be involved with a GSA or QSA?**

Some students and teachers may feel that it is important for a GSA or QSA to be an LGBTQ-only space. After all, every other space in school is designed for heterosexual students! Rather than exclude straight-identified students, though, perhaps the focus should be on the more important issue: Why do straight students want to be a part of a GSA? (Mayo 2004). There are a variety of responses to this question. Some students have LGBTQ parents, friends or family members. Others might be interested in joining a GSA or QSA simply because they are tired of the social pressures of trying to fit in. In many ways a GSA is one of the few sanctioned school spaces where students can openly question understandings of sexuality, challenge gender roles and expectations, and feel safe and valued for their differences. GSAs or QSAs don't force people to find their place in the mainstream. Instead, they are spaces that encourage students to actively question the value of rigid codes of identity and gender expression. Once students begin to ask these and other critical questions, heterosexism, classism, racism and other forms of unearned privilege quickly surface as important issues for discussion. By engaging in discussions that link multiple isms, new and powerful allies are created in the process of people simply getting to know one another. Research supports the power and potential impact of alliances by demonstrating what we already know to be true: simply getting to know an LGBTQ person is one of the most significant ways to reduce discrimination and prejudice. Without the active participation of straight-identified students, important opportunities for individual learning and alliance building are lost.

## **I am a supportive ally. How do I support students in starting a GSA or QSA in my school?**

One of the first and most important steps in creating allies is to begin educating yourself, the school administration and other school staff members about the significant health and safety needs of sexual and gender minority students. This important awareness building can occur in a variety of ways that range from simple strategies, such as watching educational videos from the National Film Board, to reading information on the ATA's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity webpage ([www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca)). Alternatively, a more encompassing approach might be to consider asking your administration to book one of the ATA's professional development workshops on sexual orientation and gender identity for the school staff. See page 49 of this handbook for a description of the ATA's workshop.

GSAs or QSAs have been most successfully embraced and supported in schools that have built a strong and vibrant human rights culture. These GSAs or QSAs demonstrate how supporting LGBTQ students and their families is an important extension of the school's human rights work. Allied teachers who believe in social justice initiatives can help interested students develop a proposal to create their own GSA. Clearly defining the GSA's mission, philosophy and goals

in that proposal can highlight the importance of addressing student health and safety needs and concerns as the core mandate of the GSA. Successful GSA proposals also emphasize how the school's GSA will serve as an important educational vehicle for all students, school staff and parents to learn about and appreciate diversity as one of the school's greatest strengths.

Below is one conceptual model that can help you begin to build an inclusive and supportive human rights culture in your school.

**Awareness** You can begin to build awareness in your school by improving your school's library resources, using and modelling inclusive language in your classroom and challenging misconceptions and stereotypes about LGBTQ people. One powerful way to build awareness and an atmosphere of respect is to seize upon the teachable moment when it arises in your classroom. For example, when a student calls another student a "fag" or "dyke," use this opportunity to talk about the inappropriateness of derogatory remarks and the history behind such words.

**FYrefly in Schools** is a program that engages a unique peer-to-peer educational model to deliver participatory workshops led by experienced facilitators to develop awareness of the lived realities of LGBTQ youth. It is offered free to junior and senior high schools and community groups in Edmonton and Calgary. For more information, go to [www.fyrefly.ualberta.ca/fyreflyinschools](http://www.fyrefly.ualberta.ca/fyreflyinschools).

**Training** To help educate your students about sexual orientation and gender identity, consider bringing in local youth or adult guest speakers to your classroom or school. Encourage your colleagues to attend LGBTQ sessions at teachers' conventions and conferences. Approach your school administration and ask them to consider making LGBTQ educational issues a schoolwide professional development goal.

**Support** Develop a human rights culture in your school and work with your school council and administration to create communities of support for sexual and gender minority and allied students, teachers and same-gender parented families. Remember that it is also vitally important to provide support for the teacher advisors of GSAs or QSAs as well as for the students. It is always important to reaffirm that GSAs or QSAs are confidential and supportive spaces for all students and teachers regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Emphasize that you don't have to be a sexual and gender minority person to facilitate or support a GSA. In fact, allied teachers or teachers who are committed to social justice educational initiatives are often in the best position to demonstrate that sexual orientation and gender identity issues are important educational issues that should be addressed by everyone, including heterosexual teachers, administrators, counsellors, parents and students.