

Is a public school legally required to allow a GSA?

The Federal Equal Access Act mandates that if a public high school allows any student group whose purpose is not directly related to the curriculum to meet on school grounds during lunch or after school, it may not deny other student groups access to the school because of the content of the groups' proposed discussions. Schools may not pick and choose among clubs based on their particular preferences for what students discuss. Simply put, all non-curricular clubs must be treated equally.

For more information about your legal rights, please visit: www.studentprideUSA.org and www.aclu.org/safeschools.

How does a GSA create a safer school?

GSAs create safer schools through education, by providing opportunities for school communities to learn accurate information about LGBT people, and by giving students a greater understanding of how diversity enriches their lives. GSAs help educate students throughout the school, creating a climate of acceptance and understanding. Additionally, GSAs provide youth with a safe space to talk about real issues that affect them day to day without fearing harassment, discrimination or bias. GSAs help ensure that a school community is a safe and supportive environment for all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, thereby fulfilling the school's legal and moral responsibility to provide an equitable learning environment for all individuals.

This guide was developed to help answer some of the most commonly asked questions about gay-straight alliances (GSAs). Since the first GSA formed in 1989, similar groups have started in more than 1,000 schools across the United States. Nearly 20,000 students are directly involved in GSA activities each year. Through such groups, students have learned the qualities of respect and equality, while taking leadership roles and responsibilities of leading a school club.

For more information, please contact:

ACLU - American Civil Liberties Union

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GLSEN - Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network

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What is a gay-straight alliance (GSA)?

A GSA is a student-led and student-organized school club that aims to create a safe, welcoming and accepting school environment for all youth, regardless of sexual orientation or gender-identity/expression. GSAs provide a supportive environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students, as well as those who are perceived as LGBT, questioning of their identity, and children of LGBT families. Additionally, such clubs allow LGBT and straight students to cooperatively address issues that affect all students, including harassment, discrimination and bias based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. It's important to remember that anti-LGBT harassment doesn't hurt only LGBT-identified students, but all students. Quite often, students who are perceived to be LGBT also face harassment, discrimination and bias. GSAs help students build coalitions and supportive school communities towards making safer schools for all students.

Why the name "gay-straight alliance"?

The term "gay-straight alliance" exemplifies the purpose of the club: to build bridges among students of all sexual orientations and gender identities — whether they identify as gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, transgender or anything else. The term also emphasizes the clubs' efforts to acknowledge and embrace the differences and similarities among all involved. While GSA is the most common club name chosen by students working on these issues, others include Pride Alliance, Straight-Gay Alliance and Spectrum. The club's name is completely dependent on what the students want, and what they feel adequately defines their purpose.

"To the extent that the Board opens up its school facilities to *any* noncurriculum related group, it must open its facilities to *all* student groups."

-U.S. District Court Judge David O. Carter

Why does the word "gay" need to be in the club name?

The name reflects the clubs' work. Many students feel that masking their purpose behind a more neutral-sounding name would be giving in to the very anti-LGBT prejudice they came together to address. The administration of El Modena High School in Orange County, California, tried to tell the students in a GSA that they could meet, but they had to use another name. United States District Judge David Carter understood that the title was essential to the message of the club. He forbade the school from changing it because a name change would "clearly infringe on profound expressive meaning that the group attaches to its name."

Who gets involved in a GSA?

A GSA should be open to any student who feels that harassment or discrimination against LGBT people, their friends, allies or families is wrong. Many youth have seen the effects of harassment, either among their friends, family members, parents or themselves, and want to do something about it. This is what a GSA is for.

How common are GSAs?

GSAs exist in public, private and parochial high schools and middle schools, ranging in student populations from 300 to 3,000. It is estimated that over 1,000 GSAs have formed throughout the United States in the last 10 years, and hundreds of youth are working to form new groups each year in large cities and small towns.

Does a GSA stir up controversy and attention?

The majority of GSAs have started without any controversy or unwanted attention. Controversy usually results only if a school's administration or board attempts to stop the group from forming. When that happens, students turn to community or legal support, which raises the profile of the club and typically results in the school being forced by law to recognize it. That is exactly what happened recently in Orange County, California, and Salt Lake City, Utah, when school officials tried to stop GSAs from meeting.

Are GSAs about sex?

No. The purpose of a GSA is not to discuss sex. Most GSAs discuss the lives of LGBT youth and their friends, as well as the harassment, discrimination and bias these youth too commonly face in schools. GSAs also often discuss and teach about LGBT history and provide youth with opportunities to develop leadership skills.