A Guide to Starting and Supporting a GSA

This document was produced through the Centre for School Mental Health (CSMH), Faculty of Education, Western University, as a supplementary resource for those advising Gender and Sexuality Alliances/Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) and/or those facilitating the Healthy Relationships Program (HRP) for Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual (2S/LGBTQIA+) Youth. This document is intended to help educators, administrators, and youth workers better support sexual, gender, romantic, and sex characteristic minorities by introducing them to relevant:
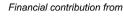
1) *Research*;

2) *Legislation, Policy, and Guidelines*; and

3) *Procedures and Practices*

Websites:

HRP for 2S/LGBTQIA+ Youth

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Research on the Experiences of 2S/LGBTQIA+ Youth

2S/LGBTQIA+ youth experience disproportionately negative outcomes compared to their heterosexual and/or cisgender peers in a range of domains, including mental health, substance use, and violence. The *heightened risk experienced by these youth is largely a function of the discrimination and minority stress* that they face. The statistics below illustrate the urgent need for educational stakeholders and community partners to cultivate 2S/LGBTQIA+ affirming learning and social environments.

2SLGBTQ Students' Experiences in and Teachers' Perspectives on Schooling
*Data taken from Egale Canada final reports, which are referenced on the next page

CH – Cisgender Heterosexual, **GBQ** – Gay, Bisexual, Queer, **LGBQ** – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer

Students		Educators
64% of students reported hearing homophobic comments daily or weekly at school		**51.1%** of educators reported that they challenged homophobia
35% of students who attend Catholic schools reported experiencing harassment based on their perceived sexual orientation		
79% of trans students who had been victims of physical harassment reported that teachers and staff were ineffective in addressing transphobic harassment		**18.3%** of educators reported that they challenged transphobia
2S/LGBTQ students	**CH students**	**Educators**
62% felt unsafe at school	**11%** felt unsafe at school	**97.1%** considered their schools to be safe
30% had been the victims of cyberbullying	**8%** had been the victims of cyberbullying	Large-scale Canadian climate research has found that GSAs help foster more positive learning environments for queer and trans students
20% of GBQ boys **20%** of LGBQ girls and **40%** of trans students reported languishing mental health	**11%** reported languishing mental health	

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commentary

Egale Canada: Still in Every Class in Every School:
https://indd.adobe.com/view/3836f91b-2db1-405b-80cc-b683cc863907

Egale Canada: Every Teacher Project:
https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/rise/docs/every-teacher-project-final-report.pdf

Canadian Mental Health Association: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans & Queer Identified People and Mental Health:
https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/lesbian-gay-bisexual-trans-queer-identified-people-and-mental-health/

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Federal and Provincial/Territorial 2S/LGBTQIA+ Rights and Protections

Since 1996, the Canadian Human Rights Act has included sexual orientation as one of the prohibited grounds of discrimination (i.e., section 2).

Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that every individual must be considered equal under and before the law. Although this section does not specifically mention "sexual orientation," in the case of Egan vs. Canada (1995) the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that Section 15 prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation as well.

Sexual orientation, since 1998 - as a result of *Vriend vs. Alberta*, and **gender identity**, as of 2017 - due to Bill C-16, are protected human rights at federal, and provincial and territorial legislative levels. **Gender expression** is an enumerated protection in all provinces and territories, apart from Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

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Sample GSA Legislation, Policy, and Guidelines

Ontario: Students' right to start a student club under the name "gay-straight alliance" is protected under Bill 13, Accepting Schools Act, 2012.

Location**:** [Education Act; Part XIII Behaviour, Discipline and Safety; Board support for certain pupil activities and organizations – 303.1 (1,2,3,4,5).](#)

Alberta: Students' right to start a student club, such as a GSA, was enshrined in 2015 through Bill 10. Bill 24 addresses limits to Bill 10 by making it clear that students can start a club under the name "gay-straight alliance". Amendments to this legislation, through Bill 8, in 2019, removed legal protections in the Education Act prohibiting teachers from notifying a parent/guardian/caregiver of a student of a student's participation in a GSA. Since the passing of Bill 8, the Ministry of Education has made it clear that the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (for public schools) and the *Personal Protection Act* (for private schools) would protect students' rights to not have their participation in a GSA disclosed to anyone unless there is a risk to the students' safety.

Location: [Education Act, Division 2 Student Discipline; Bullying Awareness and Non-Discrimination; 35.1(1)](#)
[Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act; Disclosure of personal information 40(1)gg](#)
[Alberta Government: Gay-straight alliances](#)

Northwest Territories: Currently, legislation to support the formation and functioning of GSAs is absent in the Education Act. As of 2020, "Guidelines for Ensuring LGBTQ2S+ Equity, Safety and Inclusion in NWT Schools" may assist educators' implement promising practices with LGBTQ2S+ students and staff.

Location**:** [Guidelines for Ensuring LGBTQ2S+ Equity, Safety and Inclusion in NWT Schools.](#)

New Brunswick: [Policy 713](#) details the minimum requirements for creating safe, welcoming, inclusive, and affirming school environments for 2S/LGBTQIA+ students. It has recently been revised to roll back trans and non-binary protections for students under the age of 16.

Founding and Forming a GSA

What	Why	How
Know 2S/LGBTQIA+ rights	Knowing and understanding 2S/LGBTQIA+ rights in and beyond school is the first step towards enacting those rights. Sharing human rights information with community members may help others understand their rights and responsibilities.	Understand federal and provincial/territorial human rights, education acts, education policies and/or guidelines.
Look for GSAs within your school district or province/ territory.	Various GSAs may experience similar challenges. Having and drawing on a local network may help with trouble shooting.	Reach out to other schools with GSAs, and/or consult with local pride organizations or online GSA networks.
Know your justification for starting a GSA.	Educational stakeholders may have questions about the purpose and activities of a GSA.	Prepare a simple response that describes the club's purpose (e.g., socializing, support, education, and/or advocacy).
Emphasize student handbook and school-specific policies.	Administrators may attempt to stifle the start of a GSA (e.g., ask you to complete and submit forms other clubs do not have to or delay responses to written requests and submissions, etc.).	Prepare all paperwork necessary for student clubs. Keep copies of all paperwork, and a record of who you have submitted these documents to and when you did so.
Meet with the principal and/or relevant administrators	Administrative support can make this process smoother and allow school leadership teams to learn and participate.	Hold an in-person or virtual meeting with relevant administrators to communicate your plan and answer any reasonable questions. If they are hesitant, refer administrators to relevant legislation and similar initiatives. Be prepared to move up the educational ladder if necessary.
Look for additional support staff and/or student leaders	Developing and/or running a GSA without assistance may involve a lot of time and emotional energy.	Delegate appropriate responsibilities to additional support staff and/or student leaders.
Review parent(s)/ guardian(s)/ caregivers(s) consent policies	Some GSA members may not be out at home or school. Revealing that a student is involved in a GSA may jeopardize their emotional/physical safety/ and/or relationships.	Plan GSAs activities according to student club consent guidelines so that students are not required to disclose their participation in a GSA if it is unsafe to do so.

Starting and Running a GSA

What	Why	How
Advertise	Strategies for advertising a GSA may need to change depending on the staff/student/community/ social climate.	Options for advertising range from using posters and (online) announcements to disseminating GSA advisor contact information so students and staff can learn more about the club. You can also raise awareness of the group to specific individuals, groups of students, and/or in classes.
Create a first meeting plan	Having a plan going into the first meeting can build facilitator confidence.	The focus of the first meeting can be on community building and sharing (i.e., interests). You can facilitate an introductory activity (e.g., names, pronouns – (optional), favourite movies, etc.) and ask students to share their interest in and expectations for the club. Session 1 content from HRP for 2S/LGBTQIA+ Youth can also be used to guide the first meeting.
Make the space welcoming.	Visual signals that the space and facilitators are welcoming of 2S/LGBTQIA+ folks help build positive relationships among GSA members and advisors.	Proudly display safe(r)/positive space stickers/images, pronoun posters, and flags from many 2S/LGBTQIA+ communities (e.g., two-spirit, intersex, asexual, bisexual, trans, genderqueer, etc.).
Co-construct group guidelines	A wide range of topics can come up in a GSA. Guidelines should be set so all youth feel as safe and comfortable as possible to attend and participate (to the best of their abilities).	Ask youth what they need to make the space safer and more comfortable. Guideline examples include: 'share the air', what's said in group stays in group, giving content warnings, right to pass, etc.).
Plan for the future	Knowing youths' interests in and commitment level to a GSA can help inform a successful plan for the club moving forward.	Have youth articulate their availability. Ask youth about their interests in and potential concerns about a GSA. Create an action plan that best suits youths' desires and needs. Unlike athletic teams, these clubs are student-led and guided by youth voice.

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5 Things to Remember for the First GSA Meeting

Here are some friendly reminders to help the GSA succeed:

1) Identity is fluid, evolving, and heterogeneous
Do not assume you know someone's identities (e.g., sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ability, religion, etc.). Give youth opportunities to describe their ways of being, such as holding space for them to voice: pronouns – if any, chosen name, sexual orientation, favourite animal, pet peeves, etc. Reflect on and feel free to share your identities if you feel comfortable and safe to do so. This gives you a chance to voice where you are coming from.

2) Not knowing everything is okay
Get comfortable doing some personal and professional reading/research, learning new terms, and being a little uncomfortable. Just remember that youth do not know everything either and that they are not your teachers. If you hear terms that you are unfamiliar with, the following links can help you catch up to youth:

https://www.the519.org/education-training/glossary
hrp-understanding-terminology.pdf (uwo.ca)

3) Individual boundaries need to be respected
Topics or content that can be triggering to youth may come up. Before facilitating discussions, remind students that they are free to leave, tune out, or talk with you or a co-facilitator if they are feeling upset or uncomfortable. You can also remind them to practice taking a break even when the material is not triggering. Sometimes taking a break can be difficult in the moment, so practicing break-taking ahead of time can assist youth in exploring their ability to opt-in or out of discussions.

4) GSAs are for youth (and largely) by youth
As facilitators, we may have lived experiences with rainbow communities. While that lived experience is important in terms of understanding sexual, romantic, gender, and sex characteristic diversity, a GSA is meant to help youth find and develop connections with like-minded peers. Although you work with youth, it is important to recognize that adults are still on the periphery of peer cultures.

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5) Have Fun!

2S/LGBTQIA+ youth often deal with many discriminatory and oppressive issues/experiences throughout their lives (e.g., harassment, microaggressions, invalidation, etc.) However, it is important to remember that this is not the whole story of their lives. Rainbow youth have funny stories to tell, passions outside of activism, dating and friendship drama, homework to do, tests to be nervous about, career ambitions, and favourite Netflix shows. Allow space for them to be uniquely themselves. If you have any questions about the HRP 2S/LGBTQIA+ Youth or about forming, supporting, and/or running a GSA you can reach out to us.

For more information, please contact Dr. Alicia Lapointe (Research Scientist) at alapoint@uwo.ca.

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