



# FORMING A GSA



Santa Clara County  
Office of Education



# Why Are GSAs Important?

## Helping Students Make Sense of Gender and Sexuality

Gay-Straight Alliances or Gender-Sexuality Alliances (also known as GSAs) are student-run clubs or groups in schools that serve as a safe space for all students, regardless of their gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation. GSAs provide a place for students to meet, support and listen to each other about their experiences, talk about issues related to gender and sexuality and work to end homophobia and transphobia in their school. While traditionally formed in high schools, more and more middle schools are opting to host GSAs for their students.

The ultimate goal of enriching LGBTQ middle school students' lives through partnerships with student leaders and GSAs is accomplished through collaboration with GSA leaders, advisors, school leaders, and community partners. This section of the Schoolwide Pride Guide is designed to give advisors, administrators, and students a road map to developing a lasting, impactful GSA at their school. Not only should you consider the ways a GSA can provide a sense of safety and community to LGBTQ students, but also start thinking outside the box. How can the GSA promote confidence, health, innovation, and civic engagement? How can being a member of the GSA prepare students for high school? Use this guide as a starting point to help your LGBTQ students reach their fullest potential.

# Legal Protections for GSAs

## What legal protections do students have to form a GSA?

### What Legal Protections Do Your Students Have?

- **The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution** protects the right of your students to speak freely and to associate for expressive purposes, including the formation of a GSA at your school. As long as the students do not cause a “material and substantial” disruption to the educational environment, your students are in the clear! The school would be in violation of your students’ rights to free speech if they attempt to prevent the GSA from hanging posters, using bulletin boards, or other privileges that similar student clubs are granted.
- **The Equal Access Act (EA)** ensures that all secondary schools that receive federal funding must allow the meetings of student-initiated clubs if the school allows other non-curricular student clubs to be on campus. Under this law, GSAs have the legal right to be treated like any other non-curricular student club on campus.

### “I Think A Student Just Came Out. What Do I Do?”

- #1: listen, Listen, LISTEN** – When a student decides to come out, they have likely spent a lot of time thinking about it in advance. Appreciate the courage they are taking in confiding in you and be sure to act as an ally!
- #2: Respect, Accept, and Reassure** – The student most likely chose to tell you because they see the allyship you foster around you. Offer confidentiality, and reassure them that they are safe and supported.
- #3: Do Not Say Offensive Statements** – Avoid saying phrases like “I knew it.” “It’s a phase,” or “I don’t believe it.” These are not appropriate statements, and they may increase a student’s anxiety and feeling of isolation.

# GSA Adviser Expectations

**GSA groups are initiated by students, for students.  
As a **GSA advisor**, it is important to remember that you are  
there as a supportive adult and not as the group leader.**

## **Advisers should support GSA meetings by:**

- Meeting with student leaders of the GSA as they plan and execute meetings, activities, and advocacy efforts
- Providing the GSA with a safe, positive, and supportive space to meet
- Working with student leaders and members of the group to navigate school policies and logistics around advertising, planning and executing events, and participating in activities
- Assisting the GSA in scheduling meetings, activities, and guest speakers
- Collaborating with other GSA advisors in the district, and facilitating GSAs working together on projects and events
- Ensuring that the GSA is progressing towards group goals throughout the school year, has a succession plan in place, and is fundraising for the group
- Regularly checking in with group members regarding their school experience
- Maintaining regular contact with GSLEN

## **Responsibilities of the Student**

- Adhere to GSA Ground Rules
- Be open and engaged in all GSA meetings and gatherings
- Contribute to and foster safe spaces for all students
- Make a commitment to attend a majority of all GSA meetings
- Assist in planning and implementing fundraising strategies
- Actively create ways to recruit new members and engage with other student organizations in your schools
- Collaborate with other GSAs in your district or surrounding communities

# Five Important Steps for Starting Your GSA

## #1: Follow Guidelines Set Forth By School District for Activities

Your district should have guidelines for forming new organizations. By law, any **student-initiated** group has the right to be on the campus of a public school.

## #2: Find a Meeting Space to Host Your Meetings

Students should work closely with the advisor to find a consistent meeting space and time each week for the GSA to meet. If students request privacy, be sure it is a safe and supportive space.

## #3: Be Creative in the Ways You Advertise Your Meetings!

Advertise the meetings! Students should actively recruit students who may be interested in the group in addition to hanging posters and advertising during school announcements. Students could also use social media to promote their events!

## #4: Your First Meeting Matters the Most!

Students should start the first meeting with introductions (name, pronouns, and interest in the GSA). Then, start asking questions of members: **Why do you think a GSA is important? What types of activities would you like to do in GSA? Are there any social issues here at school we can work on?** Getting information firsthand from members will keep the GSA relevant and keep members coming back!

## #5: Establish Ground Rules to Ensure Comfort and Support

Rules are an important part of establishing safe space and ensuring that everyone in the group feels comfortable being open and participating. The most common ground rule to start with is: **“Respect names and pronouns of group members, regardless of how they present during the meeting.”**

# Making a GSA Mission Statement

A **mission statement** should tell others why the GA exists and what makes it different from any other student group. A good mission statement addresses the goals and philosophy of the GSA, and talks about the work the group does.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when your GSA members develop their mission statement:

- 1. INVITE INPUT:** An effective mission statement is best when it is created by all members of the GSA! Make sure everyone has a chance to give input.
- 2. KEEP IT SHORT & SWEET:** Two or three focused sentences is an ideal length for a powerful mission statement.
- 3. TAKE YOUR TIME:** Great mission statements take time to develop, and require a couple drafts. Revisit the mission statement whenever you have new members join the group.
- 4. SHARE YOUR MISSION STATEMENT:** Distribute copies to everyone in the group. Consider including it on your advertising, having it published in the school paper, and printing it for your group archives. Mission statements aren't meant to be kept a secret!

**EXAMPLE:** The [insert school name ] GSA is open to all LGBTQ and Allied students who desire to create safe and supportive spaces in our school. The mission of our GSA is to work towards a more accepting school environment for all students regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression through education, support, social action, and advocacy.

# Student GSA Leadership Roles

**A successful GSA depends on amplifying student voice and having the guidance and direction of the organization come from **student leaders**.**

**The President** serves as the “face” of the GSA, and the President’s position holds the most responsibility and commitment. The President should do their best to attend and lead all GSA meetings with an organized agenda and plan in place. The President:

- Is the spokesperson for the group
- Should have strong verbal and written communication skills
- Is the backbone of the GSA

**The Vice President** should co-plan all GSA meetings with the President, and be in regular contact with the Secretary and GSA members to discuss upcoming agendas and issues that should be brought to the attention of the group. The Vice President:

- Should have strong verbal and written communication skills
- Position requires an active leadership role, and the ability to keep a group on track.

**The Secretary** has the responsibility of co-planning all GSA meetings with the President and VP. The Secretary should also have the role of keeping a record of all GSA meeting minutes, and a record of attendance and decisions made during meetings and events. The Secretary:

- Should distribute handouts during meetings
- Should exhibit strong verbal and written communication skills
- Has a strong ability to remain organized and engage in professional communication with members of the GSA.

# Running an Effective Meeting

1. Open every meeting with a check-in, no matter how many people have expressed a need for emotional support.
2. Take time to wrap up every meeting and bring everyone together one last time. Maybe its a chant, or a plan for next week!
3. Switch the meetings up with games and activities! Take turns suggesting ideas for the next meeting so everyone feels invested in what happens at the meetings.
4. Creating safe space for every student means it's important to remember that students are present in meetings in different ways. Make sure that students feel comfortable participating or not participating, as long as they are respectful of other members.
5. Have leadership meet or chat before each meeting so everyone is on the same page with what is happening and what is coming up next for the GSA. This will save your group from confusing breakdowns in communication.
6. Establish ground rules for each meeting, and go over them at every meeting so new and returning members know how to add to the safe space!
7. Be sure that your faculty advisor attends all meetings. Your advisor should participate as an equal rather than controlling or dominating the space.
8. Keep notes on your GSAs discussions, activities and meetings.
9. Start and end meetings on time.
10. Provide snacks!



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