



Gay-Straight Alliances

by Carol A. Snively

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

A gay-straight alliance (GSA) can be defined as a youth-led, school- or community-based group that provides a safe, welcoming, and affirming physical and emotional space for glbtq students, as well as those who are perceived as glbtq, those who are questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, children from glbtq families, and heterosexual students who want to be allies of their glbtq peers.

The inclusion of straight youth in the group mission and sponsored activities of GSAs is an important distinguishing factor from early support groups for glbtq teens, and recognizes the need for a comprehensive approach to youth safety. This strategy assists glbtq youth in building a diverse network of support, teaches heterosexual youth how to be effective allies to their glbtq peers, and teaches all youth about the effects of discrimination and prejudice. GSA participation also seems to shield youth from the negative influence of verbal and physical violence, alienation, and other forms of oppression based in homophobia and heterosexism.

The History of the GSA Movement in Schools

Perhaps the most important precursor of the GSA movement is Los Angeles's Project 10, which is widely recognized as the first organized effort to provide systematic support and education for glbtq youth in American public schools. Originating in 1984 at Fairfax High School of the Los Angeles Unified school district, Project 10 was named after the estimate frequently (though mistakenly) attributed to sexologist Alfred Kinsey that 10% of the general population is exclusively homosexual. In the words of its founder, Virginia Uribe, the focus of Project 10 has been "education, reduction of verbal and physical abuse, suicide prevention, and dissemination of accurate AIDS information."

While most early Project 10 facilitators were straight, Project 10 was originally targeted at gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth with no explicit effort to include heterosexual youth in activities. Support groups, the primary activity of the Project 10 model, focus on preventing or reducing at-risk behavior, such as alcohol and drug abuse and high-risk sexual activities, among glbtq youth. Since its inception, Project 10 has been influential as an important model for the development of support groups for glbtq youth.

The first school-based groups to call themselves Gay-Straight Alliances were formed in 1989 at two private schools in Massachusetts, the Phillips Academy in Andover and the Concord Academy in Concord. The faculty advisor for the Phillips Academy group conducted workshops about the gay-straight model throughout Massachusetts, which led to the formation of many new GSAs and to the eventual adoption of the gay-straight group model by the Governor's Commission for Gay and Lesbian Youth in Massachusetts as the preferred model for their Safe Schools Program.

The adoption of the GSA model by the State of Massachusetts Safe Schools Program in 1993 is one of three key events that spurred the development of the Gay-Straight Alliance movement. The other two were the 1999 murder of Matthew Shepard, an openly gay student at the University of Wyoming; and the 1999

Federal Court ruling in Utah--*East High Gay/Straight Alliance v. Board of Education of Salt Lake City School District*, 81 F. Supp.2d 1166, 1197 (D. Utah 1999)--which found that denying access to a school-based Gay-Straight Alliance was a violation of the federal Equal Access Act.

The Gay-Straight Alliance model has been promoted as an intervention strategy for making school environments safer and more inclusive by a number of national organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN), the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the Human Rights Watch (HRW), the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), and many others.

The most important of these organizations in promoting Gay-Straight Alliances is GLSEN, which was established nationally in 1995. It provides educational, public policy, student organizing, and development resources in print and web-based form, as well as on-site training and technical assistance to schools that want to address school safety and inclusiveness issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

Although many school districts attempt to impede the organization of GSAs, the movement has nevertheless grown rapidly. GLSEN, which maintains an on-line registry of school-based GSAs, reports that by 1999 there were 600 GSAs, a number that had grown to 1,000 in 2001, and to more than 1,200 by the end of 2002. Despite these impressive figures, the number of school-based support groups for glbtq youth remains small when measured against the need.

Why glbtq Youth Need GSAs

Gay youth, youth believed to be gay, and their allies need "free spaces" to express themselves and to find haven from the prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes, behaviors, and policies that they frequently experience. Recent reports have highlighted the widespread victimization of glbtq people, especially youth, through hate crimes, institutional oppression, social discrimination, and personal prejudice. While the general climate appears to be improving, many glbtq youth face exclusion, discrimination, and verbal and physical violence on a daily basis in schools, in the community, and in their homes.

Schools continue to be particularly unsafe for many glbtq youth. GLSEN's 2003 School Climate Survey of 887 youths from 48 states and the District of Columbia found that 39.1% of the glbtq youth surveyed had experienced physical violence at school and 84% had been verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation. The prevalence and severity of violence toward glbtq youth has implications for their immediate and long-term health and well-being.

As several studies have shown, the protracted stress of growing up in a homophobic, heterosexist society can lead to behavioral and mental health-related problems. Certain experiences, such as social isolation, alienation, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal behavior, are commonly experienced by glbtq youth, especially those who live in rural areas.

School- and Community-Based GSAs

School- and community-based GSAs provide similar activities for participants, but typically differ in their organizational structures. School GSAs meet for activities during the school day or after school, while community-based GSAs meet in the evenings and on weekends. School-based GSAs may have a room dedicated for club use or they may meet after school in the sponsoring teacher's home room.

Community-based GSAs may meet in a designated community space, such as a drop-in or community center or in another public space (for example, churches, libraries, parks and recreation buildings) that is supportive of the group's mission. School-based GSAs typically rely on teachers and school administrators, while community-based GSAs usually organize advisory boards of community adults for support, mentorship, and advisement.

Whether located in a school or the community, GSAs typically provide both organized social activities and opportunities for informal socialization. The number of meetings and level of structure in the activities vary, reflecting the resources and interests of the group and its members. Activities may consist of educational discussions of topics such as safer-sex education, queer history, the signs and symptoms of alcohol and drug abuse, and strategies for verbal and physical self-defense. Groups often organize programs to explore favorite activities, such as sports, movie night, art projects, or special events, such as gay and lesbian pride weekend, National Coming Out Day, and National Day of Silence.

In addition, community GSAs sometimes participate in community change activities, such as providing community education (workshops, newsletters, and films), giving media interviews with local TV outlets, radio stations, and newspapers about issues that have an impact on the lives of glbtq youth, lobbying for changes in school board, community, and state policies, and publicly protesting discrimination against minority groups.

The proliferation of Gay-Straight Alliances is an important development, one that may help ease the difficulties that many glbtq youth experience as they cope with homophobia among their peers and in their schools and communities.

Bibliography

Barry, Richard. "Sheltered 'Children': The Self-Creation of a Safe Space by Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students." *Construction Sites: Excavating Race, Class, and Gender among Urban Youth*. Lois Wise and Michelle Fine, eds. New York: Teachers College Press, 2000. 84-99.

Blumfled, Warren J. "Gay/Straight Alliances: Transforming Pain to Pride." *The High School Journal* 77.1-2 (1994): 113-21.

D'Augelli, Anthony R., and Lawrence J. Dark. "Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths." *Reason to Hope: A Psychosocial Perspective on Violence and Youth*. Leon D. Eron, Jacquelyn H. Gentry, and Peggy Schlegel, eds. Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association, 1994. 177-96.

DiPlacido, Joanne. "Minority Stress among Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals: A Consequence of Heterosexism, Homophobia, and Stigmatization." *Stigma and Sexual Orientation: Understanding Prejudice Against Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals*. Gregory M. Herek, ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1998. 138-59.

Doppler, Janice E. *A Description of Gay/Straight Alliances in the Public Schools of Massachusetts*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2000.

Evans, Sara M., and Harry C. Boyte. *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

GLSEN. "About Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)." January 1, 2004 . www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/66.html.

_____. GLSEN 2002 Annual Report. January 1, 2003. www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/236-1.PDF.

_____. "GLSEN Tallies 1,000 Gay-Straight Alliances." November 20, 2001. www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/863.html.

_____. "The 2003 National School Climate Survey: The School Related Experiences of Our Nation's Lesbian,

Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth." December 8, 2003 . www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/274-1.PDF.

Gustavsson, Nora S., and Ann E. MacEachron. "Violence and Lesbian and Gay Youth." *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 8.3 (1998): 41-50.

Harbeck, Karen M. "Invisible No More: Addressing the Needs of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth and Their Advocates." *School Journal* 77.1-2 (1994): 169-76.

Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. *Inside-OUT: A Report on the Experiences of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals in America and the Public's Views on Issues and Policies Related to Sexual Orientation*. Publication No. 3193. Menlo Park, Calif.: Henry J. Kaiser Foundation, 2001.

Human Rights Watch. *Hatred in the Hallways: Violence and Discrimination Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students in U. S. Schools*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2001.

Hunter, Ski, Coleen Shannon, Jo Knox, and James I. Martin. *Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths and Adults, Knowledge for Human Service Practice*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1998.

Lipkin, Arthur. "Project 10: Gay and Lesbian Students Find Acceptance in Their School Community." *Teaching Tolerance* 1.2 (1992): 24-27.

Morrow, Deana F. "Social Work with Gay and Lesbian Adolescents." *Social Work* 38 (1993): 655-60.

Platt, Leah. "Not Your Father's High School Club." *The American Prospect* (2001): 37-39.

Robinson, Kristin E. "Notes for the Field, Gay Youth Support Groups: An Opportunity for Social Work Intervention." *Social Work* 36.5 (1991): 458-59.

Russell, Stephen T., and Kara Joyner. "Adolescent Sexual Orientation and Suicide Risk: Evidence from a National Study." *American Journal of Public Health* 91.8 (2001): 1276-81.

Safren, Steven A., and Richard G. Heimberg. "Depression, Hopelessness, Suicidality, and Related Factors in Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Adolescents." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 67.6 (1999): 859-66.

Savin-Williams, Ritch C. "Verbal and Physical Abuse as Stressors in the Lives of Lesbian, Gay Male, and Bisexual Youths: Association with School Problems, Running Away, Substance Abuse, Prostitution, and Suicide." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 62.2 (1994): 261-69.

Singerline, Hugh. "OutRight: Reflections on an Out-of-School Gay Youth Group." *High School Journal* 77.1-2 (1994): 133-37.

Smith, James D. "Working with Larger Systems: Rural Lesbians and Gays." *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 7.3 (1997): 13-22.

Snively, Carol A. "Building Community-Based Alliances Between GLBTOQA Youth and Adults in Rural Settings." *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services, Special Edition on Building Coalitions and Changing Communities* 16.3-4 (2004): 99-112.

Uribe, Virginia. "Project 10: A School-Based Outreach to Gay and Lesbian Youth." *High School Journal* 77.1-2 (1994): 108-12.

_____, and Karen M. Harbeck. "Addressing the Needs of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth: The Origins of PROJECT 10 and School-Based Intervention." *Coming Out of the Classroom Closet: Gay and Lesbian Students, Teachers and Curriculum*. Karen M. Harbeck, ed. Binghamton, N. Y.: Harrington Park Press, 1992. 9-28.

Yoakam, John R. "The Youth and AIDS Projects: School and Community Outreach for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth." *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 9.4 (1999): 99-114.

About the Author

Carol A. Snively is Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Her research area includes youth and community development, effective helping strategies for sexual minority youth, and the use of art making as a tool in community organization. Her most recent community practice and research projects have focused on understanding how sexual minority teens experience their communities and participate in community betterment activities. Prior to her academic career, Snively practiced for 15 years as a registered/board certified art therapist and social worker with youth and their families in mental health and addiction treatment.