



How to Be an Adult Ally

Want to help create a safer school environment for LGBTQ and all students? Look here for advice.

An ally is someone who actively supports lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) people and works with them to achieve equality.

In schools, allies can be anyone, including students, teachers and parents. Allies can play a critical role in stopping and even preventing harassment and discrimination against LGBTQ students in school.

A 2007 survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), found that students at schools with supportive faculty and staff were less likely to report that they felt unsafe or to miss school because of

their sexual orientation or gender expression.

What Can Faculty and Staff Do?

Adult allies who work in schools can be very helpful. They often have power to take action on behalf of students. Faculty and staff can:

- Make classrooms a safe space where anti-LGBTQ language is addressed.
- Advocate for your school to adopt and enforce a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation and gender identity (see pages 7 and 11).
- Report anti-LGBTQ harassment or discrimination in writing to the school principal.
- Support students in their decision to bring

a same-sex date to the prom or other social events.

- Request books by LGBTQ authors and about LGBTQ people and issues for the school library.
- Create an inclusive curriculum that highlights the contributions of LGBTQ individuals, like Harvey Milk, and LGBT history, like the Stonewall Riots.
- Be an advisor for a gay-straight alliance, or help students organize and present a proposal for starting a GSA that complies with school requirements (see page 22).
- Make sure health classes discuss sexual orientation and gender identity as well as information about HIV transmission and prevention (taking care to emphasize that HIV affects everyone, not just LGBTQ people).
- Supply and prominently display LGBTQ-friendly materials relating to mental and physical health in nursing and counseling areas.
- Create displays and/or lesson plans about LGBT History Month and other annual observances.

What can parents and guardians do?

In a world where most LGBTQ students still experience harassment and discrimination, knowing they have their own or another parent or guardian on their side can make all the difference.

Whether or not your child is LGBTQ, you can often be the strongest and most effective advocate for LGBTQ students. School administrators may hear from parents who want to limit the rights of LGBTQ students, so it's even more important for all parents who support LGBTQ youth to make sure their voices are also heard. You can:

- Support your children and their friends who question their sexuality or identify as LGBT.

"YOU CAN OFTEN BE THE STRONGEST AND MOST EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE FOR LGBTQ STUDENTS."

- Meet with school faculty and staff to discuss issues like safety, antidiscrimination and inclusive curricula.
- Hold your child's school accountable for complying with the school district's nondiscrimination policy and state or federal laws.
- Help students' efforts to start a GSA by contacting the school and communicating your support.
- Assist your children or their friends in filing complaints about discrimination or harassment.
- Help organize events like celebrations for LGBT History Month.
- Challenge discriminatory or stereotyped statements at meetings and events like PTA meetings or parents' night.

What if I experience harassment for being an ally?

Unfortunately, allies sometimes experience harassment or discrimination for standing up for LGBTQ rights or because they themselves are perceived to be LGBTQ. However, you are not without rights or recourse (see "Cheryl Bachmann Botsolas," page 6).

If your school system forbids you from being an advocate or makes you feel that your job is on the line, it may be infringing on your rights to equal protection and free speech. In *Pickering v. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court

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announced that where employee speech touches on a matter of public concern, the employee's right to speak out may be strong enough to trump the employer's interest in restricting employee speech. In such cases, the employer may not punish the employee.

However, while the First Amendment and federal laws like the Equal Access Act generally protect the right of students to freedom of expression, they generally do not apply to curricular speech by schools and school officials. Schools constantly make choices about what to teach and what to exclude from curricula, and the law generally upholds these choices. Moreover, the EAA does not explicitly protect faculty members.

In states where anti-discrimination laws exist and retaliation occurs as a result of sexual orientation or gender identity, these laws may be used to protect adult allies. Many teachers' unions provide strong representation for teachers in the event they are punished simply for advocating for fairness. In addition, you

may be able to enlist supporters to advocate for your fair treatment at school board meetings. If you have concerns, recruiting other allies and taking action together with them might reduce your risk. If you encounter discrimination, please contact Lambda Legal's Help Desk at 1-866-542-8336 or visit www.lambdalegal.org/help/online-form for more information and assistance.

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TAKING ACTION:

Cheryl Bachmann Botsolas

This New Jersey teacher made her classroom a safe haven from harassment.

Cheryl Bachmann Botsolas, a teacher at West Milford High School in New Jersey, taught history for three years and received terrific reviews from students and supervisors.

However, soon after the school administration recommended her for tenure, Botsolas disciplined two of her students for using antigay slurs in the classroom. One of the students lashed out at the teacher, threatening her life. Even more shocking, Botsolas' tenure recommendation was revoked.

Botsolas didn't back down. With representation from Lambda Legal, she challenged the decision at a school board hearing, supported by fellow teachers and students. The board voted to overturn the superintendent's decision and restored Botsolas' tenure.

Botsolas' commitment to creating a respectful classroom environment is a model for other educators and allies in ensuring the safety and well-being of LGBTQ students.