

Are you an ALLY?

AN ALLY IS SOMEONE WHO ACTIVELY SUPPORTS LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND QUESTIONING (LGBTQ) PEOPLE AND WORKS SIDE BY SIDE WITH THEM TO ACHIEVE EQUALITY.

Allies can be anyone: a straight student who sticks by a friend who is questioning his gender identity, a teacher who serves as an advisor for a gay-straight alliance (GSA), parents who find ways to promote respect for diversity in their child's school or a counselor who is committed to making sure that LGBTQ issues are heard. By taking steps to be visibly supportive of LGBTQ students and their rights, allies can play a critical role in stopping and even preventing harassment and discrimination against LGBTQ students in school, ensuring that schools are safe for everybody. The 2005 National School Climate survey, conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), found that students at schools with higher numbers of supportive faculty and staff members were less likely to report that they felt unsafe and were less likely to miss school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. Students in schools with a GSA were also likelier to feel safe, to feel that they belonged, and thus had higher attendance rates than students in schools with no such clubs.



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Cheryl Bachmann Botsolas
Took Action

STUDENTS

Student allies are especially important because they often have an influence on the behavior of their peers. By befriending someone who is lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning, being active in an LGBTQ-friendly club, objecting to antigay jokes and slurs or advocating for fair policies in schools, straight student allies can set a positive tone of acceptance and may encourage other students to be allies. Some LGBTQ students might be hesitant to come out for fear of facing antigay harassment, or as a member of a minority, might want support in numbers when addressing administrators and teachers. As a straight ally, you can help your LGBTQ peers by adding your vocal and visible support, and sometimes by speaking up for those who may not yet be able to act on their own.

FACULTY AND STAFF

Adult allies who work in schools can be especially helpful, as they often have power to take action on behalf of students. Teachers and counselors can take the lead by posting or announcing rules on behavior in the classroom that include a no-tolerance policy for antigay language and harassment. In addition, when allies reference the work of LGBT people in lessons where appropriate, LGBTQ students are likelier to feel respected and understood, and all students gain the benefits of an inclusive curriculum.

Lambda Legal represented two teachers in Michigan — one in a middle school and the other in a high school — who insisted on including LGBT people in educational messages of diversity and respect, even though some school administrators objected. Both teachers had created displays for LGBT History Month that commemorated the historical role of lesbians and gay men and addressed antigay harassment. At first, the school's interim superintendent ordered them to take down the displays, but Lambda Legal helped these teachers fight the school district and won the right to make this important information available to students. The Michigan case supports all teachers who seek to create a safer learning environment by including LGBT people in educational messages.

LGBT-RELATED CLASS LESSONS

Schools can do great work to support students of all sexual orientations and gender identities through high-quality, accurate curricula and classroom teaching. In general, schools have the legal right to choose, create and teach accurate curricula. You can speak to officials at your school and school board about the importance of LGBT-inclusive curricula.

Sometimes, though, opponents target strong health curricula or lessons on tolerance that teach the facts about being LGBT.

If your school offers good lessons in the classroom that come under attack, you can contact Lambda Legal to find out more about promoting and protecting curricula that address LGBT issues.

PARENTS

Parents can make a huge difference by providing support to individual LGBTQ students and advocating for just policies and practices in schools. In a world where many, if not most, LGBTQ students experience harassment and discrimination, knowing they have their own or another parent on their side can make all the difference. Whether or not their own child is LGBTQ, parents can often be the strongest and most effective advocates for LGBTQ students. Often, school administrators hear from parents who want to limit the rights of LGBT students, so it's even more important for all parents who support LGBTQ youth to make sure their voices are also heard.

There are many things adults and young people can do as allies to help LGBTQ students feel safe, included and respected at schools across the country. Lambda Legal has been working with social workers around the country to make sure materials like this toolkit are made available to students. The first step is to commit to fighting discrimination against LGBTQ students and to making your school a safe place for everyone. The next step is to get involved.

While it is sometimes safer for straight allies to take a stand for LGBT rights, being an ally does not come without its own challenges. Allies too can experience harassment or discrimination because they stand up for LGBT rights or because they are perceived to be LGBTQ. As you make decisions about how you can best be effective as an ally, be aware that taking action against homophobia and discrimination may involve some level of risk, especially if you are addressing an ongoing problem at your school. If you have concerns about your safety or security, taking action along with others might provide you with more safety. If you encounter discrimination, please contact Lambda Legal's Help Desk at 1-866-542-8336 or email legalhelpdesk@lambdalegal.org for more information and assistance.

TAKING ACTION:

Cheryl Bachmann Botsolas

Cheryl Bachmann Botsolas is a high school teacher in New Jersey. She taught history for three years and received terrific reviews from her students and supervisors, and the school administration recommended her for tenure. Soon after the tenure recommendation, 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. As a responsible teacher and ally, Botsolas was promoting a "zero-tolerance" policy against harassment in her classroom. Nonetheless, Botsolas' tenure recommendation was revoked — with the effect that she was fired. But Botsolas didn't back down, and with representation from Lambda Legal, challenged the decision at a school board hearing, supported by fellow teachers and students who spoke on her behalf. At the conclusion of the hearing, the school board voted to overturn the superintendent's decision to fire her — and restored Botsolas' tenure. Botsolas' commitment to maintaining a respectful classroom environment is a model for other educators and allies in ensuring the safety and well-being of LGBTQ students.

ARE YOU AN ALLY?

CHECK ANY OF THE FOLLOWING WAYS YOU CAN BE AN ALLY THIS YEAR

EVERYONE

- I will not make assumptions about people's sexual orientation or gender identity.
- I will publicly take a stand against homophobia, transphobia and anti-LGBT harassment and discrimination.
- I will speak out against the use of antigay slurs.
- I will be supportive of anyone who chooses to come out.
- I will attend LGBTQ events.
- I will educate myself about LGBTQ issues and the rights of LGBTQ students.
- I will wear or display LGBTQ-friendly buttons, stickers or posters.

STUDENTS

- I will help form a GSA.
- I will support friends in their decision to bring a same-sex date to the prom or other social events.
- If I witness anti-LGBT harassment or discrimination, I will report it in writing to the school principal.
- I will help advocate for my school to adopt and enforce a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation and gender identity.
- I will request books by LGBT authors and about LGBT people and issues for the school library.

FACULTY AND STAFF

- I will request books by LGBT authors and about LGBT people and issues for the school library.
- I will help advocate for my school to adopt and enforce a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation and gender identity.
- I will consider being an advisor for a GSA.
- I will make sure school events include everyone.
- I will make my classroom a safe space where antigay language is not tolerated.
- I will create an inclusive curriculum that highlights the contributions of LGBT individuals.
- I will create displays and/or lesson plans about LGBT History Month.

PARENTS

- I will support my children and their friends who question their sexuality or identify as LGBT.
- I will be available to meet with school faculty and staff about these issues.
- I will help my children or their friends file complaints about discrimination or harassment.
- I will help organize events like celebrations for LGBT History Month.
- I will hold my child's school accountable for violating the school district's nondiscrimination policy or state laws.

If you've done any of these things, then you're already an ally — keep up the good work! If you haven't, now is a great time to start.