

So you wanna **START A GSA**

A GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE, OR GSA, IS A CLUB FOR LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, QUESTIONING STUDENTS AND STRAIGHT ALLIES.

There are lots of different kinds of GSAs. GSAs can be social clubs (some GSAs host dances and movie nights), support groups (some GSAs provide a safe place for LGBTQ students and their allies to talk about problems), educational outposts (some GSAs organize guest speakers or create displays for National Coming Out Day) or advocacy groups (some GSAs participate in GLSEN's National Day of Silence or push for sexual orientation and gender identity to be added to their school's nondiscrimination policy).

Talk with your friends, reach out to other students and decide what you'd like your GSA to focus on. There are more than 3,000 GSAs in schools nationwide, and there is lots of information available about forming a GSA. No matter what its focus is, your GSA can play an important role in addressing homophobia and anti-transgender discrimination and can help create a safe space for LGBTQ students. Read on to learn about the basics of forming a GSA.

YOUR LEGAL RIGHT TO FORM A GSA

In public secondary schools, GSAs can't be discriminated against or held to different standards than other student clubs — it's the law. Under a federal law called the Equal Access Act, secondary schools that receive federal money and allow meetings of other noncurricular student clubs (which means clubs that don't directly relate to classes at your school) are prohibited from discriminating against any student group based on its viewpoint. The Constitution's free speech clause also provides protection to student organizations, including GSAs. Lambda Legal and other civil rights organizations have successfully



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gone to court on behalf of students against a number of school districts — in California, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Minnesota and Utah — that have broken the law by refusing to allow GSAs to meet on the same terms as other groups. These successful lawsuits make it more likely that schools will live up to their legal obligations.

Public secondary schools are covered by the Equal Access Act if they allow even one noncurricular club to meet at the school. If your school is covered (most public secondary schools are), then you have a legal right to form a GSA and a legal right to have that GSA be treated just like other student clubs at your school. So, if other clubs at your school are allowed to post displays on the bulletin boards, make announcements and use classrooms for meetings, your GSA can too.

Some schools have tried to prevent GSAs from forming by requiring students to get their parents' permission to join a club. But even if these parental consent rules are supported by the local school board or by state law, the Equal Access Act requires that the rules be evenhandedly applied to all student groups. In other words, schools can't single out GSAs for stricter membership rules.

GETTING STARTED

FIND OUT HOW TO START A CLUB IN YOUR SCHOOL

Different schools have different rules for clubs. Always follow the rules — if you don't, it can be used as an excuse to discriminate against your group. Look in your student handbook, talk to a student government rep or ask a school administrator to guide you on your school's regulations and policies. Be sure to find out if you'll need written permission to start the club or whether you'll need to get a teacher or school advisor to come to the meetings. You may also need to register with the school administration or write a constitution or mission statement.

DO SOME RESEARCH

Find out if other schools in your area have GSAs, and call or email their advisors or leaders. (For an up-to-date list of GSAs across the country, visit the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network at www.glsen.org.) Also try to determine how safe it is for students to be out at your school. This will help you arrange an appropriate meeting place and determine the safest ways to let people know about the group.

FIND A PLACE TO MEET

In general, you'll want to find a place that is private and relatively quiet. Some students might feel a little afraid or uncomfortable about attending a meeting. They may worry that others will harass them if they join the group. As you know, homophobia and transphobia are still a reality in many schools, and that should be taken into account when selecting a meeting space. Whether you decide to meet in a classroom or away from the school entirely, the meeting space must make GSA members feel safe.

SPREAD THE WORD

At first you may want to advertise the GSA by word of mouth only, so you won't be bothered by people who might not be supportive of the group. Tell LGBT-friendly teachers, guidance counselors, school social workers and the school nurse. They may know other students who are interested in attending the meeting and may be in a position to encourage them to go. They might also want to come to a meeting as a guest speaker or serve as the club's advisor. Tell anyone else you think will be helpful or who can let other students know about the GSA. Try to identify at least a couple of students who you know will attend the first meeting.

TAKING ACTION:

Anthony Colín

When Anthony Colín founded the gay-straight alliance in his Southern California high school, he had no idea that he'd have to battle to keep it. First the school board denied the GSA's application to become a recognized student club. This meant that the GSA couldn't have meetings at the school like other student clubs could. Then the school board told the students involved in the GSA that it would only reconsider the group's application if the group changed its name. With Lambda Legal's help, Anthony and his friends sued the school district. The GSA won the right to meet while the lawsuit proceeded and ultimately won the right to meet at the school, use the school's public address system to make announcements and be featured in the school yearbook, just like other student clubs.

HOLD THE FIRST MEETING

Have snacks. Food can help break the ice and may encourage students who were "just stopping by" to stay. Once people have settled in, begin with introductions and a discussion of why you organized the meeting. Share any information you've learned about GSAs in your area. Before deciding on your goals, give everyone a chance to talk about why they came and what they would like the GSA to do. Many groups establish ground rules over their first few meetings. At a minimum, everyone at the meeting should agree to confidentiality and respect.

Don't be too discouraged if the first meeting is not well attended or if it doesn't go exactly as you planned. Getting even a few people in the room is a victory! It may take a few meetings for more people to feel comfortable attending and for the group to really get established. Anyone who does come can help spread the word for the next meeting.

STAY IN TOUCH

Find a way to keep in touch with everyone. Be sure to collect email addresses or phone numbers and to set the next meeting date.

ASK FOR VOLUNTEERS

Keeping a club going can be a lot of work. One way to address this challenge is to get others involved in sharing responsibilities right from the start. You may want to select co-chairs or form committees, so more people can be responsible for keeping the group going.

For help forming a GSA at your school, contact the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) at 212-727-0135 or studentorganizing@glSEN.org.

If your school isn't allowing your GSA to meet, or if you have other questions about your legal rights, contact Lambda Legal's Help Desk at 1-866-542-8336 or email legalhelpdesk@lambdalegal.org.