

Being a Strong GSA Advisor

Just like any other student-led school-based clubs, GSAs (originally called Gay-Straight Alliances, now often called Genders and Sexualities Alliances) need an advisor – a school staff member who attends and supervises the club’s meetings, activities, and events. GSA advisors are important because they represent supportive adults who can foster empowerment and leadership development for GSA student members.¹ GSA advisors’ training varies: some have a mental health background and are focused on providing social and emotional support. Others focus on community engagement and advocacy.² Thus, each GSA advisor contributes in different ways to the development of their GSA. Regardless, it is recommended that advisors receive training for their role as a GSA advisor. In fact, evidence suggests that advisors with formal training are more likely to foster GSA members’ self-esteem.^{3,4}



What makes an effective GSA advisor?

The ability of a GSA advisor to advocate for GSAs and GSA members is strongly influenced (and sometimes limited) by community factors (e.g., community resistance), school factors (e.g., lack of support from principals or teachers), and individual factors (e.g., fear of losing their job).⁵ However, research suggests that a GSA advisor's level of experience is the most crucial factor for dealing with school dynamics and advocating for LGBTQ youth. In fact, students in GSAs whose advisors served longer report more positive development.³

Studies also suggest that there are several things advisors can do to have a long-term and effective GSA:^{3,6,7}

1

Expand students' knowledge about LGBTQ issues

GSAs need to be safe spaces to explore current and historical LGBTQ-themed issues. GSA advisors can encourage discussions about LGBTQ rights on a regular basis, and meetings could include conversations about LGBTQ figures in history (i.e., Harvey Milk), historical events (i.e. Stonewall), or other events that are relevant to students. This is important because in some schools, students rarely have opportunities to learn about these topics outside of GSAs.

2

Facilitate student activism

Some GSAs focus on advocacy more than others. Depending on the school context, GSA advisors may support advocacy activities within their GSAs to take action in school or community projects. National annual events such as the Day of Silence (<http://www.dayofsilence.org>) and Coming Out Day (<https://www.hrc.org/resources/national-coming-out-day>) are good opportunities for GSA members to raise awareness about LGBTQ issues.

3

Encourage students' reflection on interactions with peers and family

To make sure that GSAs are supportive of students who are isolated, discriminated against, or victimized, advisors should provide students with a time for self-reflection, and should make sure that students feel free to share both positive and negative events within the GSA (for example, coming out episodes, bullying and rejection experiences, or concerns about the future).

4

Respect GSA members and support them to make independent decisions

Although advisors need to have an active role within their GSAs by offering ideas and activities, it is important that GSA members exercise autonomy and responsibility during the decision-making processes. In fact, studies have shown that when both advisors and GSA members perceive high levels of control over their GSAs, members reported feeling more able to accomplish their goals.³

Online Resources:

- GSA Advisor Handbook:
https://gsanetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/GSA_Advisor_Handbook-web.pdf
- Day of Silence:
<http://www.dayofsilence.org>
- Coming Out Day:
<https://www.hrc.org/resources/national-coming-out-day>

"GSA work is youth work. Only in partnerships between current GSA advisors and youth workers or by completely rethinking where GSA meetings take place will we move closer to meeting the needs of all queer-identified youth, regardless of their color, their chosen gender expression, or their socioeconomic status."⁷

References:

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