



RESEARCH BRIEF

GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES: CREATING SAFER SCHOOLS FOR LGBT STUDENTS AND THEIR ALLIES

Schools are responsible for providing a safe learning environment for all students. However, for many students, especially students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), school is not a safe place.¹ There is compelling evidence that the majority of students frequently hear homophobic remarks and other types of biased language at school, and that LGBT students experience bullying and harassment at school because of their sexual orientation and/or their gender expression.² These experiences contribute to a hostile climate and some LGBT students choose to miss school in order to avoid negative experiences that threaten their safety.

Findings from a growing body of research demonstrate the positive impact that school-based resources, such as clubs that address LGBT student issues (commonly known as Gay-Straight Alliances) may have on school climate.³ Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are student-led, school-based clubs open to all members of the student body regardless of sexual orientation. GSAs often advocate for improved school climate, educate the larger school community about LGBT issues, and support LGBT students and their allies. This brief examines the current research on GSAs and highlights major findings regarding school safety, access to education, academic achievement for LGBT students, and access to GSAs in school.

MAJOR FINDING 1. The presence of GSAs may help to make schools safer for LGBT students by sending a message that biased language and harassment will not be tolerated.

- Biased language, such as racist, sexist, and homophobic remarks, can make school a hostile place for all members of a school community. Homophobic remarks, such as “faggot” or “dyke” used in a derogatory manner, are among the most frequently heard types of biased remarks in U.S. schools.⁴ Students in schools with GSAs are less likely to hear homophobic remarks in school on a daily basis than students in schools without a GSA (57% compared to 75%).⁵
- GSAs are related to greater physical safety for LGBT students. LGBT students who attend schools with a GSA are less likely than those at schools without a GSA to report feeling unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation (61% vs. 68%) or because of the way in which they express their gender (38% vs. 43%).⁶
- Sexual minority youth (youth who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual as well as youth who have same-sex romantic attractions or engage in same-sex sexual behavior) in Massachusetts schools with GSAs were half as likely as those in schools without a GSA to report experiencing dating violence, being threatened or injured at school, or missing school because they were afraid to go.⁷
- Educators believe in the value of GSAs—more than half (53%) of secondary school teachers nationally believe that having a GSA would help to create safer schools for LGBT students.⁸
- In California, LGBT students and their allies who have a GSA in their schools are more likely to feel safe in school than their peers (76% compared to 69%).⁹

MAJOR FINDING 2. Having a GSA may also make school more accessible to LGBT students by contributing to a more positive school environment.

- LGBT students in schools with GSAs are less likely to miss school because they feel unsafe compared to other students: a quarter (26%) of students in schools with GSAs missed school in the past month because they felt unsafe compared to a third (32%) of students at schools without GSAs.¹⁰
- Students in schools with GSAs or similar student clubs are two times more likely than students without such clubs to say they hear teachers at their school make supportive or positive remarks about lesbian and gay people (24% compared to 12%).¹¹

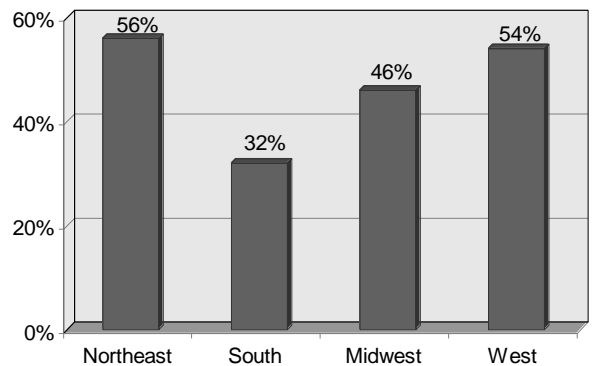
MAJOR FINDING 3. GSAs may help LGBT students to identify supportive school staff, which has been shown to have a positive impact on their academic achievement and experiences in school.

- Students in schools with a GSA are more likely to report that school faculty, staff and administrators are supportive of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students (52% compared to 37%).¹²
- LGBT students in schools with a GSA are significantly more likely than students in schools without a GSA to be aware of a supportive adult at school (84% compared to 56%).¹³ LGBT students who report having supportive faculty and other school staff report higher grade point averages and are more likely to say they plan to pursue post-secondary education than LGBT students who do not have supportive school staff.¹⁴
- LGBT students in schools with a GSA have a greater sense of belonging to their school community than students without a GSA.¹⁵

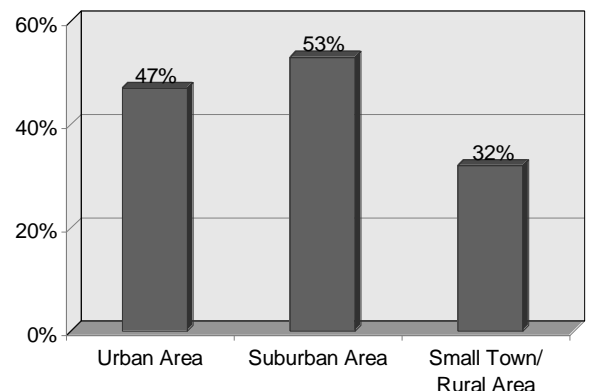
MAJOR FINDING 4. Most students lack access to GSAs or other student clubs that provide support and address issues specific to LGBT students and their allies.

- In a national survey of secondary school students, less than one quarter (22%) of all LGBT and non-LGBT students report that their school has a GSA or another type of student club that addresses LGBT students' issues.¹⁶
- Although LGBT students may be more likely to be aware of a GSAs existence than other students, less than half of LGBT students (47%) report that their school has a GSA.¹⁷
- Some LGBT students of color may have less access to a GSA at their school than their peers:¹⁸ LGBT African American/Black students are less likely to report having a GSA in their school than other LGBT students of color, particularly those in schools where the student population is predominantly African American.¹⁹
- LGBT students in the South and in small towns or rural areas are least likely to have a GSA in their school.²⁰

GSA Presence by Region



GSA Presence by Locale



SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Schools are often not a safe place for students, particularly those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. GSAs can help to make schools safer for students and may play a role in mitigating the negative impact of bullying and harassment experienced by some LGBT students. LGBT students in schools with GSAs are less likely to hear biased language, such as homophobic remarks, are less likely to feel unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation and gender expression, and are less likely to miss days of school because they are afraid to go. In addition, GSAs may play an important role in helping students identify staff who may be supportive and to whom they can report any incidents of victimization. The presence of a GSA may offer evidence of a school's commitment to LGBT students and their allies, creating a source of perceived support for students even if they are not actively engaged with the GSA themselves. The presence of GSAs may also help to improve the school experiences of LGBT students, by increasing access to education and having a positive impact on LGBT students' academic achievement and aspirations.

Despite evidence of the benefits they offer, most students lack access to the valuable resources GSAs provide. Although the number of GSAs is increasing, less than a quarter of high school students nationally have a GSA in their school, and students in small towns and rural areas and the South are least likely to have access to this type of support in school. LGBT students of color also have less access to the resources of a GSA than their peers. Further research is needed that examines the availability of GSAs to LGBT students of color and transgender students and the impact of GSAs on their school experiences.

The presence of a GSA in school may have considerable benefits for LGBT students and their allies. School communities should support the formation of GSAs so that all students can learn and pursue an education in a positive and supportive school climate. It is also important to note that GSAs are only one part of what helps to make schools safer for LGBT students and their allies. GSAs should be a part of a larger comprehensive safe schools initiative that includes school policies that specifically address sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, trainings for school administrators, faculty and other staff, and support for GSAs and other student clubs that address the issues of LGBT students and their allies. As part of a comprehensive safe schools initiative, GSAs can create positive changes in school climate that endure over time, outlasting changes in the student body, faculty or administration.

-
- ¹ Bochenek, M. & Brown, A. W. (2001). *Hatred in the hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in U.S. schools*. New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Harris Interactive & GLSEN (2005). *From teasing to torment: School climate in America, a survey of teachers and students*. New York: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.
- Kosciw, J. G. & Diaz, E. M. (2006). *2005 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.
- ² Bochenek, M. & Brown, A. W. (2001). See endnote 1 for full citation.
- Bontempo, D. E. & D'Augelli, A. R. (2002). Effects of at-school victimization and sexual orientation on lesbian, gay, or bisexual youths' health risk behavior. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 30*, 364-374.
- Elze, D. E. (2003). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths' perceptions of their high school environment and comfort in school. *Children and Schools, 25*, 225-239.
- ³ Some of the research included in this paper is based on populations of "sexual minority youth," a term defined by Szalacha (2003) as including youth who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) and youth who experience same-sex attraction or engage in same-sex sexual behaviors, but may not identify as LGB. Walls and colleagues (2007) alternately define "sexual minority youth" to include all non-heterosexual and transgender youth. In this paper we use the term "LGBT" as a general umbrella term that is inclusive of, and more commonly used by, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth.
- ⁴ Kosciw, J. G. & Diaz, E. M. (2006). See endnote 1 for full citation.
- Harris Interactive & GLSEN (2005). See endnote 1 for full citation.
- ⁵ Szalacha, L. A. (2003). Safer sexual diversity climates: Lessons learned from an evaluation of Massachusetts safe schools program for gay and lesbian students. *American Journal of Education, 110*(1), 58-88.
- ⁶ Kosciw, J. G. & Diaz, E. M. (2006). See endnote 1 for full citation.
- ⁷ Goodenow, C., Szalacha, L., & Westhimer, K. (2006). School support groups, other school factors, and the safety of sexual minority adolescents. *Psychology in the Schools, 43*(5), 573-589.
- ⁸ Harris Interactive & GLSEN (2005). See endnote 1 for full citation.
- ⁹ Russell, S. T., McGuire, J. K., Laub, C., & Manke, E. (2006). LGBT student safety: Steps schools can take. (California Safe Schools Coalition Research Brief No. 3.) San Francisco: California Safe Schools Coalition.
- ¹⁰ Kosciw, J. G. & Diaz, E. M. (2006). See endnote 1 for full citation.
- ¹¹ Szalacha, L. A. (2003). See endnote 5 for full citation.
- ¹² Szalacha, L. A. (2003). See endnote 5 for full citation.
- ¹³ Walls, N. E., Kane, S. B., & Wisneski, H. (2007). Gay-straight alliances and the school experiences of sexual minority youth. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- ¹⁴ Kosciw, J. G. & Diaz, E. M. (2006). See endnote 1 for full citation.
- ¹⁵ Kosciw, J. G. & Diaz, E. M. (2006). See endnote 1 for full citation.
- ¹⁶ Harris Interactive & GLSEN (2005). See endnote 1 for full citation.
- ¹⁷ Kosciw, J. G. & Diaz, E. M. (2006). See endnote 1 for full citation.
- ¹⁸ Grffin, P., Lee, C., Waugh, J. & Beyer, C. (2005). Describing the roles that gay-straight alliances play in schools: From individual support to school change. In *Gay, lesbian, and transgender issues in education: Programs, policies, and practices*, Ed. J. T. Sears, 167-183. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Holmes, S. E. & Cahill, S. (2005). School experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. In *Gay, lesbian, and transgender issues in education: Programs, policies, and practices*, Ed. J. T. Sears, 63-76. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- McCready, L. (2001). When fitting in isn't an option, or, why Black queer males at a California high school stay away from Project 10. In *Troubling intersections of race and sexuality: Queer students of color and anti-oppressive education*, Ed. Kevin K. Kumashiro, 37-53. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- ¹⁹ Kosciw, J. G. (2004). *School related experiences of LGBT youth of color*. New York: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.
- ²⁰ Kosciw, J. G. & Diaz, E. M. (2006). See endnote 1 for full citation.

Suggested citation:

GLSEN (2007). *Gay-Straight Alliances: Creating safer schools for LGBT students and their allies*. (GLSEN Research Brief). New York: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.