

ARTICLE

WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS



**STANDING UP
AND SPEAKING
OUT FOR LGBTQIA+
STUDENTS, FAMILIES,
AND BOOKS**

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In 2011 my principal approached me and asked if I'd be willing to sponsor a club, specifically a Gay-Straight Alliance. I'll be honest and say that as a queer person, I wasn't terribly familiar with GSAs. And at the time, I don't think I was alone in my ignorance. Even as recently as 2019, only nine out of fifty states reported that at least half of secondary schools in their state had GSAs (Gabriel, Stratford, and Steed 2021). Yes, that means that more than half of secondary schools in forty-one of our states do not have a GSA. There certainly wasn't a GSA when I was in high school. In fact, my gay friends and I were all members of the Key Club instead—a very similar situation to that of the characters in Brent Hartinger's *The Geography Club* (HarperCollins 2003). Ultimately, my answer was, "Of course. I'd be happy to be the club sponsor."

Creating a Conference

Sponsoring our GSA—now SAGA (Sexuality and Gender Alliance)—has been very rewarding over the years as it has given me the opportunity to get to know my students better than when I see them for classes or when they pop into the library. I've also learned more about what they need and want from their high school experience. By 2018 I was feeling pretty good about the progress we

had made with creating a safe space for queer kids through the club. Or at least I was feeling good until one day after school at a club meeting, students shared that they didn't feel accepted by their peers or their teachers. I listened to them explain that they felt it was a lack of education rather than deliberate or malicious behavior—at least when it came to teachers. What the students were expressing is supported by a recent *Education Week* article that shared, "Teachers fear parental pushback; they face a dearth of curriculum options, and even when there are resources available, they may not know what to look for; they may not have received training on the subject; or they simply don't want to get something wrong" (Najarro 2021).

After I listened to my concerned students, we talked. Then, we shared ideas for how we could address this issue. There are so many ways to be an ally to LGBTQ+ youth, but at our school nothing had been organized or communicated to students, staff, or families. We wrote down a wish list for a "Rainbow Conference," in which students, staff, parents, and community members could come together and learn more about the community as well as what they could do to help. One of the first suggestions for providing a more safe, inclusive school according to

Lambda Legal is to "invite local activists or representatives from LGBT organizations to speak at your school" (n.d.). And even though this information wasn't available at the time of our planning, that's exactly what we did.

The first phone call was made to Kevin Naff, a former graduate of Hammond High School in our district and current editor of *Washington Blade*, and he agreed to present a session titled "Behind the Scenes of the LGBTQ Movement." I kept making calls, and soon I had more than a dozen individuals committed to presenting at the conference. I created a presence on social media and put together a website. Grants and donations were procured, and our first Rainbow Conference was set to take place on May 15, 2020. All in all, it was about a two-year process from start to finish. Unfortunately, registration for the conference opened just as the pandemic began, and things got a little hectic. We had to quickly pivot from a face-to-face conference to a virtual one. But even virtually, the conference attracted around 250 librarians, other educators, students, parents, and community members.

We had succeeded in our mission to educate educators, students, and the community about LGBTQ+ issues.

Conference Schedule from the 2020 Rainbow Conference

- 9:00 am - Behind the Scenes of the LGBTQ Movement
- 9:00 am - Creating Community Through Play
- 10:00 am - Transition: Living as a Trans Person
- 10:00 am - Question, Persuade, Refer Training
- 10:00 am - Self-Awareness of Protections for LGBTQ People: A Discussion on LGBTQ Rights
- 11:00 am - Rainbow Reads
- 11:00 am - Talk Saves Lives: An Introduction to Suicide Prevention
- 12:00 pm - Not as Cringy as it Seems: Dissecting Today's Image of YA LGBT Literature (And Why it Matters)
- 12:00 pm - Why LGBTQ+ Rights are a Church-State Separation Issue
- 1:00 pm - It Gets Better with LGBTQ+ Stories
- 1:00 pm - Supporting Rainbow Youth - It Takes a Community
- 2:00 pm - Supporting Non-binary Students and Educators in School Systems
- 2:00 pm - Support for Transgender, Non-binary, and LGBQ students: A Discussion
- 3:00 pm - LGBTQ+ Inclusive Loving-Kindness Meditation

For full conference details and presenter information, please visit our conference archives at bit.ly/HCPSSRainbow

Listening to students was essential in learning about the deficits in their (and their teachers') learning that needed to be addressed. The conference was such a success that we did it again in 2021, this time doubling the sessions offered and registering more than 300 participants. Our third conference is scheduled to occur again on

May 6, 2023, this time adding an in-person option with an exhibition hall, bookmobile (to check out all the awesome books promoted by our local librarians), and outdoor activities. Funds to hold this conference were received through the It Gets Better Project's "50States, 50Grants, 5000 Voices" grant.

Visibility Matters

A year into planning the first Rainbow Conference, my school was putting an end to their student-created magazine, *The Vision*, due to a lack of submissions and a lack of interest in editing and designing the magazine. The name *The Vision* already fit as a perfect name for a queer magazine, as "vision" ties closely with "visibility." So, with permission and a name adjustment, the *Rainbow Vision* literary magazine was created. It was promoted throughout our school system by high school media specialists, and teachers of English, art, and GT (gifted and

talented) classes. We sought entries from LGBTQIA+ students and allies, and used the magazine to provide them with a means of artistic and creative expression.

According to Stephen T. Russell et al. (2021) four strategies can promote school safety for all students:

- creating inclusive enumerated policies,
- providing support and training to school personnel,
- establishing student-led clubs such as GSAs, and
- providing access to LGBTQ-related resources and curricula.

By creating this magazine, we not only gave students access to LGBTQ-related content but also a means of self-expression. They would be able to contribute to as well as design it. Much like the Rainbow Conference, rather than focus on just our own



ONE OF THE QUESTIONS ON THE READ THE RAINBOW REGISTRATION FORM IS “WHY ARE YOU INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN THIS BOOK CLUB?” AND THE RESPONSES ARE ENLIGHTENING AND AFFIRMING FOR WHY THIS BOOK CLUB IS SO **NECESSARY.**



school, submissions were accepted from all high school students in the county. In 2020, our inaugural year, we received thirty-five entries and published thirty of them. Initial funds to print the magazine were received through a grant from Teaching Tolerance (now Learning for Justice). After publication of the first volume, I received a number of e-mails from students and teachers asking if there would be a middle school version of the magazine. And so, the magazine was opened to middle school student entries. In 2021 we received sixty-five entries and published thirty-eight works in our second volume. In 2022 we received eighty-three entries and published fifty-three of them in our third volume. Each year students from the GT Intern/Mentor program have expressed an interest in working on the magazine and have participated in the editing and layout processes. As I write this in February, I currently have a high school senior intern and a freshman volunteer

working on editing and laying out the fourth volume of our magazine, which will be published in May 2023 and featured at our local county book festival, Books in Bloom.

Reading the Rainbow

Origins

Reading and writing go hand in hand. You have to have writers to have readers, and to be a reader, writers have to create content. While my job provided me with the opportunity to give students access to borrowing books, there is also something very special and wonderful about actually owning a book. As a librarian in 2020, I was acutely aware that not only were LGBTQ+ books being challenged across the country, but I also saw that LGBTQ+ authors were getting uninvited from school visits and book festivals. To assist in creating a more-positive culture for queer books and queer kids, I created a book club called Read the Rainbow,

a book club that would not only provide free quality books to students, but would also bring in the authors of the books to speak with and inspire our young readers and writers.

I crossed my fingers and applied for a grant, which I received in 2020 from SEL in Action to begin the work. I wrote to authors, telling them about the club and asking if they would consider joining us for a book club meeting. I'd say at least 85 percent of them responded, and of those who responded, 95 percent gave a resounding “Yes!” Because this book club is 100 percent virtual for authors and participants, it is open to all. While it is widely promoted within the county, we've had students join from out of county, out of state, and, in a few cases, from out of country.

Process

A few guidelines I established when applying for the grant I still follow for each meeting.

1. Only students are eligible for the free book, but adults are welcome to participate in the club.

2. If a student accepts a copy of the book, they are committing to attend the meeting. If they do not attend, they may still register for and attend future book club meetings, but will not continue to receive a free book.

3. Books are purchased from local bookstores, and each copy of the book is mailed directly to student participants.

Most recently, I had to add an additional rule: Students receiving the free book must be residents of the United States. It is just too expensive to mail books to folk in other countries (though I did for a few students prior to updating the guidelines).

During a club meeting, I ask that privacy be maintained and that students lead the questions and conversation with the author. The book club started with an average of around forty registrants per club meeting, and now we are averaging around eighty folk registering for each book club meeting, with around 60 percent of those actually attending. While books are provided only to the first fifty student participants, the club is open to anyone who wants to join. In several cases, we've been able to provide more books than our original fifty copies thanks to generous community members who each purchase an additional copy of the book for the students. The book club has been a wonderful way to not only encourage folk to read, but also to learn more about the writing process from the authors themselves. The grant funds have run out, but the book club has been able to continue thanks to our partnership with a local organization called CARY (Community Allies of Rainbow Youth); its members have

Opportunities are not just for those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, but also those looking to be supportive allies or to learn more

been instrumental in continuing to procure funds so that our club can continue.

Students' Views

One of the questions on the Read the Rainbow registration form is "Why are you interested in participating in this book club?" and the responses are enlightening and affirming for why this book club is so necessary. One teen wrote in to share that the book club was getting them out of their reading slump. When registering for *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, another teen mentioned that it seemed like an amazing book to read over the long break and looked forward to having an opportunity to meet others their age who enjoy reading, and who could identify with different aspects of the book. Teens have also mentioned wanting the chance to join a book club but not having the time or opportunity to do so previously.

I send out an optional and anonymous feedback form after each meeting. One of the questions is: "The mission of Read the Rainbow is to promote LGBTQ+ literature written by LGBTQ+ authors in order to bring awareness and advocacy for LGBTQ+ topics, interests, and issues. Do you feel this was accomplished?" While the feedback is always

supportive, it is also sometimes surprising and gives new perspective about things I hadn't previously considered such as this anonymous student response, "I really do [think the mission was accomplished]. By attending these book clubs I get exposed to more books and I'm able to talk to older LGBTQ adults since I don't have any in my life otherwise." To see all the books we've read so far, please see the sidebar.

Keeping the book club virtual even after face-to-face activities have resumed has allowed us to continue providing a safe and accessible space for participants. While many of the students learn about the club through social media, from their schools' media specialists, Rainbow Representatives, and educators who help to advertise the club, many register based on recommendations from their peers. Last school year, through a district level grant from SEL in Action, a Rainbow Representative was established at each school in our system. Rainbow Representatives are staff members who are allies and advocates for the LGBTQIA+ community. The Rainbow Representatives receive information regarding upcoming topics and events of interest that are then communicated by the rep to their school communities (with supervisor and/or principal approval). (To learn more about our Rainbow Representatives, please visit the website included in the "Learn More About" list.)

In the recently updated eighth edition of *School Library Management*, Julia Torres shared, "Students need to feel that the library is a partner with other community organizations that support them so they do not see it as an extension of the oppressive system that aims to suppress their will, rather than liberate it" (2022, 59). We have been able to partner with CARY, but also with our local

Read the Rainbow Books

Read the Rainbow typically meets every two months during the school year, dependent upon author availability, scheduling, and funding to purchase the books. Since its inception in 2020, Read the Rainbow has featured the following books and authors:

October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard by Lesléa Newman

If I Was Your Girl by Meredith Russo

The Henna Wars by Adiba Jaigirdar

The Black Flamingo by Dean Atta

The Gravity of Us by Phil Stamper

The House in the Cerulean Sea by T. J. Klune

Cinderella is Dead by Kalynn Bayron

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe by Benjamin Alire Sáenz

Kings of B'More by R. Eric Thomas

The Prince and the Dressmaker by Jen Wang

Cemetery Boys by Aiden Thomas

You Should See Me in a Crown by Leah Johnson (our most recent read)

FAMILY Read the Rainbow Books

So far, our FAMILY Read the Rainbow has included:

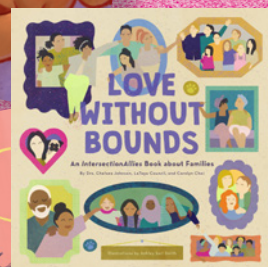
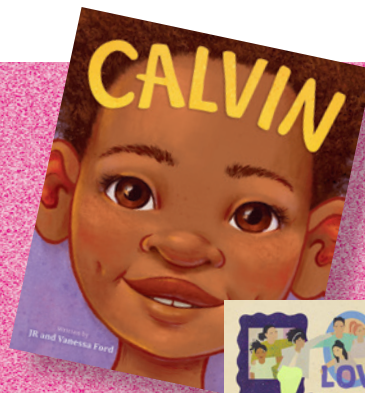
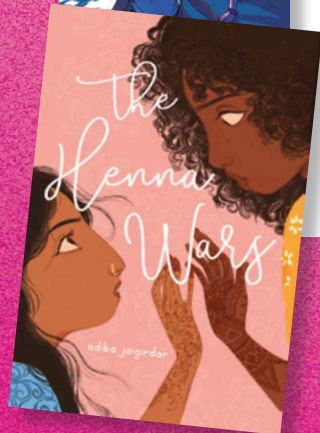
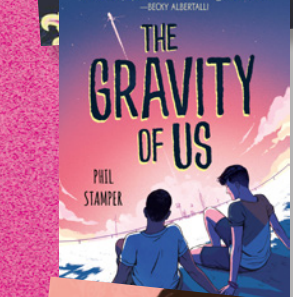
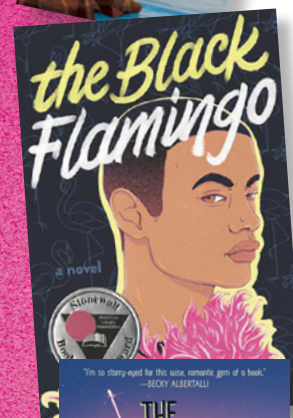
And Tango Makes Three by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell

Calvin by J. R. Ford and Vanessa Ford

When Aidan Became a Brother by Kyle Lukoff

Love Without Bounds by Drs. Chelsea Johnson, LaToya Council, and Carolyn Choi

This June we will be welcoming Michael Genhart and highlighting his book, *They're So Flamboyant* as part of our optional HCPSS Pride Week activities.



PFLAG chapter and other local organizations and businesses who wish to support our club. It's been a great way to bring visibility to LGBTQ+ supportive organizations, but also to the library media program.

FAMILY Read the Rainbow

Read the Rainbow has since expanded to include younger students and families with our FAMILY Read the Rainbow program. This program is a little shorter to accommodate our younger participants. The participants are able to hear authors read their stories aloud, and time is provided for question and answer sharing. Recently, during our program for the book *When Aidan Became a Brother* by Kyle Lukoff, we were delighted to have both the author and the illustrator, Kaylani Juanita, present to share their process

for creating and illustrating the story as well as Kaylani's perspective on interpreting the characters.

FAMILY Read the Rainbow meets two to three times during the school year. The schedule is largely dependent upon author availability and funding for books. To see all the books we've read so far (as I write this in February), please see the sidebar.

An Invitation

A common concern—and rightfully so—is receiving pushback from the community. Has there been pushback regarding LGBTQ+ programming for students? Sure. Absolutely. Mostly this pushback has come from those on social media who are not associated or linked to our county school system. Any time you introduce a concept or idea that shifts a mindset, you will get

pushback from others both outside as well as inside your organization. Knowing this, we've emphasized that the opportunities offered are all optional. Participants are invited, not coerced. Nothing is a requirement.

Also, the opportunities are not just for those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, but also for those looking to be supportive allies or to learn more about the community. Would you be openly outraged over receiving an invitation to a birthday party for someone you didn't know very well? It's possible. But showing your rage wouldn't be a very good look for you as a human—unless you have a track record as being a curmudgeon. As with any invitation, you can either accept or decline. Framing our programs and publicity as invitations to all not only helps to make our community

This summer, take the community learning with you.

www.ala.org/aasl/CoPs



more visible and inclusive, but it also allows for those not comfortable identifying as part of the community to still participate from an ally standpoint. Allies are an integral part of the advocacy work needed to advance rights and protections for all of our LGBTQIA+ students, staff, and families within our community, across the country, and around the world. The need for their continued support and involvement can't be emphasized enough.



Danielle N. DuPuis
(she/her/hers), a National Board Certified Teacher, is currently the LGBTQIA+ Initiatives Specialist

for the Howard County (MD) Public School System (HCPSS) in Ellicott City, where she loves finding innovative ways to educate, unify, and collaborate with students, staff, community partners, and families. She has worked as a library media specialist in HCPSS for seventeen years, having started her career working for the Howard County Library System twenty-one years ago. When not working or spending time with her wife and three children, she enjoys long walks with friends, reading books, and exploring a wide variety of creative interests that include writing books, and poems. She has published four professional resource books, which include *The Adventures of Super3: A Teacher's Guide to Information Literacy for Grades K–2* (Linworth 2010) and *Big6, Large and In Charge: Project Based Information Literacy Lessons for Grades 3–6* (Linworth 2013), both coauthored by Annette C. H. Nelson. Danielle hopes to one day become a published YA or children's book author and to produce a children's video series featuring an array of humans and puppets.

Moving Forward

After receiving such positive and encouraging feedback from each of the aforementioned programs, it was clear that there was not only a need for LGBTQIA+ programming to accommodate LGBTQIA+ students and families, but also a need to bring visibility and education about the LGBTQIA+ community to others who were interested in learning more. So, this past school year, the idea was introduced to include an LGBTQIA+ Initiatives Specialist into the school district budget for the 2022–2023 school year. I, along with

members of CARY and many others in my district, sent e-mails, made calls, and presented at community forums in support of this position. In one of my earliest phone calls with a board member, I was asked, "Who will champion this position?" And it wasn't until later that I realized: We are the champions. The librarians, other educators, parents, and advocates who continue to show up and put themselves out there in defense of LGBTQIA+ kids, books, authors, individuals of all ages, and families. We are the champions.

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Learn More About:

- Books in Bloom <<https://www.booksinbloommmd.com>>
- CARY (Community Allies of Rainbow Youth) <www.cary-hoco.org>
- HCPSS and supporting LGBTQIA+ youth <www.hcpss.org/supports/lgbtqia-youth>
- Rainbow Conference, Read the Rainbow, and Rainbow Vision <<https://sites.google.com/hcpss.org/hcpssrainbowconference/home>>
- Rainbow Representatives <www.hcpss.org/supports/lgbtqia-youth/rainbow-reps>
- Follow Us:
Twitter @HCPSS_Pride
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- Grant Credits:
It Gets Better Project's 50 States 50 Grants <www.50states50grants.com>
- Learning for Justice Educator Fund <www.learningforjustice.org/educator-fund>
- SEL in Action Awards <www.education-first.com/sel-in-action-awards>
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