

**School Counselors and Social Justice Advocacy for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,
Transgender, and Questioning Students**

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) students often face considerable isolation, discrimination, and violence at school, which can exacerbate the acute psychosocial and academic problems they already encounter. The purpose of this article is to introduce gay-straight alliances (GSAs) as a social justice and advocacy approach for professional school counselors to support LGBTQ students. GSAs are student-led non-curricular groups that provide support and advocacy for LGBTQ middle and high school students as well as their allies. The history of GSAs and research about these groups will be presented along with resources and recommendations for school counselors to become social justice advocates for their LGBTQ students.

Keywords: gay-straight alliances, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/questioning students, school counseling, allies, Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

School Counselors and Social Justice Advocacy for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Students

This article explores how school counselors can become advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) students by supporting gay-straight alliances (GSAs) on their campuses. GSAs are non-curricular groups that provide support and advocacy for students that are LGBTQ and their allies (Bidell, 2007, in press). While these groups welcome students of any sexual orientation or gender identity, their primary aim is to provide a safe, supportive, and positive space for LGBTQ students and their allies. Establishing and supporting GSA's can be a powerful means by which school counselors create safer school climates for LGBTQ students and redress the pressing psychosocial issues facing LGBTQ youth in our schools.

A Crisis in Our Schools

Middle and high schools can be perilous environments for LGBTQ students. LGBTQ youth are especially vulnerable to both verbal and physical harassment from their peers. Recent data provide alarming examples of how schools, instead of a place to learn and develop socially, can be a hostile environment for LGBTQ students. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) conducted the most comprehensive nationwide survey, the 2009 National School Climate Survey of over 7,000 LGBTQ (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). The survey provides disquieting information about the hostility many LGBTQ youth endure in their schools. Close to three-fourths of LGBTQ students heard prejudicial remarks (e.g., fag, dyke, queer, and faggot) at school and almost 61% reported feeling unsafe in their school. Almost all LGBTQ students said "gay" was used as a negative pejorative causing them

to feel bothered or disturbed. Approximately 85% of the students were verbally harassed and almost half were physically assaulted because of their minority sexual orientation or gender identity. Over half of the youth experienced cyberbullying regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. Middle school students reported higher levels of LGBTQ motivated verbal and physical harassment as well as physical assault compared to high school student. Confirming GLSEN's data, other research (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2003) shows that LGBTQ youth are far more likely to describe being bullied, sexually harassed, and/or physically abused compared to heterosexual students.

Verbal and physical harassment directed toward LGBTQ students takes a tremendous toll. LGBTQ students that are bullied suffer from emotional, psychological, and educational problems. These include absenteeism, poor academic performance and achievement, and even diminished educational aspirations (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Jones & Clarke, 2007; Kosciw et al., 2010). Data from the 2009 GLSEN survey shows over 30% of LGBTQ students reported a missed class or school day because of feeling unsafe or uncomfortable at school – a rate approximately four times higher compared to non-LGBTQ students. Compared to their heterosexual counterparts, LGBTQ students were significantly more likely to forgo post-secondary education planning (Kosciw et al., 2010). As the levels of verbal and physical bullying increase, so do the negative outcomes. LGBTQ students describing more frequent levels of harassment missed over three times as much school, had lower grade point averages, and described a lower desire to enter college than LGBTQ student experiencing lower levels of harassment (Kosciw et al., 2010). Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002) found that

LGBTQ youth reporting high amounts of bullying at school had higher rates of health risks (e.g., substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and sexual risk taking) compared to heterosexual students reporting similar levels of victimization. Unfortunately, school personnel can be direct or passive contributors to verbal harassment by making prejudicial remarks themselves or failing to intervene when others do so.

Roughly two-thirds of LGBTQ students heard school staff using prejudicial remarks and even more reported that school personnel failed to intervene when in the presence of others making such comments (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008). It is not surprising that the majority of LGBTQ students failed to report these incidents and believed that doing so would result in little to no action or make the situation worse if they told school staff (Kosciw et al., 2008, 2010). Specific to the counseling profession, counselors and trainees may hold opprobrious views regarding LGBTQ issues that inhibit their support of sexual orientation and gender identity minority students (Barrett & McWhirter, 2002; Henke, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2009; Satcher & Schumacker, 2009). Furthermore, counselors often report feeling inadequate and ill prepared regarding their sexual orientation counselor competency (Bidell, 2005; Rock, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2010). Examining close to 150 counselor trainees, Bidell (2011) found that school counseling students self-reported significantly lower sexual orientation counselor competency compared to community/agency students.

The harassment and bullying most LGBTQ students experience while at school not only creates a hostile environment to navigate, but likely exacerbates the multiple risks and psychosocial problems they already face. There is now a consensus among professionals that LGBTQ youth (regardless of their victimization experiences at school)

are at heightened risk for a host of serious psychosocial problems including: (a) mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, (b) early onset of substance use and abuse, (c) risky sexual behaviors and HIV infection, (d) suicidal ideation and attempts, as well as (e) homelessness and the resultant problems LGBT youth face on the streets (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Coker, Austin, & Schuster, 2010; Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998; Jiang, Perry, & Hesser, 2010; Kelleher, 2009; Lewis, 2009; Marshal et al., 2008). These data point to a crisis in our nations' schools, which urgently call to professional school counselors for action, advocacy, and leadership.

Gay Straight Alliances

While there is some debate over their first emergence, no one disputes that GSAs are one of the fastest growing student organizations and are representative “of the contemporary movement for social justice across the United States” (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009, p. 892). There are now over 4,000 registered GSAs throughout the United States (GLSEN, n.d.) and similar types of organizations are beginning to spread internationally. The roots of GSAs are often traced to Fairfax High School in California and three Boston area high schools. In 1985, Dr. Virginia Uribe started Project 10 at Fairfax High School in California after faculty and school staff became enraged about the experiences of an African-American gay male transfer student (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). The student,

was physically abused by peers, and verbally abused by teachers and peers alike. . . dropped out . . . becoming one more casualty of a system that neither

understood, nor cared about him. His rejection was a systematic repeat of his experiences at four previous schools (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992, p. 10).

A comprehensive counseling and education program was developed in 1985 for LGBTQ students called Project 10 (the name is representative of Alfred Kinsey's estimation of the population thought to be sexual orientation minorities). Project 10 is still active within the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Influenced by the work of Project 10, three groups that initially coined the term *gay-straight alliance* were formed between 1987 and 1989 in the Boston area. Kevin Jennings, a former history teacher, is often credited with founding the first GSA in 1988 at Concord Academy in Massachusetts. By 1990, gay and lesbian educators in Massachusetts formed the Gay and Lesbian Independent School Teachers Network to support LGBTQ youth and worked with the State of Massachusetts to adopt the GSA-model in their Safe School Program. By 1995, the network became a national origination and changed its name in 1997 to the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network or GLSEN. GLSEN is now the largest organization in the United States supporting LGBTQ students and GSAs. Similar to GLSEN, the Gay-Straight Alliance Network provides leadership, networking, and advocacy regarding GSAs and safe school environments for LGBTQ students (Gay-Straight Alliance Network, n.d.). The organization was started in 1998 to support GSAs in the San Francisco Bay Area and is now a national organization.

While GSAs have existed since the late 1980s, legal challenges to ban or curtail these organizations didn't begin to arise until the 1990's. Primarily motivated by conservative religious beliefs, some parents, school administrators, and politicians have

opposed GSAs, claiming they promote homosexuality and promiscuity, as well as act as recruiting beacons for students confused about their sexuality. Legal efforts to ban GSAs have largely been struck down by federal court rulings based on the protections afforded in the Equal Access Act of 1984 as well as the First Amendment of the United States Constitution (Mercier, 2009).

The Orange Unified School District's unanimous decision in 1999 to prohibit a GSA at El Modena High School in California was one of the first cases decided using the Equal Access Act. Students at the school argued the decision to ban the organization was a violation of the Equal Access Act and their First Amendment constitutional rights. U.S. District Court Judge David Carter issued a preliminary injunction in 2000 ordering the school district permit the GSA at El Modena High School (Colin ex rel. Colin v. Orange Unified School District, 2000). It was determined that the Orange County School Board was in violation of the Equal Access Act and settled the case by agreeing to recognize the GSA organization.

The 98th Congress passed the Equal Access Act in 1984, compelling federally funded schools to provide equal access to all extra- or non-curricular student clubs. Conservative Christian religious groups seeking to guarantee the rights of students to form extra-curricular Bible study groups on school campuses sponsored the initial legislation. The law applies to any school accepting federal funding and has a limited open forum (i.e., student-led non-curricular organizations granted permission by the school to meet outside of instructional periods). The Equal Access Act mandates that any school receiving federal aid and having at least one student-led non-curriculum club cannot deny, restrict, or discriminate against any student organization on the basis of

religious, political, or other philosophical speech. Furthermore the school must give each group equal access to common resources such as meeting spaces, public address systems, and school publications.

Notwithstanding the nearly unanimous legal support of GSAs, school boards and politicians have continued their efforts to find methods that hinder GSAs. For example, the Salt Lake City School District took the unprecedented step of banning all extra-curricular student groups in February 1996 as a way to maintain compliance with the Equal Access Act, but also prohibit the GSA formed in 1995 at East High School. The conflict resulted in considerable media attention and federal court involvement. Upon appeal, the American Counseling Association along with other school and youth professional organizations submitted a friend of the court brief stating the need for and importance of GSAs in public schools. After an appeal at the federal level was fully briefed in 2000, the Salt Lake City School District reversed its ban, and permitted all non-curricular student groups, including GSAs, to organize and meet. It is interesting to note that the Salt Lake City District recently approved a policy protecting LGBTQ students against discrimination and harassment at school – the first such policy in the state of Utah (Drake, 2010). Furthermore, GSAs are on the rise throughout Utah with the creation of over 30 new GSAs within the last year (Eckholm, 2011).

For the most part, legal challenges to ban GSAs have largely been unsuccessful based on the protections afforded in both the Equal Access Act as well as the United States Constitution's First Amendment (Mercier, 2009). However, some school boards and administrators, not supportive of these groups, continue to develop policy and legislation using

extreme measures . . . to prevent GSAs from organizing and meeting on school premises reveal[ing] that the deep animus of local communities and school board officials towards gay and lesbian individuals is in fact the driving force behind their actions (Mercier, 2009, p. 179).

One recent example includes the development of policies requiring students to obtain parental consent to join or participate in extra-curricular clubs and organizations. The state of Georgia has passed such legislation and similar laws have been enacted or are being considered in several other states. Whittaker (2009) argues that parental consent legislation to thwart GSAs is a direct violation of the freedom to associate provision in the First Amendment. Even with the attempts to limit or ban GSAs, these organizations are flourishing across the country and constitute one of the fast growing forms of student non-curricular groups in schools today (Kosciw et al., 2008, 2010; Russell et al., 2009).

Social Justice Advocacy and Gay Straight Alliances

Advocacy is increasingly seen as a core component of the professional school counselor's role and ethical responsibility (Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010). Drawing on advocacy competencies, the ASCA National Model® (2005) sees school counselors as professionals that employ leadership, advocacy, and collaboration to effect systemic changes that facilitate a safe and supportive school environment, which in turn improves the academic, emotional, and social lives of their students. Singh et al. (2010) define a school counselor social justice advocate as one that addresses "educational inequities and differences in academic achievement that may be grounded in issues of race/ethnicity, gender, class, disability status, and sexual orientation, and

that may prevent many students from maximizing their academic, social, and personal potential” (p. 135). GSAs are a powerful tool school counselors can utilize to actualize social justice advocacy for LGBTQ youth.

There is overwhelming evidence that GSAs can significantly enhance the lives of LGBTQ youth. GSAs provide LGBTQ students numerous opportunities to become empowered and less isolated. Participation in GSAs or other types of support groups has been shown to significantly help the physical, emotional, academic, and social lives of LGBTQ youth (Crowley, Harré, & Lunt, 2007; Friedman-Nimz et al., 2006; Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Grossman & Kerner, 1998; Nesmith, Burton, & Cosgrove, 1999; Russell et al., 2009). Walls, Kane, & Wisneski (2010) analyzed the experiences of almost 300 LGBTQ youth concerning how the presence or absences, as well as level of participation in GSAs impacted absenteeism, school safety, and victimization. Their findings show that LGBTQ students in schools with GSAs reported better academic performance and attendance compared to students in schools without GSAs. It seems the mere presence of the GSA might be a protective force. The students enrolled at schools with GSAs who reported limited or no participation in the organization on their campus similarly showed the beneficial gains of those students engaged with their GSA. Students attending a school with a GSA are less likely to hear prejudicial comments, experience verbal harassment and physical assault, or skip school (Kosciw et al., 2008, 2010). Moreover, these students reported an improved school climate where they felt safer and had a stronger sense of belonging to their school community.

Becoming a GSA advisor is a direct and powerful way for a school counselor to support LGBTQ students. Yet doing so can be a difficult decision that elicits

professional concerns and fears. Valenti and Campbell (2009) describe that teachers feared important aspects of their job such as tenure, dismissal, or retribution if they became GSA advisors. They also worried that their credibility might be undermined in the school and that some school personnel might automatically assume they were LGBTQ or wanted to convert students. School counselors have identified similar concerns when describing their involvement with ethnic and economic social justice and advocacy work in their schools (Singh et al., 2010). The decision to become a GSA advisor needs to be made carefully and with the consideration of how such involvement might impact ones' professional and personal life.

Counselor educators need to play a more central role. By developing LGBTQ curriculum, educators can facilitate counseling students' sexual orientation and gender identity competencies (Bidell, 2005). Additionally, school counseling students need specific knowledge about the multiple educational, social, and emotional problems LGBTQ youth face at school. Counselor educators can also design LGBTQ advocacy assignments as a means to help school counseling students explore their own biases as well as develop the requisite skills necessary to become an ally, advocate, and GSA advisor. Dillon et al. (2004) found that it was crucial for counselors in training to examine their heterosexual biases and attitudes about sexual orientation and gender identity before they could be effective allies. Counselor educators must take a leadership role in developing, implementing, and evaluating training and education that supports LGBTQ counselor competencies and affirmative counseling services (Bidell, 2005; Dillon et al., 2004).

Headquartered in New York City and Washington, D.C., GLSEN is a comprehensive and established LGBTQ resource for professional school counselors, trainees, and counselor educators. During an interview with Martha Langmuir, GLSEN's director of community initiatives, several key points were outlined for school counselors regarding LGBTQ student advocacy. She acknowledged the challenges school personnel face when supporting a GSA in a non-supportive school district. Langmuir suggests school counselors and other staff interested in social change and justice for LGBTQ students start with being a "visible ally in all the ways it seems appropriate and safe to be [because] if LGBTQ students don't know you are an ally, your support is invisible" (personal communication, May 19, 2010). She also recommended school counselors consider starting with activities that are less comprehensive before undertaking the larger task of supporting and advising a GSA. For example, GLSEN's Safe Space Kit is a tool to help implement specific LGBTQ advocacy interventions that might be an initial step to developing more comprehensive LGBTQ school support programs. It can begin the process of change and help counselors gain a sense of the political climate at their school and within their community.

Other GLSEN advocacy resources that school counselors can utilize include: (a) The day of silence; (b) No-name calling week; (c) The GLSEN lunchbox, and (d) GLSEN K-12 curricula and lesson plans. All of these resources are available to school counselors on the GLSEN website and are powerful ways for counselors to start the process of LGBTQ support, advocacy, and GSA creation in their schools. In addition to these resources, GLSEN offers an Educator Training Program that provides training workshops to help school professionals gain additional resources and tools regarding

ways to implement school-based programs that make schools safer and more supportive for LGBTQ students. Research shows that LGBTQ education and advocacy programs in schools can significantly improve the school's climate (Horowitz & Hansen, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2010). All of these GLSEN activities and interventions have the potential to positively impact the school climate for LGBTQ students and to be an important step toward the development of a GSA.

Conclusion

LGBTQ youth face extraordinary stressors often with few or no resources, allies, or mentors available to help them at home or school. Unlike other minority young people, LGBTQ youth typically do not have parents, siblings, and extended family members that share their minority status. Hence, LGBTQ youth cannot draw on the support, experience, and wisdom of their family regarding how to navigate a minority identity within the dominant hetero- and gender-normative culture. Thus, LGBTQ students can be intensely isolated with minimal resources to draw upon. By taking incremental, tangible, and concrete steps to support LGBTQ students, school counselors can become powerful advocates and begin to actualize social justice advocacy for their LGBTQ students.

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Resources

Amplify-LGBTQ Youth Resource: www.youthresource.com

Association for LGBT Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC): www.algbtic.org

Center for Excellence in School Counseling and Leadership (CESCaL): www.cescal.org

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD): www.glaad.org

Gay & Lesbian National Hotline: www.glnh.org

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network: www.glsen.org

Gay-Straight Alliance Network: www.gsanetwork.org

The Hetrick-Martin Institute (Home of The Harvey Milk High School): www.hmi.org

Human Rights Campaign: www.hrc.org/issues/youth_and_campus_activism.asp

Scholarship Search: www.hrc.org/issues/youth_and_campus_activism/8644.htm

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund: www.lambdalegal.org

Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center (LYRIC): www.lyric.org

Like Me Organization: www.likeme.org

The National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC): www.nyacyouth.org

Parent, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays: www.pflag.org

The Point Foundation: www.pointfoundation.org

Project 10: www.project10.org

The R. Scott Hitt Foundation: www.scotthittfoundation.org

The Trevor Project: www.thetrevorproject.org

Youth Guardian Services: www.youth-guard.org

Biographical Statement

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