

## **Best Practices for adults interested in working with Middle School Gay-Straight Alliances**

### **Role of advisor:**

- Since students unlikely to have had many opportunities for leadership by the time they reach middle school, advisors will need to help them learn those skills. Look for appropriate opportunities for students to step up and lead and then support them as they try on these new roles. Make sure not to set them up to fail by giving them a task beyond their current skill set and then not providing support and guidance.
- Help participants mediate the social structure of an ongoing club. Integrate lessons and discussions on “how clubs work” into the ongoing structure of the meetings.
- While it is important that GSAs and similar clubs be student-initiated and student-led, recognize that many middle school students are not aware that they CAN start a club at their school. Share the idea with students who you think might be interested. Let them know you will help them navigate the steps towards official club status.
- Work with the students to advertise the club to the broader school community. Role model talking up the club as appropriate with other students and colleagues.

### **Educating students about LGBTQ and other diversity issues inside and outside of the student club:**

- Check your own biases and prejudices towards young people, especially in regard to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) issues. Make sure other adults working with the GSA do the same.
- Honor students’ right to self-identify and be the expert on their own lives. At the same time don’t be surprised when students either question or change the way they label (or don’t label) themselves.
- Help students be able to identify and dispel myths about LGBTQ people. Help them to discern and evaluate social & cultural messages about what it means to LGBTQ as well as male, female, etc. Provide them with opportunities to seek out and identify their authentic self.
- Provide information about healthy relationships as appropriate.
- Help students examine their own biases and see the connections to other isms (ie, build commitment to standing up for others, not just LGBTQ folks)

### **Structuring club time and meetings:**

- Help members to both identify and understand the purpose of their club. This can/will change over time.
- Meet with student leaders ahead of time to plan each meeting. Decide who will be responsible for each section of the agenda and help students prepare for their roles.
- With the students develop and regularly revisit ground rules upon which the entire group have approved.

- There should be no expectation for any participant to reveal their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
- Student clubs that meet after school should strive to be different from the regular school day. Create a relaxed environment and provide more time for socializing as well as team building activities.
- Provide group with a short menu of two to four manageable projects and or activities. Help them learn how to set priorities and a realistic work schedule.
- If possible help the club be as project-oriented as possible. Focusing on a project or a culminating event is likely to provide focus, urgency, and a sense of purpose which in turn are likely to encourage regular attendance. Another strategy is to set the club up as a series of finite commitments. Work on a project or two for six to eight weeks, and then start a new project. Be sure to advertise and promote these natural jumping on points.

### **Providing Support in the GSA setting:**

- While GSAs provide support to students who must daily face a heterosexist culture and school community, GSAs are not a therapeutic group. Advocate for a specific therapeutic group if necessary.
- Don't let the emotional needs of one student dominate the entire group. Work with students to get the extra attention they need outside of GSA. Help them to understand the function of the GSA and discern what appropriate group involvement is.

### **Relationship with the school community:**

- Look for opportunities to build alliances with other groups and clubs. Help students connect the effort to eliminate heterosexism and homophobia with efforts to eliminate racism, sexism, classism, and so on.
- Educate your colleagues about LGBTQ issues whenever possible. Provide them with simple tools to interrupt homophobic name-calling and teasing.
- Help your administration support you in private and in public. Provide them with tools and resources to help them better understand and describe the nature of the group and the work you are doing.
- Keep you administrators apprised of projects that might spark a strong reaction. While the school cannot treat the GSA in a way that is different from the way they treat other non-curricular clubs, they can only benefit from receiving heads up when an activity or project is likely to catch the attention of others.