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Guest Viewpoint: View Gay-Straight Alliance clubs as partners

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National School Boards Association
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12/10/02 - Julie Silva was determined. The enthusiastic and intense 17-year-old had decided in May 2001 to start a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club at Clovis High School in Clovis, a medium-sized town in California's culturally conservative San Joaquin Valley.

The first requirement was that she produce a list naming other students who wanted to join the GSA, a significant hurdle in itself, given many students' confidentiality concerns.

She then began the arduous process of gaining administrative approval for the club. More than nine months of negotiations, meetings, and delays passed - extending into the second semester of the next school year - before the school board allowed Clovis High GSA to meet. In the meantime, many other clubs had gained faster approval.
"I am not going away, and neither is the issue of intolerance and homophobia," Silva says.

Unlike many cases involving GSAs and reluctant school districts, Julie's experience didn't make national headlines or result in a lawsuit. It represents the extremely grudging acceptance that many GSAs have encountered across the country.

Gay-Straight Alliances are here to stay. After years of local controversy and struggle, most school administrators and school boards now recognize that these student-led clubs have an equal access right to exist.

But it's time for school administrators and school boards to move beyond grudging acceptance. GSAs provide significant opportunities for youth leadership development and can be valuable partners in supporting schools' commitment - and legal obligation - to provide a safe and

nondiscriminatory school experience.

New research shows, in fact, that the presence of a GSA does exactly that. Researcher Laura Szalacha examined the effects of GSAs on schools in Massachusetts and found that having a GSA in a school is associated with a more positive school climate.

The presence of a GSA correlated strongly with reduced harassment. In schools without GSAs, 75 percent of students reported hearing slurs against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) youths every day. In schools with GSAs, that number was nearly 20 percent lower.

Data from surveys across the country, including the federal Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, point to the persistence of anti-LGBT harassment and violence and to its negative health consequences for targeted students.
Students who might not be LGBT but whose identity, appearance, mannerisms, or even choice of extracurricular activities don't conform to social expectations based on their gender also are often targeted.

Furthermore, allowing harassment to persist without an appropriate response damages the overall school environment and fosters a climate of division, isolation, and fear.

GSAs began forming in the late 1980s in response to this hostility. The intention was to make schools safer through education, support, and advocacy. Nearly 300 GSAs are registered with the GSA Network in California, and estimates put the number of GSAs in the rest of the country at well over 1,000.

How do GSAs change their campuses? Laura Vilchez, GSA president in South Pasadena High School in California, noticed, like many students, that teachers often didn't know how to respond to anti-LGBT slurs.

She and other club members led a poster campaign to give teachers a tool to help them articulate a clear response. The posters declared a "Hate-Free Zone," and in the process of asking teachers to display them in their classroom, GSA members educated teachers about the importance of responding to slurs.

Other GSAs conduct teacher training or peer training, make videos focusing on LGBT student issues and experiences, or meet with principals to promote stronger responses to harassment.

How does a school benefit from having a GSA club? Improved overall safety, greater well-being for LGBT students, youth leadership development, and a general improvement in school climate are the most important benefits. But a GSA and its educational efforts can also help a school fulfill its legal obligations to provide a safe and nondiscriminatory learning environment.

If your state has a nondiscrimination law that includes sexual orientation or gender identity, your GSA can play a key role in helping implement that law.

If your state has no such law, your district is still obligated by the Constitution and federal law not to discriminate, and a GSA can support you in fulfilling that obligation.

It is in every school's interest to support GSAs and the leadership they bring to the problem of homophobia and bias-motivated violence on campus.

Here are a few ways that school boards can support GSAs and partner with students to create safer schools:

• Don't place obstacles in the way of students who are trying to form a GSA. Treat a GSA just as you would treat any student-led extracurricular club.
• Let GSAs know that you support their work and make sure they know that you would welcome meeting with them to discuss how your district can improve its school climate.
• Consider offering small grants to any student organization that undertakes work to promote fairness, tolerance, and safety on campus.
• Stand up for the rights of students, even in the face of controversy.
• Recognize that GSAs are about nondiscrimination and safety, not sex.
• Don't try to make GSAs take the word "gay" out of the club's name. A federal court has ruled that such efforts violate students' fundamental free speech rights.

This year, Visalia (Calif.) Unified School District settled a lawsuit brought on behalf of the GSA Network and a former student who was systematically harassed and discriminated against because of his sexual orientation.
The settlement consists of a three-year consent decree in which the district committed to providing teacher training and peer training to all ninth-graders in the district on California's sexual orientation nondiscrimination law.
Who will provide the peer training? GSA club members and other student leaders will be at the forefront. From opposition to partnership - school districts can and should transform their relationship to Gay-Straight Alliances.

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