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ST. GEORGE, Utah — Some disapproving classmates called members of the new club "Satanists." Another asked one of the girls involved, "Do you have a disease?"

Students in St. George, Utah, after gathering for a meeting of the Gay-Straight Alliances.

But at three local high schools here this fall, dozens of gay students and their supporters finally convened the first Gay-Straight Alliances in the history of this conservative, largely Mormon city. It was a turning point here and for the state, where administrators, teachers and even the Legislature have tried for years to block support groups for gay youths, calling them everything from inappropriate to immoral.

The new alliances in St. George were part of a drastic rise this fall in the number of clubs statewide, reflecting new activism by gay and lesbian students, an organizing drive by a gay rights group and the intervention of the American Civil Liberties Union, which has threatened to sue districts that put up arbitrary hurdles. Last January, only 9 high schools in Utah had active Gay-Straight Alliances; by last month, the number had reached 32.

The alliances must still work around a 2007 state law that was expressly intended to stifle them by requiring parental permission to join and barring any discussions of sexuality or contraception, even to prevent diseases.

Gayle Ruzicka, president of the Utah Eagle Forum, a conservative family group, promoted the law. Its authors expected, she said, that requiring parental permission would deter some children from joining the alliances and that restricting topics for discussion would mean that "there's not a

lot of purpose in being there, and the clubs end up being pretty small."

"I just don't think these clubs are appropriate in schools," Ms. Ruzicka said. "You can talk about providing support, but you're also creating a gay recruiting tool."

But members of the new clubs said they were undaunted by the restrictions, which they said showed a misunderstanding of what the alliances meant for students who had often lived with fear and shame — at home and at school.

Kate Hanson, a 15-year-old bisexual sophomore at Snow Canyon High School, said that having the alliance "helps you realize that there are others like you and there are people who support you."

"I was so excited when I heard we could have a G.S.A.," she said. "I just thought it would be a fun club."

With the increase in alliances, Utah is joining a growing national movement to provide friendly meeting places in schools for students who have often felt like misfits, clubs where gay youths and their supporters can socialize, speak out against discrimination and sponsor events like the Day of Silence in honor of bullied students.

Since the first club was formed in Massachusetts in 1988, by a gay boy and a straight girl with same-sex parents who were tired of being stigmatized, the organizations have spread to most of the country, reaching more than 4,000 high schools and even a handful of middle schools by 2008. The clubs are surging anew after recent publicized suicides of gay teenagers, said Eliza Byard, director of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network in New York.

The struggles of the alliances in Utah are known to advocates around the country. In 1997, when Salt Lake City school officials discovered that they could not single out alliances for a ban, they took the extraordinary step of outlawing all extracurricular clubs in district schools.

That move drew national attention and helped spur the creation of new alliances in other states, said Carolyn Laub, director of the GSA Network, a group based in California that provides leadership training.

The Salt Lake district eventually backed down, but as of last January, only nine clubs were active in the state, six of those in the capital.

Publicity about the breakthrough in St. George, an isolated city in the red-bluff desert of southwest Utah, has inspired students in other parts of the state, and by last month at least 32 clubs were operating, said Eric Hamren of the Utah Pride Center in Salt Lake City. He spent last spring and summer locating and training student organizers, finding some of them at the annual Queer Prom that his organization puts on for gay and lesbian students around the state.

But resistance continues. Some schools are still imposing legally shaky barriers, like requiring the unanimous approval of student officers or prohibiting activities that violate "community morals," said Darcy Goddard, legal director of the A.C.L.U. of Utah.

As she did in St. George last year, Ms. Goddard has warned officials that such policies may violate the federal Equal Access Act— a law passed by Congress in the 1980s, mainly to protect Bible study groups in schools, that has become a prime tool for protecting Gay-Straight Alliances from arbitrary hurdles.

In 2007, conservative groups pushed through the state Student Clubs Act, still on the books, that was aimed at the alliances and reflected what rights groups called misleading stereotypes.

The law requires parental permission for participation in all school clubs and says organizations can be barred to “protect the physical, emotional, psychological or moral well-being of students and faculty.”

Students say the law reflects misconceptions about both homosexuality and the alliances, which in many cases are led by straight girls who want to support gay friends or siblings. The club at Dixie High School here, for example, is led by Bethany Coyle, a senior who describes herself as straight and a supporter of equal rights. She said that one vice principal had asked if the club would recruit homosexuals and that students had scrawled epithets on a sign-up sheet, scaring off some potential members.

A teacher advising one of the new clubs in St. George said that he opened each of the weekly meetings with a reminder of the forbidden topics of discussion, but that it was proving irrelevant. The students, he said, seemed more interested in making friends and planning events.

Jason Osmanski, a 17-year-old junior who was a driving force behind the new alliance at Snow Canyon High School and now serves as its president, said that while members sometimes shared stories of harassment, they did not need to discuss sexuality at the meetings.

If the students’ legal right to a club seems firmly established, antigay feelings in the community persist. Alliance members in St. George were disheartened by school board elections this fall, when several candidates spoke out against the groups, saying they hoped parents would refuse to give their permission for students to join.

The students say that they are ready to adapt to any reasonable conditions, and that they will persevere.

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