Are you interested in social justice? Human rights? Safe schools? Have you ever thought about starting a gay-straight student alliance (GSA) in your school?

So you're asking, What's a GSA?

A GSA is a student-led and teacher facilitated school-based group that works to create a welcoming, respectful, and safe space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ*) students and their allies in schools. Typically, GSAs are designed to provide a safe and inclusive space for students to meet, socialize, and support one another as they discuss their feelings and experiences related to sexual orientation and gender identity issues.

GSAs are now one of the fastest growing social movements in North American schools! The first known GSA started in 1989 in Concord, Massachusetts. You might be surprised to know that Alberta’s first GSA was established in 2000 at Lindsay Thurber Comprehensive High School in Red Deer. Yes, that’s real缔——RED DEER!

Over 4,000 GSAs now exist in the United States. In fact, 1 in 10 high schools in the US has a GSA in Canada, Ontario and Manitoba both have legislation supporting a student’s legal right to start a GSA and name it as such in their school. In Alberta, Edmonton Public Schools has a Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity policy, which supports students who want to start a GSA. As a result, there are now 20 GSAs in the Edmonton Public School District. The Alberta Teachers’ Association also has a policy encouraging school boards to support GSAs in all schools where students request them.

OK, this sounds cool, but how do I do it?

Here are 10 proven tips and strategies to help get you started.

1. Follow all school/district policies and guidelines

A GSA must be approved and established in the same way that any other group in your school is formed. Check your student handbook or district policies to see what your school’s rules are for student groups. These rules may require you to seek the permission of a teacher, school administration, and/or enlist the support of other students. If you can, find lots of support and look for a diverse group of allies to help get you started. Be sure to put your request in writing and keep all correspondence with your school administration.

2. Find a GSA advisor

Find a teacher, administrator, or school staff member who would be willing to serve as a supportive ally for your group. If possible, try to include both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ advisors in your group. Remember, diversity will be your group’s greatest strength.

3. Speak to your school administration

Encourage your school administration team to become your allies. School administrators can work with your GSA to help demonstrate that your group is a valued and important part of your school community. Administrators also serve as an important liaison between students, teachers, parents, school boards, and the larger community – be sure to include them in your planning. Remember, if you follow all the proper procedures, a school cannot turn down your request to start a GSA if they do, you can seek legal advice to support your request. All schools must abide by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which explicitly provides protection on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation.

4. Inform school counsellors and other school resource people about your GSA

School resource workers, like police officers, youth workers, and school counselors, will often know of students who might benefit from your school’s GSA. School counsellors, in particular, may be an important source of support for students who need professional support and guidance. School can be a lonely and difficult experience for all youth in general, but especially so for LGBTQ youth. Your GSA can help to make a positive difference! Research shows that GSAs are a proven and effective intervention and prevention site, which helps to reduce suicide ideation, substance abuse, and other self-harming behaviours. GSAs also help to promote a sense of belonging, attachment, and connection to the school environment, which is critical to any student’s academic success.

5. Develop a mission or vision statement

A guiding core statement of beliefs can help to inform your group, and in turn, demonstrate how serious and important your GSA is to the school community. Organize your GSAs mission and vision statements to include principles related to diversity, human rights, and social justice. Find out what your school or district’s educational priorities and goals are and demonstrate how your GSA helps to live them out.

6. Find a safe meeting place

Select a safe and comfortable location in your school that is relatively private. Remember that some students may feel uncomfortable and nervous when first attending meetings. Try to create an atmosphere that accommodates all individuals and comfort levels. Safety and confidentiality should always be the primary concerns of your GSA. It might not be the best idea to pick a meeting place next to your football team hangs out. Then again, you could always invite them to attend. Never underestimate who might be an ally!

7. Advertise your group

Work with your GSA advisor to discuss the best ways to advertise your group. Consider having a “poster party” to design flyers announcing your group’s meetings. Remember to emphasize that ALL students are welcome and encouraged to attend your GSA. Remember, it is a gay and straight alliance! Be inclusive of all students and identities.

If posters become defaced or torn down, don’t get discouraged. Work with your advisor to use this opportunity as a “teachable moment” to talk about prejudice and discrimination. The simplest presence of your group’s posters and the words lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender can send a powerful message of inclusion and they can help to educate students about the diversity in your school.

By simply putting up posters and being visible, many students might begin to feel safer at school by knowing they and/or their families and friends are welcomed and recognized as important members of the school community. Some of these students might never attend your GSA, but be assured that they will know there is a safe and supportive space for them should they ever need it.

Make sure your posters set a positive tone for your group. Include the meeting time, location, and date. Think about including a small description about what goes on at your meetings and be sure to highlight that everyone is welcome and their confidentiality and safety are guaranteed. If your school has a web space for student groups, consider developing a webpage for your GSA. You can also advertise your group through social media networks.

8. Schedule your first meeting

Select a meeting time that is convenient for most of your participants. Revisit the group’s mission statement and brainstorm possible activities and discussion topics for future meetings. Some GSAs hold meetings on a weekly basis, others monthly. Determine what kind of schedule will work best for your group. If your GSA has a budget, don’t forget to bring snacks to your meetings. Everyone loves free food!

9. Establish clear guidelines

Think about establishing specific ground rules for group discussions that reaffirm responsible and respectful behaviors. Reinforce the importance of straight allies in your group and make an extra effort to make your GSA welcoming to transgender, two-spirit, and youth of colour and/or youth with differing ethnic, class, religious, or ability backgrounds. In addition to creating a welcoming environment, work together to develop and establish a group philosophy or mini Charter of Rights & Freedoms that can be posted and read at the beginning of each meeting.

Keep a positive and supportive tone in your group meetings and remember to emphasize the importance of equal participation (by students and advisors), confidentiality, safety, and the right of individuals to make mistakes and learn from them. Be clear that gossip and lalaip have no place in your group. Ensure that bullying or exclusion will never be tolerated.

10. Plan for the future

Work with your GSA to develop an action plan that will help to make your group an active and sustainable presence in your school. Your action plan might include long and short range goals and priorities. Possible activities could include: LGBTQ-themed movies from the National Film Board of Canada; guest speakers; holding joint meetings and events with other school groups; writing articles for the school newspaper or website; networking with local LGBTQ groups; doing a web search on LGBTQ youth issues; visiting your school library and suggesting potential LGBTQ-themed books and media resources; creating bulletin board displays about LGBTQ history; starting an LGBTQ book club; inviting LGBTQ school alumni to come and speak to your group or school; or planning school-wide activities to celebrate National Coming Out Day (October 11); Transgender Day of Remembrance (November); Bullying Prevention Awareness Week (November); Pink T-Shirt Day (February); Day of Silence (April); International Day Against Homophobia & Transphobia (May); and you can even host your own Pride Day or Week in your school. The possibilities are endless! Be creative and have fun!