

Frequently Asked Questions about Middle School GSA's

Much of this information was inspired by the great work of, and questions from, SFUSD MS LSL's in previous years, as well as from resources available on the GSA Network website at www.gsanetwork.com.

1. What is a GSA?

The acronym "GSA" means Gay, Straight Alliance. It is an opportunity for students to gather to discuss issues and plan activities related to diversity, inclusive of any number of topics ranging from racism to ageism. The club should include topics inclusive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues. The overall goal of the GSA is to create a safer learning environment for all students, with an emphasis on gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning students and families. Individual GSAs should determine objectives to meet that goal.

Each GSA is tailored to fit the needs and structure of a particular school, therefore the GSA at your school will likely look different than any other GSA.

GSA's can be called Rainbow Club, or any other name students choose. Some SFUSD GSA MS clubs have been called: The Ally Club, Wellness Club, and Diversity Club. This document will refer to the club as "GSA."



2. It makes sense to have a GSA in High School, but why should we have a GSA's in Middle School?

Each year more and more Middle School students are coming out: they and their friends need a safe place to share their experiences and ask questions. In all likelihood, there are also students who have parents or family members who are LGBT.



Homophobic slurs such as "fag" and "queer" are frequently used in schools. **According to the 2007 SFUSD School Climate Survey, 87% of SFUSD middle School students have heard other students use anti-gay remarks.** The GSA is encouraged to address any variety of school issues related to safety and violence prevention.

3. What is the point of having a GSA if there are no lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ) persons on our campus?

You may not know of LGBTQ persons because students, staff and/or family members, may not be forthcoming about their sexual orientation if they do not feel safe coming out. If there are no out members of your school community, consider why this may be the case. People may not feel comfortable coming out until they are assured that they will not be rejected. Regardless of the number of LGBTQ persons or those with LGBTQ family members who are part of your school community, there are a variety of benefits of a having a Middle School GSA.



How can your GSA provide an opportunity for students to experience the following healthy behaviors and beliefs to help limited making risky choices?

A growing body of research suggests that a wide range of adolescents' health problems could be avoided by ensuring that all youth have support, connections, and opportunities in their communities. Adolescents are less likely to engage in risky behaviors if they:

- Have a sense of physical, emotional, and economic **security**;
- Have **connections with adults and peers**, in particular, a strong relationship with caring adult;
- Are able to **make a contribution to the community** and **have input into decision-making**;
- Believe that others have **high expectations** of them; and
- Have **opportunities for participation** in engaging and challenging activities that build skills and competencies.

Clayton SL, Brindis, CD, Hamor JA, Raiden-Wright H, Fong, C. (2000). Investing in Adolescent Health: A Social Imperative for California's Future. San Francisco, CA: University of California, San Francisco. National adolescent Health Information Center.

4. How many meetings should we have?



Consider what you would like to accomplish with your students. There is no specific required number of meetings. Some clubs may decide to meet once or twice a week, others only once every other week. Some groups may meet frequently, even daily, when working on a specific project and not as frequently during other times, such as when testing occurs.

5. Where should the meetings take place?

Some clubs have met in teacher's rooms, counseling offices, or other locations. Keep in mind that some students may wish to discuss private issues and may not feel comfortable in a very public place like the library or cafeteria.

6. What are some ways to encourage students to participate in the club?

◆ **Publicize!** Before the first meeting post announcements in the hallway, in your classroom, in the daily bulletin, as part of the daily announcement or any other way that new clubs are promoted. Students who come to the first meeting may create their own flyers for future meetings, activities or events.

◆ **Connect** meetings with an event, such as Violence Prevention month in January. Having students participate in a school—wide event gives the group purpose, and empowers student interest with the larger school community.

◆ **Get teacher and faculty buy in!** Share what you are doing with other teachers at faculty meetings, teacher bulletins, or whenever you can. There may be teachers who are interested in participating in the group. Counselors may know of particular students who may be interested in being a member of the club. And, of course, talk with the other members of the **Healthy School Team**.



- ◆ Provide healthy **snacks!** Check with local stores for donations.
- ◆ Get **student buy in!** Ask students what they want out of a club, what they think are the needs and ways to address those needs. Have a conversation with the students, create a survey. The interests, needs, and energy of the youth participants should be the driving force behind the objectives and activities of the club. Some of this may be done before or at the first meeting.
- ◆ Be **creative!** Have the students draw signs announcing meetings or have an anti-slur/anti-discrimination poster campaign.
- ◆ Make it **FUN!** Have games, and music.
- ◆ Give **extra credit!** If students are helping create a safer school by organizing Health Awareness Events, writing articles for the school newspaper, promoting a conflict mediation training, or creating bulletin boards for the school, teachers may be willing to give the students extra credit.

7. What should our meeting include?

First meeting: Establish **objectives** for the club. How is the GSA going to create a safer school? Although, as the faculty advisor, it is good to have ideas about what the club may accomplish, the students should take an active role in deciding the goal(s) of the meeting.

The first meeting should include **ground rules** that everyone can agree upon. Common rules may be to keep information shared in the club confidential, and the right to “pass.”

All meetings: Remember, second and third meetings may be the first meeting for newcomers. The goal, objectives, and rules should be on display or reviewed at each meeting. Each meeting should move toward achieving the goals and objectives set out by the club. Before the end of each meeting, establish when and where the next meeting is going to take place.

Project or End-of-Year wrap up: The end of the year or the end of a project should be acknowledged. It is important for students to know that their work made a difference, large or small.

Toward the end of the school year, provide summer resources for camps, intern opportunities and other places where youth may go to find support and/or continue with the work they have started within the school. SHPD will provide information on a variety of summer resources in the Spring.

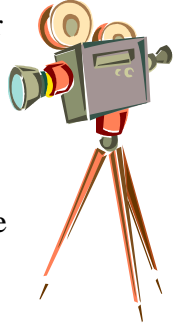
8. What are some projects that we can do with our club?

The objectives and goals should drive what is done at the meetings. For example, if the main goal of the club is to reduce slurs used at school, the activity may be to have an anti-slur assembly, poster or essay contest.

- ◆ **Organize** an anti-bullying / name-calling I violence prevention assembly.
- ◆ **Coordinate** a school wide **celebration** of Health Awareness activities such as **Violence Prevention** month in January or **Gay Pride** in April.
- ◆ **Create** posters for an anti-slur campaign or have a poster or essay contest.
- ◆ **Promote** the Ally Program by distributing flyers provided by SHPD or make new ones.



- ◆ **Educate** other students in homeroom, student council or specific classes about the accomplishments, work, and activities of the GSA.
- ◆ **Teach** the teachers at staff meeting about your goals and how they may support your work. Check out the LGBTQ curriculum for resources.
- ◆ **Invite** outside speakers to come to a GSA meeting, to individual classes, to staff meetings or to school wide assemblies. (See the CBO list and Approved Speakers list in the HST manual.)
- ◆ **Meet** students from other SFUSD MS GSA5 to socialize or work together on projects.
- ◆ **Watch** a movie that addresses diversity and/or gay related themes and discuss the film afterwards. Provide popcorn for an added treat. A movie meeting is a great way to celebrate the end of the year.
- ◆ Conduct a school wide **safety survey** and implement a plan to address issues of safety.



9. Are parents required to sign permission slips before their child can participate in the GSA? How should I respond to parent and caregiver concerns?

Because the overall goal of the GSA is to help create a safe place for all students in the school community, parent notification is not required for students to join the GSA. Follow the same procedure established at your school for all other clubs.

Parents may have questions about the GSA. Regardless of the question, acknowledge that you appreciate their interest in learning about the activities their child is involved in.

Answer questions **honestly** and **clearly** with family members. If you do not feel comfortable answering a particular question or know the answer, let the parent know that you will get back to them with their answer as soon as possible. Be sure to follow up as soon as possible.

10. I have tried almost everything to encourage students to participate in a GSA, but there has been no interest. What should I do?

The most successful clubs have been separate from other organizations and groups. However if this is simply not possible, consider the alternatives below.

- ◆ Work with students who may be interested in promoting specific monthly health awareness events such as Respect Promotion in January or Gay Pride in April.
- ◆ LSL's have occasionally coordinated similar activities with students who participate in: The Student Council, Conflict Medication Programs, After School Programs, Health, Social Studies of English Classes, and a variety of already established clubs.

11. Help! I have more questions!

Don't worry, you are not expected to know all the answers!



Many questions may be answered in other sections of the HST binder. Contact the School Health Programs Department at 242.2615 or with questions or concerns. The CBO resource list and approved speakers includes a list of resources for LGBTQ youth and families.