

## Nutrition, Health and Safety

### Gay/Straight Alliances: A Student Guide Introduction

The third Board of Education Recommendation on the Support and Safety of Gay and Lesbian Students encourages schools to offer school-based support groups for gay, lesbian and heterosexual students.

This guide is for students and student organizations to help them plan support groups for gay, lesbian and heterosexual students. Methods of providing this kind of support will vary from school to school, depending on the goals of the organizing group and the climate of the school. Because Gay/Straight Alliances have been successfully formed in more Massachusetts schools than any other type of support group for gay, lesbian and heterosexual students, this guide focuses on how to start and maintain such a group. The guide can also help you think about how to organize other types of support groups as well.

School-based support groups can provide students with a place to meet and talk about issues related to sexual orientation. These groups can help to change the climate of a school and make it safer for all students. There are also numerous community-based groups that reach out to young people. This section takes a look at different types of support groups in Massachusetts for gay, lesbian and heterosexual students interested in addressing issues related to sexual orientation, anti-gay prejudice and the concerns of lesbian and gay students and their friends. They provide a safe and informal place where students can:

- Talk about their feelings and experiences;
- Learn about homophobia and how it affects everyone;
- Educate each other and their school community about issues relating to sexual orientation (including planning a Day of Awareness for the school community); and
- Have fun going to movies and plays, hosting dances, playing group games, going on picnics, attending political rallies and marches, and hosting speakers, writers, artists, and musicians.

The goals of school-based support groups are:

1. to provide safe places for gay, lesbian and heterosexual students to meet in school;
2. to offer opportunities to learn and teach about the challenges surrounding sexual orientation; and
3. to build community spirit, mutual understanding and support among gay and lesbian students and their friends.

### Gay Straight Alliances

Gay/Straight Alliances help to reduce anti-gay violence, harassment and discrimination by educating the school community about homophobia and by encouraging a greater degree of understanding from students and school personnel. The groups also give all students a safe place to discuss their feelings and fears related to sexual orientation.

A brief sampling of high school campuses reveals a variety of names for these groups. Some use "Gay/Straight Alliance" in their title - for example, Belmont High School Gay/Straight Alliance - while others choose more distinctive terms like SPECTRUM at Concord-Carlisle Regional High School and Project 10 East at Cambridge Rindge and Latin. Some unique names at private schools include Northfield Mount Hermon School Homo-Bi-Hetero Society, GASP! (Gay and Straight People) at Milton Academy, and LeSGaB (Lesbian, Straight, Gay and Bisexual) at Noble and Greenough School.

Gay/Straight Alliances are student-run and have a limited number of faculty advisors, usually two, who help facilitate the group, offer resources and support, and mediate discussions. It is important to note that adults should participate in a limited basis and in an advisory capacity only. If too many adults are in the room, students complain that staff/faculty spend too much time talking about their own issues and dominate discussions. Over time, fewer and fewer students attend the meetings. Adults who want to join a group should consider forming their own parallel Faculty/Staff Support and/or Study Group.

Many groups suggest drawing up a list of rules that might include:

- Meetings and discussions are confidential - names of group members and anything said at meetings are to remain within the confines of that space;
- Students, teachers and staff participate as equal members; and
- Members are in no way obligated to declare or define their sexual orientation, nor are any assumptions to be made regarding members' sexual orientation.

Groups tend to change their agendas for each week depending on the needs of the participants. Most try to strike a balance between the political work of raising consciousness and reducing homophobia at the school, and dealing with the more personal or emotional issues of the members and offering the members support. (See sections on Out and About: Other Activities and Top Ten List of Suggestions for Awesome Meetings.)

Some groups meet more often than others: Barnstable High School's group meets once a month; Watertown High School's group meets once a week. The size of groups also varies widely from school to school, from just a few members to over fifty. It is important to stress that it does not matter how many people go to meetings. The work Gay/Straight Alliances do fighting prejudice and discrimination can impact the lives of everyone in the student body, and just a few students can make it happen.

Rachel Mazor, a member of Brookline High School's Gay/Straight Alliance, sees progress as a result of her group. "There has been a

change in the general atmosphere of the school. There is an enormous awareness of what homophobia is and that there are homosexual and bisexual students." She said that, since the creation of the Gay/Straight Alliance, teachers have attended workshops to deal with their own homophobia and that of their students, and are learning how to help students who are struggling with issues of sexual orientation. "People are now willing to interrupt homophobic jokes and slurs. People now include sexual orientation when talking about diversity."



(See 10 Easy Steps to Starting a Gay/Straight Alliance in Your School.)

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