

## Article 45

### **Gay–Straight Alliances Impact on School Climate and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender Student Well-Being**

Paper based on a program presented at the 2013 Texas Counseling Association Conference, November 21, 2013, San Antonio, TX.

Elizabeth Deming, Katie Soule, Nicole Poulsen, and Tony Walker

Deming, Elizabeth J., is a Texas certified school counselor at Communities in Schools in Lubbock, Texas. She has 10 years combined experience working with students in both a school and university setting. Her research focus is school counseling and school counselor development, efficacy, and advocacy.

Soule, Kathryn J., is an academic advisor at the University of North Texas. She also works in private practice doing play therapy and art therapy with children.

Poulsen, Nicole L., is a Crisis Specialist at Star Care in Lubbock, Texas. She has experience working with trauma in adolescents, severe mental health, and suicidality. Her research interests include crisis and trauma.

Walker, Tony J., is a licensed professional counselor and certified school counselor at Uplift Education in Dallas, Texas. He coordinates a team of mental health professionals that operate within the school network and has an expertise in school related counseling programs and implementation. His research interests include school counseling program development, low-income adolescent issues, and LGBT adolescent advocacy.

#### **Abstract**

A literature review of Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs) and their impacts on student perceptions of safety and well-being in school is presented. The authors also examine how schools with active GSAs feel and function and how the school culture compares to schools without GSAs. Research suggests that the presence of GSAs in schools leads to both short- and long-term benefits to students, for both lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) students and their heterosexual allies. Though GSAs face legal barriers in school settings, this review outlines benefits in detail and conveys that literature promotes the continued support and creation of Gay–Straight Alliances in schools.

Keywords: gay–straight alliance, GSA, LGBT adolescents, LGBT issues in schools

In a world in which 85% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) youth report being harassed because of their sexual orientation (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011), 64% report feeling unsafe at school (Mayberry, 2006). A survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) collected

comprehensive survey results on students ages 12-18 and showed that only 4% of total students indicated they felt afraid of attack or harm on school premises (Aud et al., 2011), however studies repeatedly show higher risks of physical assault and suicide among LGBT youth (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2003). It is clear that LGBT youth are still in dire need of interventions to help ensure their safety and well-being. Research has shown that one effective means of intervention is the concept of a Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA; Griffin et al., 2003; Mayberry, 2006). A GSA is a school-sponsored group, which is open to all youth and specifically welcomes LGBT adolescents and their heterosexual supporters, known as allies (Fetner & Kush, 2008). GSAs can serve multiple functions that include counseling or support groups, social organizations, and even educational and activist movements within schools (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). Despite the tremendous benefits of GSAs, which will be summarized in this review, research indicates that less than half of LGBT students attend a school that offers a GSA or similar group (GLSEN, 2011). Although the body of current literature explores various components of GSAs in great detail, the authors could find no review that compiled knowledge specifically relating to the overall impact of GSAs on student perceptions and well-being and the long- and short-term effects of these groups, both individually and systemically.

The purpose of this review, then, is threefold: (a) to compile the current literature on GSAs, specifically as it relates to their impact on student well-being and perceptions of safety and belonging in school; (b) to synthesize how schools with GSAs feel and function, examining how they promote student safety and belonging as compared to schools that do not have active GSAs; and (c) to justify the continued support and creation of GSAs and express the need for continued research on them and other interventions that are effective in aiding LGBT youth.

## **Literature Review**

### **Experiences of LGBT Youth**

It is well documented in the literature that LGBT youth experiences differ from those of their heterosexual counterparts when it comes to gender identity and race and ethnicity issues (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Sausa, 2005). The existing body of research indicates “gay or bisexual males may be more likely to experience victimization based on their sexual orientation and gender expression than their lesbian and bisexual female peers” (Kosciw et al., 2009, p. 977). Additionally, transgender youth experience higher levels of victimization than their lesbian, gay, and bisexual peers. Kosciw and Diaz (2006) found that Caucasian LGBT youth experienced less racially motivated harassment in school than LGBT youth of color. However, they did not find racial or ethnic group differences in harassment associated with gender expression or sexual orientation. An interesting finding related to the multicultural aspects of LGBT youth revealed that African American students were less likely to be bullied than Caucasian or Latino youth (Nansel et al., 2001).

**Harassment and bullying.** Regardless of ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity, Nansel et al. (2001) and NCES (2011) found that students in middle school or junior high school were at greater risk for harassment and bullying than high school students. Community climate and regional differences can account for differing

experiences of harassment and victimization as well. Based on a national study of LGBT youth's experiences, Kosciw and Diaz (2006) showed that youth residing in the South and Midwest were significantly more likely to be victimized than youth living in the West or Northeast. Community climate comes into play as LGBT youth in rural communities experience more harassment and assault related to sexual orientation and gender expression than their peers living in urban or suburban communities (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Kosciw et al., 2009).

**Victimization of LGBT youth.** Shockingly, even school poverty levels contribute to negative experiences of LGBT youth. Kosciw et al. (2009) found that youth in higher poverty communities reported more victimization based on gender expression and sexual expression than in more affluent communities. Unfortunately, victimization of LGBT youth has a host of negative consequences as evidenced by recent research (American Association of Suicidology, 2013; GLESEN, 2011; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). Compared with heterosexuals, LGBT youth are at a higher risk for bullying, harassment, absenteeism, substance use, low self-esteem, depression, and suicidality. One student said explicitly, "Bullying in our school is mostly verbal, but it hurts just as much as any physical pain... Teachers rarely do anything about it" (GLESEN, 2011, p. 26). Another student stated, "I stopped going to school for four months before graduation because I couldn't handle the bullying anymore. I will not get to attend my senior prom... and throw my graduation cap in the air" (GLESEN, 2011, p. 41). In regard to absenteeism, 32% of LGBT students reported missing at least one entire day of school in the past month due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable (GLESEN, 2011). Perhaps the most shocking and imminent risk factor that faces LGBT youth is suicidality.

### **Suicide Risk and Protective Factors Among LGBT Youth**

For the past few decades, statistical reports of LGBT youth suicides have varied greatly in different studies (American Association of Suicidology, 2013). The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2008) provided an overview of these statistics and indicated that studies vary widely in reports. For example, one study reported that 20.5% of lesbian youth had attempted suicide while another study found that 52.4% of lesbian youth had attempted suicide at least once in their life (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1998). While statistics vary, it is clear that being a youth and being someone who identifies as LGBT are both risk factors for suicide (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

**Suicide risk factors.** Currently there is a lack of quantitative research on GSAs to provide a clearer overall picture of how GSAs mitigate suicide and substance abuse risk factors in LGBT youth (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Lee, 2002; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011). The following are risk factors for suicide: a history of suicide attempts, hopelessness, "barriers to access mental health treatment," relational or social loss, and isolation (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (2013, para. 2) also cited the following additional risk factors: substance abuse, a serious life stressor, and "prolonged stress due to adversities such as unemployment, serious relationship conflict, harassment, or bullying."

Research indicates that LGBT youth experience higher levels of these risk factors, which also include harassment and victimization, as well as stress associated with their sexual orientation (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Lee, 2002;

Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2008). One study of 361 New York youth revealed that, among LGBT youth suicide attempters, "high levels of parental psychological abuse, more parental discouragement of childhood gender atypical behavior, and more lifetime gay-related verbal abuse were characteristic of attempters" (D'Augelli et al., 2005, p.657). This study also found that one third of the sampled group reported a history of suicide attempts. However, only 15% reported serious suicide attempts (attempts that required some medical attention). Of this group of attempters, "half of the males and one third of the females considered their suicide attempts to be related to their sexual orientation" (D'Augelli et al., 2005, p.657).

**Suicide protective factors.** It is clear from these studies that LGBT youth are in need of an environment that provides support, acceptance, affirmation of gender and individual expression, coping skills, and empowerment. Despite the fact that many LGBT youth face risk factors, there are still protective factors that may be put in place. Protective factors include access to interventions and support, "family and community support," and "learned skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, and nonviolent handling of disputes" (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999, p.10). GSAs attempt to promote these protective factors in youth by providing support, building community, and taking "action to create change" (GSANetwork.org, 2013).

The reality is that GSAs are what the students and school make them to be. The GSA Network Web site provides a list of resources that members and faculty can use to assess current school climate and policies and provides members with a starting point for social change and leadership. The Web site also offers resources for peer education workshops and for starting and running an effective GSA. Despite these efforts, however, there is no standard protocol for GSAs or for the level of student involvement or activism. These factors will directly affect how effective students perceive their GSAs to be and will impact how greatly the student organization influences school climate and suicide protective factors in LGBT youth. In addition, these attributes of GSAs may impact protective factors such as conflict resolution and problem solving as student members are taught how to advocate for themselves and their peers.

In a study conducted with 306 LGBT youth in the in the Denver area, 83.7% of students who attended schools with a GSA were able to identify a safe adult at their school, as opposed to 55.6% of students in schools that did not have a GSA (Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). This statistic supports the idea that GSAs promote the protective factor of social support and intervention in LGBT youth. In addition, 18.5% of students who attended a school with a GSA reported fewer absences from school due to fear compared with their non-GSA counterparts (19.44%; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). This was true regardless of whether or not the student was a member of the school's GSA. This may be attributed to changes in overall school climate, which may promote protective factors such as community support.

### **The Benefits of GSAs in Schools**

A growing body of literature has explored the impact and effects of GSAs in schools as these groups have become more widely established (GLSEN, 2011; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2013; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Lee, 2002; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). According to a recent nationwide survey, there are now more than 3,000 GSAs in the country, although less

than half of self-identified LGBT students attend a school in which a GSA or similar group exists (GLSEN, 2011). In comparing schools with and without GSAs, researchers have noted numerous benefits to LGBT students (Lee, 2002; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). These gains have been attributed to differences in both individual social support and the school environment (GLSEN, 2011; Lee, 2002).

**Social support.** Perhaps the most obvious impact of GSAs in schools is the immediate social support network available to LGBT students. While adolescence may be a time of profound loneliness, Lee (2002) suggested that GSAs provide a safe space for students to develop positive relationships. GSA members reported being able to connect with classmates dealing with similar issues, such as coming out, forming relationships, identifying supportive staff, and developing coping strategies. Being part of the group reportedly helped students feel less lonely and isolated as they were free to express themselves honestly. This openness translated to more genuine relationships outside of the GSA with heterosexual peers and teachers, as students reported they no longer felt they were withholding part of their identity from everyone around them (Lee, 2002).

Another benefit of increased social support reported by students who participated in GSAs was a feeling of safety in numbers in the face of bullying or harassment (GLSEN, 2011; Lee, 2002). Among those who were harassed at comparatively lower levels, membership in a GSA was associated with decreased depression and fewer suicide attempts (Toomey et al., 2011). Students reported that membership in the group gave them a support system so that they did not feel like they were facing bullying alone (GLSEN, 2011). As one female high school student member put it, "I personally feel a lot less scared because of the group. Because we have numbers now. Because we are seen and because we are visible" (Lee, 2002, p. 16).

**School environment.** Regardless of whether or not students are members of a GSA, they may benefit from the presence of a GSA in their school. In fact, some studies have found that the on-campus presence of a GSA is even more predictive of positive outcomes than membership in a GSA with regards to levels of bullying and student well-being (Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). This is likely due to positive differences in the overall school environment (Walls et al., 2010). Students who attended schools with a GSA reportedly felt safer, were less likely to hear homophobic remarks, experienced less bullying and harassment, reported that school personnel were more likely to intervene against bullying, and identified supportive adults who were made visible by the group (GLSEN, 2011; Goodenow et al., 2006; Lee, 2002; Szalacha, 2003). Possibly as a result, students with a GSA located on campus felt more connected to their school and had more interest in their coursework (Lee, 2002).

GSAs can also actively contribute to a school environment that is safer for all LGBT students by providing an avenue for advocacy (GLSEN, 2011). In addition to providing individual support with regards to bullying, GSAs can organize programs to educate the larger student body and staff about the effects of harassment and ways to intervene. Members of GSAs can also organize to advocate for changes in school policies to help create a safer, less hostile environment for students (Russell, McGuire, Laub, & Manke, 2006). Recommended changes include a more inclusive curriculum with positive representations of LGBT individuals, as well as explicit antibullying policies that specifically address sexual orientation and gender expression (GLSEN, 2011; Russell et

al., 2006). These changes demonstrate to both staff and students that LGBT students are equally protected from bullying and harassment and ensure student safety.

### **The Need for Change and Legal Implications**

Though many schools have been successful in creating effective GSAs on their campuses, many more have failed regardless of the 1984 Federal Equal Access Act that mandated schools receiving federal funding cannot discriminate against student groups. Schools such as Yulee High School and Okeechobee High School (ACLU, 2009) have won suits that now allow GSA groups to meet on campus. Still, many LGBT students and allies alike fight for equality on their campuses. For example, the Governor Mifflin School District has an active Internet filter that prevents student access to LGBT communities. At the same time, sites for organizations that condemn homosexuality were not blocked (ACLU, 2013). Students were unable to access Web sites for organizations such as the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), Safe Schools Coalition, Freedom to Marry, the Equality Federation, and Lambda Legal. Sites such as these were blocked for falling into the commercial filtering software's "sexuality" filter (ACLU, 2013). Official letters from the ACLU have been sent to the Governor Mifflin School District, though no ruling has yet been made. Although students and the ACLU may bring suit against school districts in defense of LGBT equality, cases that make it to the federal court level are not always successful. In the case of *Caudillo v. Lubbock Independent School District* (2004), Lubbock Independent School District won the federal case against the formation of a Gay and Proud (GAP) group based on the fact that the school district has the authority to exclude sexually explicit, indecent, or lewd speech (*Caudillo v. Lubbock Independent School District*, 2004). The court concluded that both the discussion of safe sex and the websites linked to the Gay and Proud group's site included speech of an indecent nature. The court ruled that Lubbock Independent School District engaged in permissible, viewpoint-neutral exclusion of sexual subject matter (*Caudillo v. Lubbock Independent School District*, 2004). Since the ruling, a number of articles have been written questioning the validity of the ruling due to the court acting on speculative misconduct (Orman, 2006; Riener, 2006). There are various resources available to school personnel who want to begin a GSA or for those facing challenges in creating a GSA, including: <http://www.glsen.org>, <http://community.pflag.org/>, <https://www.gsanetwork.org/>, and <https://www.aclu.org/lgbt-rights/>, among others. Regardless of success or failure in legal matters, the ultimate goal of this literature review is to illuminate the factors that negatively impact LGBT students on campuses without GSAs. Toomey et al. (2011) eloquently states "school administration and personnel should be supportive in helping students to form and facilitate GSAs in schools as a potential source of promoting positive development for this underserved population" (p.183).

### **Conclusion**

Research suggests that GSAs are effective in creating a more positive school culture and climate (Heck, Flentje & Cochran, 2013; GLSEN, 2011; Goodenow et al., 2006; Heck et al., 2013; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Lee, 2002; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et

al., 2010). GSAs help students feel safer, and they are less likely to hear discriminatory comments, while the frequency of LGBT bullying incidents declines, and students are better able to identify supportive adults with whom to connect (GLSEN, 2011; Goodenow et al., 2006; Lee, 2002; Szalacha, 2003). GSAs improve LGBT student motivation and bolster academic achievement (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Lee, 2002). Of critical importance is that research suggests incidents of suicide decrease and there are lower levels of depression found in LGBT students (Toomey et al., 2011). In the long term, students have higher overall psychosocial well-being and an increased chance of graduating college (Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). These are among the distinct features that schools with GSAs manifest, as contrasted with their non-GSA counterparts. While academic literature clearly conveys the benefits of GSAs, there are still schools and individuals who resist the creation of these important student organizations (GLSEN, 2011).

Perhaps one solution is continued research to support the formation of GSAs and educate key decision makers. Currently, there is a noticeable lack of quantitative studies on GSAs to help justify their existence. Additionally, there is a staggering lack of quantitative research on how GSAs mitigate suicide and substance abuse risk factors in LGBT youth, especially since identifying as LGBT is a suicide risk factor (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Lee, 2002; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011). Implementing protective factors such as increased access to interventions, increased family and community support, and practical dispute resolution training is recommended. There is a need for practical program development to help train school staff on LGBT issues. There may be a need for training programs aimed at school administrators to help foster awareness of the benefits of GSAs, their importance in the school setting, and the specific challenges that LGBT students face. Finally, as relevant to any LGBT research topic, there is a compelling need for new or updated counseling theories to generate relevant literature to support working with LGBT adolescents, especially in the school environment.

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*Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: [http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS\\_Home.htm](http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm)*