GLSEN

The GSA Study:

Leader Narratives on Best Practices for

Gender and Sexuality Alliance Clubs

Students have been forming Gender-Sexuality Alliance student clubs (originally known as Gay-Straight Alliances, or GSAs) for over 30 years. Today, they continue to serve multiple purposes, including social support and student advocacy.[1] Much of what is known about GSAs centers on what club participation or presence does for LGBTQ students in terms of their academic performance and mental health, or focuses on the effect of GSAs on the overall school climate. We know, for example, that GSA *participation* is linked to greater feelings of belonging for LGBTQ students,[2] and associated with lower substance use among LGBTQ youth.[3] The *presence* of a GSA improves the overall school climate for LGBTQ students, who report hearing fewer anti-LGBTQ remarks, feeling safer at school regarding their sexual orientation and gender identity, experiencing lower levels of victimization, and having peers more accepting of LGBTQ people.[4] The presence of a GSA, when combined with supportive teachers, also is related to higher college aspirations for LGBTQ youth.[5] Benefits associated with GSA presence positively affect non-LGBTQ students as well.[6]

Despite growing insights on the effects of GSAs, limited research reveals the function of GSA clubs in the school, the nature of their activities, or how they may function better. GSAs may vary in level of student engagement. For example, longer-serving members may engage more than newer members, and members who perceive their GSA as more organized may engage more than those who perceive their GSA as less organized.[7] GSAs also may vary in terms of their activities, whereby nearly all GSAs may provide a safe space to socialize, but many GSAs may also engage in advocacy.[8] Regardless of the specific activities any particular GSA organizes, GSAs are school clubs where youth may be able to learn about themselves and each other by exploring multiple and intersecting identities within an explicit context of a supportive alliance.[9]

In this research brief report, we examined student narratives from a diverse group of GSA student leaders about their experiences in GSA clubs across the U.S. Prior research shows that GSA leaders spent more time per week than members do with their GSA,[10] and thus may have unique perspectives on GSAs as organizations. The sample of twenty student leaders were intentionally selected to ensure representation based on gender identity, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. Several themes emerged from student narratives related to best practices: how to recruit club members, how to create inclusive GSAs, and how to create effective and sustainable clubs. Each theme below includes practical recommendations and tips that are geared toward creating and sustaining inclusive GSAs that address the needs and aspirations of ever-changing cohorts of students in middle and high schools.

Pathways to GSA Membership and Barriers to Recruitment

According to GLSEN's *2019 National School Climate Survey*, 61.6% of LGBTQ students had access to GSAs in secondary schools.[11] However, not all students know what a GSA is or whether a GSA exists at their school. Students learn about and join GSAs in a variety of ways, depending upon their individual circumstances. Based on findings from our previous report on GSAs in U.S. secondary schools (henceforth referred to as the GSA survey report), GSA students and advisors provided various solutions to recruiting new members, including increasing their advertising efforts, attracting more students in general to the GSA, or making the GSA more welcoming and inclusive for all students.[12] With regard to recruitment methods that are inclusive of students of color and transgender and nonbinary students, these included creating resources on pronouns to ensure that GSA members and the school community respected students' names and pronouns, planning activities during Black History Month, and learning about LGBTQ icons who are people of color.[13] GSA advisors also discussed implementing new recruitment methods to increase their membership, such as hanging posters around the school, displaying rainbow flags in their classroom, and planning events to attract new members.[14] Here, we explore how students found their school's GSA in order to identify effective outreach mechanisms for recruiting new members. We also explore barriers that GSAs face in recruiting new members.

Student Pathways to Joining their GSA

Overall, students joined GSAs through one or a combination of common pathways, including club fairs, friend circles, interactions with a trusted adult, and school announcements. The examples below suggest that creating multiple opportunities

for students to join GSAs will enable a diverse range of new members. We also describe barriers to GSA recruitment, and make recommendations for how students and school leaders can address these challenges.

Club fairs

A number of students interviewed found their way to a GSA by attending a club fair. One student, for example, described their experience at the club fair:

> "I got involved in my GSA after seeing a booth for them at the school, on the day of open house where they have all the clubs set up booths that, like, let people have an opportunity to sign up for the clubs. And I signed up on the open house day." (nonbinary/genderqueer, bisexual, white, 10th grader)

Some students who found their way to a GSA through a school event like a club fair, attended with classmates they already knew and trusted. A student, for example, joined their GSA after attending a club fair with a friend:

> "I heard about it [GSA] through a club fair we had at our school, where like different freshmen would walk around and see the different clubs. And I saw our GSA and, me and my friend that was interested in it, we signed up for the club." (cisgender, gay, multiracial, 10th grader)

Having a booth at school club fairs may be a way for classmates to at least learn about the existence of a GSA, even if they do not immediately get involved.

Friend circles

Other students learned about the existence of the GSA at their school because of a friend or classmate. One student remembered that,

> "A classmate of mine told me about the club that I never knew, but she told me when I was a sophomore. So, I looked into the club when I started my junior year and I thought it was interesting so I decided to join." (cisgender, gay, multiracial, 12th grader)

"I first got involved because I had a friend who would go some days and I usually walked home with them, so I ended up going to GSA with them and found it pretty fun."

Similarly, another student recalled:

> "I first got involved because I had a friend who would go some days and I usually walked home with them, so I ended up going to GSA with them and found it pretty fun. And then just started going to GSAs at other schools and stuff." (transgender, other sexual orientation, white, 9th grader)

Still another student learned what a GSA was when they were in ninth grade:

> "I actually heard [about] it from one of my friend's friends who's in my school now, they were [the club] president and went to the GLSEN National Conference." (cisgender, bisexual, Black, 9th grader)

Not surprisingly, word-of-mouth is an effective mechanism for attracting new club members. Current GSA members may want to talk with classmates about what the club does or why they joined, or invite a friend to attend a meeting.

Trusted adults

Trusted adults, such as GSA advisors, teachers, and mental health professionals, also served as sources of information for students who eventually joined a club. A student, for example, who was motivated to join a GSA to become "a better ally to people whose experiences are different than mine," explained that,

> "I initially started going because the teacher that hosted it was one of my favorite teachers and I just felt really safe talking to him and I just enjoyed being in his classroom." (cisgender, straight, Latinx, 11th grader)

A trusted adult also was the pathway to the GSA for a student, who described learning about the school's GSA after coming out to their teacher:

> *"I wanted him to change the pronouns he was using for me in class. He told me about GSA, it was my sophomore year. I didn't join yet, but I joined my junior year." (transgender, queer, multiracial, 12th grader)*

A transgender multiracial student who joined their GSA as a first-year student, had already learned what a GSA was from a counselor in middle school. Similarly, a student shared that they first learned about their GSA through their school's Principal's Council, made up of students and teachers.

> *"So I went to [the meeting] and that's where they introduced us to GSA and another few clubs, which you might wanna be a part of. That's how I met the advisor, too." (nonbinary, bisexual, Asian American/Pacific Islander, 11th grader)*

Students glean information from trusted adults in their life. Parents, educators, and mental health professionals cannot assume that young people already know what a GSA is, whether the school has one, or how to get involved in a club. Having a list of local GSAs would be a helpful resource to youth.

School announcements

Awareness about the existence of a GSA may stem from direct interactions such as participation in a school fair, word-of-mouth among classmates, or a recommendation from a trusted adult. However, students also may learn about GSAs by paying attention to public announcements, flyers, or displays arranged by the club. A student said that they found out about the GSA because "there was either an announcement on the loud speaker and I thought I'd check it out, or I saw it on the school website." (transgender, queer, white, 8th grader). Another student described how a public hallway display contributed to the visibility of the school's GSA:

> *"I heard about it my freshman year, and you know, I would see the GSA display case we have at the end of one of our English pods. There was a glass case and they would have*

> *decorations saying like, "Hey, this is the GSA. This is what we were doing," kind of stuff, and so they would decorate it every once in a while, and then, sometimes if I stayed after school I would see them doing stuff." (nonbinary/genderqueer, asexual, white, 11th grader)*

Students notice announcements, stickers, flyers, posters, and displays. These are effective outreach mechanisms for building awareness and for new members who would benefit from audio and visual reminders of upcoming meetings and activities, whether in-person or on social media.

Barriers to Recruitment

Even when GSAs create multiple pathways to club membership, barriers facing GSAs due to negative public perceptions of GSAs or LGBTQ students within the wider school community may prevent or delay students from learning about or joining a GSA. For some students, stopping by a GSA booth at a school club fair may be too uncomfortable or unsafe due to the level of anti-LGBTQ bias in their school. A student, for example, who recently hosted a GSA booth for incoming first-year high school students, described how

> *"All of the kids would pass by and be like, 'Look, that sign has gay in it,' and then like point and laugh and make fun of it." (transgender, straight, white, 11th grader)*

Unsupportive peers mocking the GSA during the club fair led prospective new members, many of them first-year students, to avoid joining out of fear of being made fun of. Reflecting this school climate concern, fourteen of the twenty students interviewed described ongoing discrimination or harassment from peers. Transgender and nonbinary students detailed experiences of transphobia in theater club and choir, being assaulted because of their gender, hearing anti-LGBTQ slurs and having candy thrown at the GSA during homecoming, and learning that fellow members were being mocked for attending GSA. Cisgender students also reported finding club flyers torn down, and having to address false rumors that a GSA is really just a "gay club." A student described "microaggressions," meaning bias-based remarks or actions that can too easily be dismissed or overlooked by educators, aimed by classmates at the GSA.

"Every time there's a GSA meeting, they have a flag that they'd have outside the classroom. There are people passing by in the hallway and they see that happening so that there can be some sort of rude gesture or glance or something being said by those people." (cisgender, straight, Latinx, 11th grader)

These anti-LGBTQ and anti-GSA messages being aimed at the GSA and broadcast to the school community at large, both reinforce why GSA student clubs are needed in schools as safe spaces, and demonstrate at the same time why it is difficult for some students to join a GSA. Challenges stemming from an anti-LGBTQ school climate may present barriers when GSAs conduct outreach activities. Depending upon the school climate, school events or activities may become more effective recruitment mechanisms when students attend with a friendly classmate.

Based on the above findings, the following are recommendations for school personnel, such as school counselors, teachers, district officials, and administrators, as well as community organizations that support GSAs, to help GSAs effectively reach out and recruit new student members:

- Increase public awareness of the GSA among students, educators, parents, and mental health professionals across the school community.

- Support inclusion of GSAs at school-wide events, such as club fairs, homecoming parades, etc.

- Ensure that GSAs are treated in a non-discriminatory manner as it pertains to marketing the club and hosting its activities.

- Address anti-LGBTQ bias and discrimination so that students have equal access to their school's GSA.

Students: How to effectively recruit new members for your school's GSA.

- Include the name and contact information for the GSA club on your school website.
- Create GSA flyers. Include GSA meetings and activities, post on school bulletin boards, share in school announcements, hang hallway banners, use displays and library exhibit spaces, etc.
- Use social media to build visibility for your GSA, and to promote meetings and events.
- Participate in school club fairs and other school-wide activities to promote your GSA.
- Consider working in solidarity with other school clubs to build support and reach new members beyond your existing circle of friends.
- Distribute GSA outreach materials to teachers and staff and ask them to serve as ambassadors for your club.
- Set aside time during each GSA meeting to welcome newcomers and host events for prospective members throughout the school year.
- Incorporate a range of student voices in club announcements and other outreach materials, so that prospective members can see themselves as belonging in the club.
- Reflect and brainstorm regularly on how your GSA welcomes and retains members.

For GLSEN resources on GSAs, go to: https://www.glsen.org/support-student-gsas

Inclusive GSAs

Findings from the GSA survey report indicated that the majority of students in GSAs were white and cisgender.[15] However, the survey-based report also found that LGBTQ students of color were just as likely to attend GSAs, and be a leader or officer in their school's GSAs, and transgender and nonbinary students were more likely than their cisgender peers to attend GSAs and be a GSA leader.[16] Given prior research that suggests the importance of GSA clubs for LGBTQ students of color, as well as transgender and nonbinary students, in this section we examine how GSAs engage in efforts to be inclusive as a valued foundation of club life. We look specifically at how clubs affirm and provide support to students of color and transgender and nonbinary students.

Three different kinds of efforts to make GSAs more inclusive emerged from the student interviews. One focused on representing diversity, such as by including an array of racial or gender identities on club flyers. A second type focused on education and advocacy activities, such as engaging in discussions about issues related to race/ethnicity and gender or planning activities for Black History Month and Transgender Awareness Week. A third type focused on collaborating with other student groups or organizations, such as social, political, advocacy, and cultural organizations.

In the student interviews, we found that the demographic composition of GSAs and schools were linked in some ways to how clubs engage in being more inclusive through representing diversity and education and advocacy activities.[17] Generally, student leaders from more racially diverse GSAs or clubs with a greater number of transgender and nonbinary members report that their clubs engage in representational as well as education and advocacy activities.[18] Students from less racially diverse GSAs and clubs with less gender diversity comment that their clubs engage more in representational activities than education and advocacy activities. Therefore, we looked at two types of efforts, representing diversity and education and advocacy activities, GSAs use to make their clubs more inclusive by the demographic composition of their GSA and school.

GSAs Engage in Inclusivity by Representing Diversity

The first inclusivity strategy described by student leaders related to representing diversity, including racial and ethnic diversity as well as gender diversity, to affirm and support students of color and transgender and nonbinary students.

Racial/Ethnic Diversity

Clubs focused on the recognition of differences by creating club marketing materials (e.g., flyers and posters) that display people of color or identity markers like flags; having members or leaders of color; and through other supports, like encouraging members to ask friends of color to join the club. A student who attends a majority white GSA within a majority white school indicated that their club uses GLSEN poster designs, which include diverse racial and ethnic identities.

> *"We just kind of use the GLSEN poster designs, like how they feature different identities and stuff on them." (transgender, straight, white, 11th grader)*

However, nearly half of students interviewed indicated that race is *not* something their GSA explicitly discusses, provides information about during club presentations, or includes in outward-facing materials like flyers. Regardless of the racial/ethnic composition of the school or GSA, several students explained this lack of attention to race/ethnicity. A queer, transgender, multiracial 12th grader, who participates in a majority white GSA within a majority white school, for example, indicated that race is not something the GSA ever really discusses. A cisgender, gay, multiracial 10th grader, who participates in a majority white GSA within a majority students-of-color school, explained that most students already know that LGBTQ people of color are supported in the GSA. A student, who participates in a racially mixed GSA within a majority white school, shared that even though the GSA never explicitly says that LGBTQ students of color are welcome, displaying the progress pride flag (a pride flag that includes the transgender flag and black and brown stripes) is a way their club signals its inclusivity.

"Other than that, [displaying the progress pride flag], we don't really say like, 'Oh, people of color are welcome are here' because our school is really diverse. So, I don't really think there's anything besides the flag that would do that, but, like, directly shows like, 'hey, we're inclusive.'" (cisgender, bisexual, Black, 9th grader)

Student leaders' comments suggest that GSAs which do not explicitly provide support around race/ethnicity may exist in schools with low numbers of students of color, may have low club participation by LGBTQ students of color, or may engage primarily or exclusively in representational support of diversity (such as by displaying flags).

Gender Diversity

The majority of GSAs are "majority cisgender," meaning that most members are cisgender. Clubs provide representational supports to acknowledge other genders by including visible representations of transgender and nonbinary identities on club materials like flyers and by having transgender or nonbinary members or leaders (including advisors). A student who attends a majority cisgender GSA shared that, in addition to promoting the sharing of pronouns at the beginning of meetings, their club also includes information about Transgender Day of Remembrance on club posters.

"We did try to, like, actively in our meetings, we would include pronouns. That was the first thing that we would ask anyone, is 'what are your pronouns?' And we had informational meetings about what being trans and nonbinary was for those that may have not known or didn't have enough information about it. We would include that on our posters, just, you know, things that we celebrated. Like, we would celebrate Trans Day of Remembrance and that sort of deal." (cisgender, lesbian, white, 12th grader)

However, as was the case with race/ethnicity, GSAs may not conceptualize inclusivity in terms of needing to address transgender and nonbinary experiences. Of the three students who reported that their club does not explicitly show support for transgender or nonbinary students, two were from majority cisgender GSAs. A cisgender, gay, multiracial 12th grader, who attends a majority cisgender GSA, for example, shared that their

club does not specifically make an effort to show that it is a space for transgender and nonbinary students, but that it is a safe space where everyone can be who they are. Another student, who also attends a majority cisgender GSA, observed that if transgender or nonbinary students came to a GSA meeting, they would see it is an inclusive space.

"I think we don't really do anything to show that we're inclusive in that way, but I think if someone was transgender or non-binary in our school, they'd see we're a safe space for anybody to come." (cisgender, bisexual, Black, 9th grader)

Only one student, a nonbinary, questioning, multiracial ninth grader, indicated that their club does not provide explicit support for transgender or nonbinary students because the club focuses more on sexuality than gender, although the club membership itself is majority transgender or nonbinary. Overall, fewer student leaders reported that their GSAs do not explicitly show that they are safe spaces for transgender and nonbinary students than those who reported their GSA does not show support for students of color. However, the reasons for the absence of visible supports around gender were similar as for race: including having few transgender or nonbinary members in the club and assuming transgender and nonbinary students already know the GSA is inclusive.

GSAs Engage in Inclusivity Through Education and Advocacy Activities

The second inclusivity strategy that student leaders described related to education and advocacy activities that incorporated race/ethnicity and gender.

Education and Advocacy Activities Related to Race/Ethnicity

Some, but not all, clubs also engaged in the second inclusivity strategy of focusing more intentionally on incorporating race and addressing racism within programming and activities. Inclusion activities included doing presentations or having conversations about Black, Latinx, Native and Indigenous, and Asian American/Pacific Islander history, culture, or issues; discussing the experiences of LGBTQ members of color; participating in national days of action or support such as Black History Month; or engaging in other

efforts, like working to address racial slurs or getting translations of materials for non-English speakers. For example, a student who attends a majority students-of-color GSA within a majority students-of-color school, described how their GSA discussed the relationship between the Civil Rights and LGBTQ rights movements and the role of historical icons like Marsha P. Johnson, one of the lead organizers of the Stonewall riot.

> *"The biggest thing would be like when the Black Lives Matters movement started, that was definitely a key point where we talked about a lot of sensitive things. And we couldn't go outside. So we protested through our social media. We showed our support and like, that'll help pretty much feel — I don't know how — I, like, I felt safe, but I can't really talk about others. 'Cause how they feel will be different from mine. And we talked about Marsha P. Johnson, that was around April, before the movement started. And then we brought it up again during Pride Month. So I would say it's pretty well rounded when it comes to making people of color safe." (cisgender, bisexual, Asian American/Pacific Islander, 11th grader)*

A student, who attends a majority white GSA within a majority students-of-color school, spoke about his efforts at inclusion as a young Black gay man in the GSA and within the broader community:

> *"I always talk about being a young Black gay man. It's like, 'look, this is what I have to live in everyday. So you're gonna hear about it.' And especially now with everything that's happening with the Black Lives Matter movement, and with social justice, now more than ever, I've been like, 'Look, this is what's happening in the world, this is what people need to be aware of.' So I learned from just being in my own hometown, by being in my school district where it was like, 'Look, I can't wait around for somebody to have a nice story or a good narrative. I have to make my own narrative.' So I really use my stance as a Black, gay person [and] try to connect things through it because everything is connected. So I definitely use my queer identity to connect [my GSA] with everything that's happening with the Black Lives Matter movement." (cisgender, gay, multiracial, 10th grader)*

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Education and Advocacy Activities Related to Gender

Building on their representation-based efforts, many clubs also focused intentionally on transgender and nonbinary inclusion activities. Inclusion-based pursuits included: encouraging the use of names and pronouns among members and/or advisors; club-internal presentations or discussions about transgender or nonbinary issues, culture, or history; club-internal development or sharing of transgender or nonbinary resources; and, participation in national days of action or support like Transgender Awareness Week, Transgender Day of Visibility, or Transgender Day of Remembrance. One student described what their club does for Transgender Day of Remembrance.

> *"Well, I know every year on the Trans Day Remembrance we have held small demonstrations in our main hallways where we make signs and we stand out in the hallway. The signs typically show names of trans people who have been hate crimed and we typically stand there silent, and we wait for people to come up and talk to us, and ask what it's about." (nonbinary, bisexual, white, 10th grader)*

Creating an inclusive GSA in this way was particularly meaningful to one student in a majority transgender or nonbinary club, who described how transgender and nonbinary students are less likely than their cisgender peers to have supportive spaces outside of the GSA to discuss their problems.

"They [cisgender members] still benefit from [GSA], of course. I feel like it benefits more the trans kids, because those are the kids who come in here with their problems and, like, are able to load it off on our group and then go home. Even if they have, like, a bad house, they can still go home knowing that they told someone about it." (transgender, straight, white, 11th grader)

Generally, clubs that are majority cisgender engage more often in representational diversity efforts than in inclusion activities. Clubs which are either mixed or majority transgender or nonbinary often engage in both representational and inclusion-based supports.

GSAs Engage in Inclusivity by Collaborating with Other Organizations

In addition to representing diversity and engaging in content-based inclusion, student leaders also shared how collaboration with other student groups or organizations enhanced their GSA's inclusivity. According to our GSA survey report, the vast majority of GSA members also participated in non-GSA school-sponsored extracurricular activities.[19] However, only 30.7% of GSA members reported engaging in GSA-based collaborations with non-GSA clubs.[20] Students in the survey report also commented that GSA advisors were least helpful in advancing collaborations and advocacy efforts such as district-wide LGBTQ-Inclusive policies or staff training.[21] In contrast, nearly all GSA leaders in this narrative study reported that their GSAs have worked collaboratively with other student clubs or groups in their schools or communities, or that they have plans to do so in the near future. The difference in reported experiences between GSA members and leaders may be that leaders were aware of, or were involved in, club collaborations in ways that individual members were not.

Student leaders reported that their GSAs worked with social, political, advocacy, or cultural organizations, such as a larger umbrella social justice organization, the Student Equity Team, or the Black Culture Club. GSAs also collaborated with other student groups like the woodworking club, Anime Club, and school band, student government, and student council. A student explained that their GSA collaborated with the carpentry club/class to begin work on a gender-

neutral locker room, requiring coordination not only between students but also between club advisors and the school principal.

"The locker room was the only thing which needed the most work from other groups, we cleaned it, the carpentry club was supposed to make things for it, fix up the locker room and other things, and fix up the showers or the lockers which were broken, which took a lot of time. And then we now we have to wait 'til this year to start the painting process." (cisgender, bisexual, Asian American/Pacific Islander, 11th grader)

Less common school-based collaborations were with organizations that were not explicitly social justice oriented, like Key Club, Strategic Gaming Club, and non-student entities like the Principal's Council or the Parents Council Students reported that their clubs collaborated with community organizations, too: a radio show for LGBTQ youth and a community church. Collaboration between GSAs and other groups occurred around specific projects, such as Halloween or Fall Festival booths for an event organized by the student council or decorations for a GSA homecoming float with the art class.

According to student leaders, a key factor to a GSA's ability to collaborate with other clubs is the involvement of GSA members, leaders, and advisors being involved in other organizations. A transgender, queer, multiracial, recent graduate shared that their GSA had not collaborated with other clubs but would if enough members were involved with another organization. Another student reflected on their role as a "bridge" between clubs and, thus, a facilitator of collaboration.

"I was like one person involved in all these different things. So, I was able to connect them through me. Because, well, we were already connected, where it was like, 'oh, yeah, we support each other, we can use our school resources.' Now I was involved in a lot of different clubs and activities. So, I could be like the bridge that connected them." (cisgender, gay, multiracial, 10th grader)

Based on the findings above, the following are recommendations for school personnel such as counselors, teachers, district officials, and administrators as well as organizations that

support GSAs, about how to make GSAs more inclusive of students of color and transgender and nonbinary students:

- Provide educational and advocacy resources to GSAs related to transgender and nonbinary students and LGBTQ students of color, as well as other marginalized communities such as students with disabilities, immigrant students, etc.

- Encourage GSAs and other clubs to incorporate learning racially inclusive history and anti-racism skills into their LGBTQ-focused activities.

- Help GSAs to collaborate with other student groups or organizations on social, educational, and advocacy activities by connecting club advisors and encouraging inter-club events or initiatives.

Students: How to make your school's GSA more inclusive of students of color and transgender and nonbinary students.

- Make your GSA rooted in inclusion by helping each other learn about gender justice, racial justice, and disability justice, etc.

- Engage in race/ethnicity representation-based diversity and other inclusion efforts: host regular discussions of Black, Native and Indigenous, Latinx, or Asian American/Pacific Islander history, culture, or issues at meetings or events; participate in national days of action or days of support.

- Engage in gender identity representation-based diversity and other inclusion efforts: use affirming names and pronouns; have presentations or discussions about the history, culture, or issues of LGBTQ people of color and white as well as transgender and nonbinary people of color; participate in national days of action and days of support like Black History Month and Transgender Awareness Week.

- Include experiences and stories of joy and strength as well as trauma and loss among people of color and transgender and nonbinary people.

- Actively practice and promote gender-affirming, anti-racist, accessible-to-all inclusivity policies and practices within your GSA and school.

- Examine who makes GSA programming decisions and how they are made, and who runs for and becomes club officers or activity planners: whose perspectives and/or interests are included?

- Democratize participation, attract a range of voices in the room, increase capacity of student clubs, and ensure a diverse pipeline to club leadership, by creating a club that attracts members from across your school community.

- Build relationships for socializing and solidarity with other school clubs and community organizations to set the stage for possible collaborations.

- Mobilize educators and students alike to be visible allies of the GSA and its members and vocal in making unacceptable anti-LGBTQ discrimination in school.

For GLSEN resources on GSAs, go to: https://www.glsen.org/support-student-gsas

Creating Effective and Sustainable GSAs: Student Leaders, Advisors, and Youth-Adult Leadership

An effective GSA is one that has the ability to attract and retain members and leaders (both student and adults), has the requisite resources to host programming aligned with its mission, and has the infrastructure needed to operate as a club. A sustainable GSA is one that is able to consistently manage these capacities over time in ways that reflect the values of the club. Findings from the GSA survey report showed that many GSA students and advisors rated online resources they have used on how to sustain their GSA over time as very or extremely helpful, but they also felt that more of these resources were needed for their GSA.[22] Like other school clubs whose sustainability relies on its student and adult leaders having the capacity to meet the needs of its members, student and adult leaders are critical to creating effective GSAs. However, GSAs may be somewhat unique in that, depending upon location and school climate, the club may be a relatively new addition to the school, and its members and leaders may encounter pushback from within and from outside the school. In this section, we examine the unique roles played by student leaders and advisors in creating effective and sustainable GSAs, and how student leaders and advisors can work together to do so. In the student interviews, several strategies for creating effective and sustainable GSAs emerged, including developing organizational skills, helping students plan educational activities, navigating anti-LGBTQ bias and discrimination, creating a safe space and providing students emotional support, expecting inclusivity within the GSA, and finding the right balance of youth-adult partnership.

Develop and Apply Organizational Skills

As with any school club, GSA club leaders must learn and practice common organizational skills, such as developing an effective meeting agenda or event planning. Student leaders report engaging in tasks that require them to develop new organizational skills or apply existing ones, including applying general organizational skills, facilitating leadership transitions, navigating internal conflicts, communicating with GSA activities, and creating consensus within the GSA.

Applying general organizational skills

Some of the skills needed to run a GSA are similar to those needed to run other school clubs, such as maintaining effective working relationships with school administrators. Student leaders reported submitting paperwork and securing administrative approval in order to establish a new club, hosting events, or hanging and distributing flyers. GSA leaders also manage club-internal tasks like generating meeting minutes, maintaining club records, coming up with ideas for social or advocacy programs, planning and facilitating general club meetings and leadership meetings, and being on-the-ground workers for club activities. All of these organizational tasks require administrative acumen and strategic thinking about suitable and realistic club activities, with short-term and long-term goals in mind.

Facilitating leadership transitions

In tandem with advisors, students coordinate the election of new leaders and help facilitate leadership transitions. This work is made easier in some cases by the transfer of organizational resources, such as PowerPoints and other materials, between leadership groups, as one student explained.

> *"Because we've had our GSA for so long, we have like presentations already made. So … we had a few presentations about queerbaiting and … media. We had presentations about queer sex ed. We had presentations about different derogatory terms. So we had them already made so then, we would just use those. So we never had an issue where it was like, 'Oh, we want to present today but we don't have anything.' If we didn't have anything, then we'd make a new one or we would just use an old one."* (cisgender, gay, multiracial, 10th grader)

Navigating internal conflicts

Student leaders and club advisors must also navigate internal conflicts, including behavior disruptions during meetings and interpersonal conflict among club members. Particularly when interpersonal conflict arises, student leaders, who are themselves students, may be closer to peer dynamics than adult advisors. Half of the 20 GSA

students interviewed mentioned what they called interpersonal conflict, or "drama," among members as disruptive to club efficacy. One student described how two club members who were dating "hijacked" the GSA group chat on social media, making it difficult for other leaders to finalize a date for the next meeting. Although conflict between members may exist in clubs of any size, it can be especially damaging to clubs with small memberships.

"These two kids were dating and they were like having drama in … my GSA group chat. And I was like, 'Guys, I'm just trying to say, when can we have our next meeting?' They'd be sending, like, some mean … sarcastic stuff to each other." (transgender, straight, white, 11th grader)

Communicating about GSA activities

Interviewees also shared that GSA student leaders play a key role in communicating club updates to existing members and doing outreach to potential new members. A student who serves as the Publicity Commissioner for their club described how the GSA uses Instagram to announce club meetings, share messages of encouragement, promote student wellness, and broadcast information about local resources for LGBTQ youth shared by other organizations. Club leaders use the messenger feature of Instagram to coordinate communications tasks behind the scenes.

"Our GSA has an Instagram chat where we'll have our … [leadership] council. And so it will mainly be one of us [who] sends in a post asking, 'Hey, is this okay? Can someone write a caption for it?' Because we [are] very [well] known for our very long captions of, expressing like, 'Hey, you guys are awesome.' And, we'll have confirmations, we'll have checkers. Like, some of us will check it to make sure there's no cussing, there's not anything that will hurt people. And then some of us will edit it, and then we'll ask if a certain person can post it." (cisgender, queer, Native and Indigenous, 9th grader)

Creating consensus within the GSA

One final skill that leaders indirectly described had to do with creating consensus among GSA members and between members and advisors. The GSA

"At the beginning of each year, we usually talk about, 'hey, what do you all want to see this year? What do you want us to work on? What do you want us to kind of back off on and what are topics that you want to know more about?' So we do a list and the [student leaders] all gather up and kind of organize it how we want to do it."

survey report indicated some mismatch between how GSA students and advisors understood the primary purpose of the club or their expectations about programming and activities.[23] The GSA leaders interviewed for this report also described a mismatch in expectations between themselves and club members, or in what they were able to accomplish as part of service to or time with their GSA. For example, some students discussed prior expectations that the club would be more engaged in social justice work, but instead experienced a social club atmosphere where students would primarily hang out and develop friendships

When asked to describe who makes the decision for what their GSA does, student leaders' responses indicate that decision-making is distributed among student members, student leaders, and adult advisors. Some GSAs spend time at the beginning of the school year brainstorming ideas for programming as a club, which leaders and advisors together then complete specific planning around.

"At the beginning of each year, we usually talk about, 'hey, what do you all want to see this year? What do you want us to work on? What do you want us to kind of back off on and what are topics that you want to know more about?' So we do a list and the [student leaders] all gather up and kind of organize it how we want to do it." (transgender, gay, white, 10th grader)

Other GSAs may organize club activities on the basis of student leader and advisor interests.

"*It was like the student leadership and the advisors. Not just one person. It was all of us, like, 'okay, what do we wanna do today? Do we wanna present something or do we wanna just, like, have everyone just chill out, relax and just check in with each other?'*" (cisgender, gay, multiracial, 10th grader)

Although general members and advisors may vary in how much they plan club activities, student leaders play an important role in building consensus by receiving, relaying, and putting into action the ideas shared by members and advisors.

Applying general organizational skills that are similar to other clubs, leadership transitions, interpersonal conflicts, effective communication, and potential differences in priorities among multiple stakeholders in club activities (student members, student leaders, advisors, and administrators) suggests that GSA student leaders may encounter opportunities to improve their organizational skills.

Help Students Plan Education Activities

In addition to helping student leaders with developing organizational skills, advisors can help plan educational activities. GSA student leaders spoke positively about how their advisor supplemented GSA education activities by securing or hosting guest speakers, and that club members were able to interact with and learn from community members who visited their meetings. One student specifically mentioned how helpful it is to have an adult initiate contact with prospective guest speakers.

> "*Our advisor definitely reaches out to people, 'cause, some of us do have, like, social shyness like we do not know how to interact with people and some of us are still learning how to send formal things or how to invite someone to things. So, we would bring up someone we want to talk to during our sessions, and she would try to contact that person. Or she herself would reach out to people who she knows that might be interested in talking to us, or we might be interested.*" (cisgender, bisexual, Asian American/Pacific Islander, 11th grader)

GSA student leaders reported that their advisors also connected their clubs with supplementary educational materials from outside resources. For example, some advisors maintained a set of GSA resources, such as the GLSEN calendar; community resources, such as hotlines and local organizations; or, topical content from national newspapers, like the *New York Times*, that cover LGBTQ current events. One student leader described how their advisor helped to find relevant and accurate information, whether it was readings or videos, when it was related to their professional expertise.

> "*Usually the president of the GSA will kind of pick a topic or an activity for the day, but sometimes if we talk about something that's like related to history or culture or psychology, [and] our teacher is also a history and psychology teacher conveniently enough, so if there's something that's more like research-driven, then he'll provide us with some resources or a video or something to read about or something to talk about.*" (cisgender, straight, Latinx, 11th grader)

Another student reflected on how meaningful it was that their GSA advisor helped them to explore LGBTQ history through documentary and feature films.

> "*Because that history isn't taught anywhere. Like the guy who basically won World War II for us was a gay man. We never discussed that, nobody ever said his name. I never heard his name before. Even out of the mouth of my history teacher. And so it was like stuff like that, especially with my senior year, seeing sophomores and freshmen hearing about people just like them who did things in history. It was really cool, you can just kind of tell that they had never been able to identify with any historical figure before … They [younger students] could see themselves and it makes them feel better and that was one of my favorite things that we did.*" (transgender, queer, multiracial, 12th grader)

Advisors shared educational resources and connected students to outside resources during in-school meetings and activities. They also created opportunities for GSA members to learn more about LGBTQ history and policy issues by helping to plan field trips for students or identifying relevant

conferences for students to attend. GSA advisors can identify resources and broker relationships within and beyond the school community in order to be supportive and effective co-leaders with students of their GSA clubs.

Address Anti-LGBTQ Bias and Discrimination

The GSA survey report indicated that GSAs commonly faced pushback from other students, parents, educators, principals, and other administrators about the GSA.[24] Because GSAs live in an ecosystem where students experience anti-LGBTQ bias and discrimination, this can hinder the effectiveness and sustainability of GSAs. Thus, GSA leaders may need to navigate anti-LGBTQ sentiment and discrimination in their schools to effectively lead the club. Student leaders described pushback to their club's formation or its ongoing existence from administrators. Half of the students interviewed cited school administrators as a frequent barrier to the efficient or effective running of their GSA. Unsupportive administrators mishandled the details of GSA announcements, provided last-minute notifications about school-wide opportunities or required meetings, and were rumored to be transphobic. For example, a student shared how the administration treated her GSA differently than they did other student clubs.

"I think part of it was the fact that we were new and didn't know about all of the little details that we had to get approved. But I think part of it is just because [the administration] … realized that we were subject to any kind of extra outside people that were just not gonna approve [of] us. So they wanted to make sure we were following all the rules that other clubs probably could've gotten away with because they weren't necessarily watched as closely, people weren't scrutinizing them as much. Like, Student Council could get away with giving out flyers that hadn't been approved, and that sort of thing." (cisgender, lesbian, white, 12th grader)

Similarly, GSA leaders may have to deal with how anti-LGBTQ bias affects their recruitment and retention of club members. As noted in the earlier section on outreach, some students who may want to join a GSA may not feel sufficiently safe in their school community to do so, and some GSA students face harassment when attending club meetings. One student also reported that

classmates have signed up to become GSA members as a joke, which creates not only more work and disappointment for GSA leaders, but is also another expression of anti-LGBTQ bias within the school more generally.

Based on their experience with pushback, GSA leaders identified what others who wish to start or sustain a GSA may want to anticipate, learn more about, and/or be prepared for. Students described, for example, long histories of tension between GSAs and administrators, as well as the tremendous amount of work past members did in forming the GSA, such as by making research-backed arguments about the importance of GSAs during school board meetings.

"And our administration took a little bit of convincing to get them [to agree to allow for the formation of a GSA]. Like, I had to do some heavy research about why this would be better for students and then we had to basically go in front of the school board and argue it out." (cisgender, lesbian, white, 12th grader)

One student described how administrators in their school resisted approving the GSA until after the formation of a Minority Students Association, which included a Black Students Group and an Asian Students Group.

Create a Safe Space and Provide Students Emotional Support

GSA student leaders in the interviews agreed with advisors from the GSA survey report that a critical role advisors play as adults is to provide a safe space for club members to meet new people and socialize, and to provide emotional support to students.[25] Students reiterated how important it was to have a place for the GSA to meet and that they relied on their advisors to pay attention to and address student mental health needs.

"But then when the student was thinking about self-harm, and that was like a little bit of an issue, the student went directly to the advisor. And then the advisor was a mandated reporter. And the advisor told the necessary authority, they told the principal, they told their guidance counselor… And thank goodness for the teachers, because they were so nice, and so like understanding what the student, as well as me." (cisgender, gay, multiracial, 10th grader)

The kind of emotional support that GSA advisors offer to students is not limited to crisis intervention. Given that GSA advisors are also educators, it is not surprising that some will also include relationship building and mentorship of students within their role as well. One student, for example, described how their advisor encouraged the GSA member to become a club leader and to expand his school engagement beyond the GSA, too.

> "Oh, definitely. He [the GSA advisor] actually- in my personal case, he actually got me to run as the secretary, to get in that role of leadership. He also, because he runs the yearbook too, like I said, he does everything. He also got me to join that as a designer." (cisgender, pansexual, white, 12th grader)

However, given that GSA advisors are also employees of the school district, they may be bound to enforce school or district policies that may have negative emotional consequences for the students in their GSA - or for students who wish they could join their GSA. For example, some schools or school districts mandate the use of parental consent forms for all school club participation.[26] Students described that when advisors upheld this policy it ended some classmates' ability to attend GSA meetings.

Expect Inclusivity Within the GSA

According to the GSA survey report most GSA advisors are cisgender and white, and close to half are heterosexual;[27] advisors vary in terms of the direct connections they have with the diverse experiences of the LGBTQ community. However, advisors in the GSA survey report also indicated that they felt competent about advocating on behalf of LGBTQ students, including LGBTQ students of color, perhaps because they frequently navigate the school system and advocate for their students in their role as teachers, and thus, may be more equipped to advocate for these students.[28] Overall, GSA student leaders in the interviews reported that their advisors helped to set a tone of inclusivity and anti-discrimination within the GSA.

In one case, a transgender student described speaking to their GSA advisors about gender identity discrimination within the club, thus needing to take a break from their GSA. The advisors stepped in and used their authority role in the club to reset group norms to include gender identity within the scope of the GSA.

> "[The advisors], you know, hopped on the box and [said], 'Hey, this is a place for everyone.' And they actually made it where when you join the club, you do kind of like a verbal contract that says, 'Hey, if you join this club, you're going to respect everyone's identities.'" (transgender, gay, white, 10th grader)

These findings suggest that club advisors play an important role in setting a tone of inclusivity and anti-discrimination within the GSA. By drawing on their GSA-specific skills and knowledge, advisors help to create a space where inclusivity is an expected part of the DNA of their school's GSA.

Finding the Right Balance of Youth-Adult Leadership

Nearly all student interviewees (n=18 or 90%) described their GSA as predominantly student-led, with just two students (10%) indicating that their GSA is co-led by student leaders and their advisor(s). Even for clubs that define themselves as "student-led" or aspire to be "student-led," what that means or looks like may vary. Students depend upon adults in schools, for example, to gain access to meeting space, as well as institutional knowledge and resources. Students benefit, too, from advisors' social and emotional support. And, when they join a GSA, not all students will already know what it means to be a member or a leader of a school club. In the GSA survey report, advisors talked about how they ideally wanted their students to lead the GSA, and they also said that their students may not have the skills to lead or were not interested in doing so. Yet, few advisors believed that one of their roles was to develop student leadership (3.8%).[29] The student leader interviews show that an effective and sustainable GSA requires the right balance between student and adult leadership. Specifically, student experiences in GSAs may improve if club leaders have additional youth-centered support from advisors, including actively engaging in the GSA; helping students with developing leadership skills; increasing organizational capacity of their GSA; addressing LGBTQ-related issues; and, helping students make informed decisions.

According to student leaders, advisors vary a great deal in their levels of engagement with GSAs. Some are more likely to sit in the back of the classroom, provide space, but not engage with the students during meetings. They usually grade or work on other tasks, but are available to answer questions or help manage rowdy student behavior when asked. One student described the advisor's hands-off approach, and then explained how it contributed to a common club-internal struggle that GSAs face, namely, a lack of organizational structure (n=7 or 35%).

> *"Our advisor really just did her own work in the background while the president led. Honestly, she was really just there to make sure we didn't get in trouble. Like she was just watching. She didn't really get involved in anything. There was not a lot of structure in our GSA. It was really just showing up and hanging out. I definitely showed up thinking there would be a lot more like fundraisers than there were. I thought we could, like, plan, or whatever, public events. But I didn't know that we were as unfocused as we were." (transgender, queer, white, 8th grader)*

Another student remarked that, while not unsupportive, the advisors did not actively engage in the GSA. The student said that they felt stymied by the lack of direction from the advisor, which, in turn, seems to have affected the club's overall functionality:

> *"Yeah, I mean they're not unsupportive. But I feel, like, I didn't really know what GSA was all about until I really took your survey and looked and learned about what GSAs might, could do. And I'm not sure if they knew either. Typically, they just sit in the back of the classroom, and make sure we don't go too off the walls. They don't know much about how to run a GSA, and like, sponsor it. I find that we're pretty disorganized. We have set goals and not completed them like donating to local shelters for LGBT youth. We were gonna do that, but we couldn't get that organized. And throughout most of the year, we had two or three people in the room max." (nonbinary, questioning, multiracial, 9th grader)*

One student, who had been a member of community-based queer youth theatre group, which had been led by adults, spoke to the lack of student leadership skills and organizational capacity of their GSA to establish common safe space practices, from their perspective:

> *"I think it was a little bit different because every other kind of group that I've been a part of for LGBTQ youth, has been more, like it's been kind of led by adults, and so having this like, student-run group, it was a little bit different. The students probably didn't have as much experience in working with that kind of group. I'm pretty used to, like, when I go to my theater group meetings, we follow those similar practices of, like, 'this is how we introduce ourselves,' and like, 'this is how we respect each other in this space.' I was just a little bit surprised [that] we don't necessarily hold those same standards in the GSA just because it's a student organization, it's not the same as what I had been a part of." (nonbinary/genderqueer, queer, Middle Eastern and North African, 10th grader)*

Students also described how the GSA advisor may not understand, as one student put it, "queer issues," and therefore, the club relies more heavily on its student leaders, as the student described:

> *"He doesn't really understand queer issues, so he'll sit in the back, listen in, answer a couple questions. But relatively it's very much student-based. He'll sometimes be the one to have people come to him to ask him, like, 'Oh, can GSA come to this event? Can we get some confirmation about certain things?' But we usually, the student body takes care of most of it." (cisgender, queer, Native and Indigenous, 9th grader)*

Drawing on their institutional knowledge and authority, some advisors take on a mediating role with the school on behalf of the GSA. For example, one student explained that their advisor ensured that the club conformed to school policies:

> *"She was more of the, like, paperwork. She'd take care of all the paperwork and, you know, tell us what information we needed to keep our club running and within all of the rules. And she'd just basically give us information about how we need to keep our club running and the ideas of, like, what else we could do. She was kind of like an advisor mostly." (cisgender, lesbian, white, 12th grader)*

Other advisors will engage more directly in club activities, for example, by helping student leaders select meeting topics or creating space for student leadership. One student mentioned that in their GSA, many of the presentations about LGBTQ topics are student-led instead of advisor-led.

> *"There are times where students will run the meetings, especially during presentations, that's a very student-led thing. So, like, the presentation about lesbian history and learning about Sappho and all that, that was run by a student. Students are very involved and can take on these leadership roles that are typically done by a teacher." (nonbinary, asexual, white, 11th grader)*

While some students may have the interest, experience, skills, or time to identify resources and engage in GSAs without much advisor input or support, others would benefit from adults who work collaboratively with youth, while using their adult access to power and knowledge to inform youth decision-making.[30] One student described how their advisor "did that very well:"

> *"He did that very well too, 'cause I wouldn't have been in that leadership role. I wouldn't have figured it out myself as much as I did without him." (transgender, straight, white, 11th grader)*

These findings suggest that in order for student-led school clubs to be effective and sustainable, its members and student and adult leaders require access to tools and resources as well as skill- and relationship-building opportunities.

Based on the findings above, the following are recommendations for school personnel such as school counselors, teachers, district officials, and administrators as well as for organizations that support GSAs, about how to create effective and sustainable GSAs:

- Provide resources to students and educators about the right to form a GSA, and for the GSA to be treated equally when compared to other school clubs.

- Provide activities and skills development around advocacy as a potential approach to navigate anti-LGBTQ bias and discrimination directed toward GSAs.

- Provide resources to GSAs on how to make GSAs more effective and sustainable.

- Support advisors with resources and professional development to equip them with the knowledge and skills to be an effective advisor.

- Provide GSA students with organizational and leadership development tools to increase the meaningful value and impact of their club experience.

Students: How to make your GSA more effective and sustainable

- Work with your GSA advisor to mentor new members to grow into leadership roles so when seniors graduate the club is not starting from scratch.

- Plan extra meetings during the school year or summer to organize goals and activities for the year.

- Establish coalition with other school clubs that work with other minority/marginalized groups to address systemic issues of bias and discrimination in school on LGBTQ as well as race/ethnicity, and other marginalized groups.

- Discuss the importance of various roles that students and advisors play within a GSA, and identify who would enjoy stepping into those roles and what resources or knowledge they need to be successful in them.

- Hold check-ins regularly among GSA leaders, members, and advisors to create shared expectations for your club goals and activities.

- Encourage multiple educators to co-advise your GSA so that you get access to various skills, knowledge, and networks.

- Assess your club student leaders and members' and advisor's skills and knowledge, and identify challenges as well as opportunities for growth.

- Share and rotate club responsibilities among a diverse group of students to help develop individual and group capacities for learning and leadership.

- Ask advisors and community organizations for help to further develop your communication, organizational, conflict management, collaboration, and advocacy skills.

- Invite school administrators to attend GSA events and get to know GSA members.

- Assess your local school climate to know how advocacy might align with your club's interests.

- Reach out and connect with other GSAs in your school district or region.

- Advocate for your GSA advisors to connect with other GSA advisors in your school district or region to address district level issues when it comes to LGBTQ students and GSAs.

For GLSEN resources on GSAs, go to: https://www.glsen.org/support-student-gsas

Conclusions

The qualitative interviews in this report were intended to provide deeper insight into student leaders' experiences in, and ideas about, GSAs. Their perspectives on pathways to GSA membership and barriers to recruitment, what racial and gender inclusivity mean to GSAs today, and how effective and sustainable GSAs are created through student leaders, advisors, and collaborative youth-adult leadership, were reflected in this report. This report was not intended to provide generalized findings about GSA students' experiences in schools, nor was it intended to reflect experiences of all youth. In addition, it is important to also note that these interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the students were reporting retrospectively about their past experiences.

Regarding pathways to GSA membership, comments by student leaders reveal that GSA members initially find and join GSAs through club fairs, friend circles, trusted adults, and school announcements. However, students must also navigate barriers to recruitment, such as negative perceptions of GSAs or LGBTQ students within their school community. With regard to inclusivity, from the student interviews, it seems that GSAs have largely succeeded as safe space for lesbian, gay, and bisexual cisgender students, but they only more recently have begun incorporating more the perspectives and needs of transgender and nonbinary students. Increasingly, GSAs are addressing issues of importance to students of color, including racial justice in schools, by engaging in practices to represent diversity, including diversity topics in club discussions, and pursuing collaborations to foster inclusivity in partnership with other organizations. When it comes to creating effective and sustainable GSAs, students describe a range of administrative and organizational skills required of student and adult leaders alike, and explain the important roles advisors play in modeling how to address anti-LGBTQ discrimination, as well as providing emotional support. Finally, when students and advisors work together collaboratively in youth-adult leadership partnerships, it becomes clear that both play multiple club roles (sometimes overlapping, sometimes complementary) that vary based on student (and educator) skill and interest.

Student leaders' observations about their GSAs reveal that they are clubs that have great potential to expand recruitment, programming, and youth-adult leadership practices in ever more affirming, gender-inclusive, and anti-racist ways, particularly when LGBTQ students of color and transgender and nonbinary students are involved or leading. Though not the explicit focus of this brief, student leaders' comments likewise suggest that GSAs are spaces where LGBTQ and allied students with disabilities would benefit from recognition, inclusion, and leadership opportunities. Members, student leaders, advisors, school administrators, parents, and others in the community all play a role in helping GSAs center inclusivity and justice, in their various forms, in the ongoing work of clubs and schools. This work is as important now as it has ever been.

Despite the U.S. federal government's renewed commitment to protect LGBTQ students from discrimination in K–12 schools,[31] LGBTQ students, especially transgender and nonbinary students and LGBTQ students of color, continue to be targets of pervasive anti-LGBTQ bias-based behavior.[32] As such, GSAs remain a critical, evidence-based resource and protective factor for its members as well as non-member students attending middle and high schools with GSAs.[33] At the same time, the school community should not rely just on GSAs as the only means of addressing the needs of LGBTQ students in school. A holistic approach to safer, more affirming, and more inclusive schools is also achieved by implementing evidence-based policies and practices that enumerate protections on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, providing inclusive curriculum and library resources, and having educators who are supportive of LGBTQ students.

Based on the specific recommendations provided throughout this report, we present the following measures for consideration by school personnel, such as school counselors, teachers, district officials, and administrators, as well as by organizations that support GSAs:

Work Toward Effective Outreach and Recruitment

- Increase public awareness of their school's GSA across the school community, and support inclusion of GSAs at school-wide events.

- Address anti-LGBTQ bias and discrimination in the school community to ensure that students have equal access to their school's GSA, and that GSAs are treated in a non-discriminatory manner as it pertains to marketing the club and hosting activities.

Work Towards a More Inclusive GSA

- Provide educational and advocacy resources to GSAs related to transgender and nonbinary students and LGBTQ students of color, as well as other marginalized communities.

- Encourage GSAs and other clubs to incorporate learning racially inclusive history and anti-racism skills into their LGBTQ-focused activities.

- Help GSAs to collaborate with other student groups or organizations on social, educational, and advocacy activities by connecting club advisors and encouraging inter-club events or initiatives.

Work Towards a More Effective and Sustainable GSA

Provide resources to students and educators about their rights, such as forming a GSA, provide resources to GSAs on how to make GSAs more effective and sustainable, and support advisors with resources and professional development to equip them with the knowledge and skills to be an effective advisor.

Provide activities and skills development around advocacy as a potential approach to navigate anti-LGBTQ bias and discrimination directed toward GSAs.

Provide GSA students with organizational and leadership development tools in order to increase the meaningful value and long-term impact of their club experience.

Implementing these measures can help students and advisors thrive and succeed in the functioning of their school's GSA. However, it is also important to note that GSAs live in an ecosystem where students experience anti-LGBTQ bias and discrimination, which can hinder the effectiveness and sustainability of GSAs. Therefore, it is important not just to expect inclusivity within the GSA, but also to model inclusivity in the school community, such as advisors' teaching inclusivity within their own classrooms or school offices.

About the Research

This research brief is based on a set of twenty interviews conducted with GSA student leaders who had earlier completed GLSEN's GSA Student Survey (2020) and expressed interest in participating in a follow-up interview. The interviews were conducted from August 2020 through September 2020, during the Covid-19 disruption. The interview sample is neither representative of GSA students or leaders in general, nor of the original GSA student survey sample. First, students were invited to sign up for an interview in addition to the long survey they already completed. Second, the selection of twenty participants was not based on their status as either a GSA member or leader. Instead, students were intentionally selected to ensure diverse representation based on race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. The breakdown for race/ethnicity of GSA students selected for this interview study was: 50% White, 25% Multiracial, and the remaining racial/ethnics groups were 5% each (Black, Latinx, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Native and Indigenous, Middle Eastern and North African). The breakdown for gender identity of GSA students was: 50% cisgender, 30% transgender, and 20% nonbinary/genderqueer. The breakdown for sexual orientation of GSA students was: 30% gay or lesbian, 25% bisexual, 15% pansexual, 15% other sexual orientation, 5% questioning, 5% asexual, and 5% heterosexual or straight. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify salient themes and insights.

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Endnotes

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17 The GSA survey report showed that the racial/ethnic composition of GSAs differ by the racial/ethnic composition of their school's student body, such that majority white schools tend to have majority white GSAs, whereas schools with higher levels of racial/ethnic diversity tend to have GSAs with more evenly distributed racial/ethnic composition. Truong, N. L., Clark, C. M., Rosenbach, S., & Kosciw, J. G. (2021). *The GSA Study: Results of national surveys about students' and advisors' experiences in Gender and Sexuality Alliance clubs*. New York: GLSEN, p. 16, Figure 1.3.

18 It is important to note that when we describe a GSA as, for instance, having "half students of color and half white students" on the basis of interview responses, we are not suggesting that in racially mixed

GSAs the interests or experiences of all students of color are the same. Nor are we suggesting that white students lack a dominant voice in organizing club activities within this racially mixed context.

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Cover Photo Collage Descriptions

From left to right

First row: 2020 GSA of the Year, Ilima intermediate school's Rainbow Royales GSA taken by the Hawaii State Teachers Association; Nantucket High School's GSA students march; and 2005 GLSEN Chicago march.

Second row: 2019 GSA of the Year, LAMP High School's Spectrum GSA; Students from Ponderosa High School's GSA; and Students from GLSEN's No Name Calling Week.

Third row: Members of GLSEN's 2016–2017 National Student Council; Gabrielino High School's GSA in 2018; and GLSEN contingent in the 2017 NYC Pride parade.

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