

Forming a teacher GSA/ QSA in Alberta

A Guide for Teachers





The Alberta Teachers' Association

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Background

Teachers and other school personnel recognize the benefit of gay–straight alliances (GSAs) and queer–straight alliances (QSAs) for their school communities and are beginning to seek those same benefits for themselves, both personally and professionally.

Student GSAs and QSAs have been a topic of public discourse for several years now. With the amendments to the *School Act* in 2015 (formerly known as Bill 10), students are able to form GSAs and QSAs at the school level without reservation. There is an abundance of research that demonstrates the power and impact of these groups and, in Alberta, we are fortunate that there is unequivocal support for these organizations at the government and professional levels. Both PRISM for Elementary and Secondary toolkits highlight this research.

One unexpected by-product of student GSAs is the emergence of teacher groups at the local level. Several groups have already formed, with others in the works. The Association recognizes the value of these initiatives in the lives of teachers. As such, it has developed this short guide as a starting point for groups across the province.

Many resources exist to support students, but little exists to support sexual and gender minority (SGM) teachers and allies who wish to form a GSA or a QSA in their local. This is an introductory guide for those who may wish to form a GSA in their local, and it should be used in conjunction with other resources available from the Alberta Teachers' Association.

Research

International research has continually shown that workplaces committed to supporting and affirming diversity improve productivity, work satisfaction, mental health outcomes and quality of life¹²³⁴⁵⁶⁷⁸.

It is not a stretch of the imagination to understand that people who feel valued, respected, safe and included will enjoy higher levels of success, however those levels are defined.

Creating schools that are welcoming, caring, respectful and safe can be done in many ways, including creating and maintaining by GSAs and QSAs, which serve students in a variety of ways and lead to better educational outcomes. A large body of recent research demonstrates the importance of supporting sexual and gender minorities:

- *Being Safe, Being Me: Results of the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey (2017)*
- *Every Class in Every School: Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools*
- *The Every Teacher Project On LGBTQ-inclusive Education In Canada's K-12 Schools Final Report*
- *Helping Young People Stay Afloat: A Qualitative Study of Community Resources and Supports for LGBTQ Adolescents in the United States and Canada*

The question then becomes how can we support sexual and gender minority teachers in meaningful ways in our locals?



Considerations for creating a teacher GSA or QSA:

- *Confidentiality and anonymity*
- *Safety (not all communities are safe)*
- *Community reaction*
- *Accessibility*
- *Protection of privacy (not everyone is out)*
- *Understanding safe spaces*

THE NEEDS OF A TEACHER GROUP

The reasons for forming a GSA in your local are varied, and each GSA will have a different approach. For some, it is a chance to stand in solidarity with the youth in their division who are fighting for validation. For others, it is a recognition that teachers need to have a safe space to learn about the issues facing sexual and gender minorities. Others may simply want a social group. Whatever your reason, your GSA can fill those needs with the support of the ATA.

BASIC TERMS

GSA/QSA—These often stand for gay–straight alliance and queer–straight alliance, though some groups use GSA to stand for gender and sexuality acceptance.

Sexual and Gender Minority or SGM—A collective term that represents people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions.

LGBTQ—The most commonly used acronym, which includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer. As with SGM, it is a collective term that represents a diverse group.

Ally—A person, regardless of their sexual orientation, who supports and honours the human, civil and sexual rights of sexual and gender minorities, and who actively explores and understands his or her own biases.

For a more in-depth exploration of terminology, please check out the PRISM Toolkits for Elementary and Secondary or the Respectful Schools Online Toolkit. These are available as downloads from the ATA website, www.teachers.ab.ca.

¹Omankhanlen, A E, and J O Ogaga-Oghene. 2011. "The Impact of Workforce Diversity on Organizational Effectiveness: A Study of a Nigerian Bank." *Annals of the University of Petroșani, Economics* 11, no 3: 93–110. www.upet.ro/annals/economics/pdf/2011/part3/Ehimare-Ogaga-Oghene.pdf (accessed January 16, 2019).

²Abdelmessih, V. 2018. "Banking on Inclusion and Diversity: Companies Shift Focus on Promoting an Inclusive and Diverse Work Environment." MediaPlanet Industry and Business website. www.industryandbusiness.ca/insight/banking-on-inclusion-and-diversity (accessed January 16, 2019).

³Pleasant, S. 2017. "Perspectives in HRD—Crossing the Boundaries of Employee Engagement and Workplace Diversity and Inclusion: Moving HRD Forward in a Complicated Sociopolitical Climate." *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* 29, no 3: 38–44.

⁴Duhigg, C. 2016. "What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team." *New York Times Magazine*. www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html?fbclid=IwAR3DkpZPSI-ourVCSAAAbRb4zpgdxy0clktunbLc1t9uSLydvw47BaDhUJcM (accessed January 16, 2019).

⁵McMahon, A M. 2011. "Does Workplace Diversity Matter? A Survey Of Empirical Studies On Diversity And Firm Performance, 2000–09." *Journal of Diversity Management* 5, no 2: 37–48. <https://doi.org/10.19030/jdm.v5i2.808> (accessed January 16, 2019).

⁶Chrobot-Mason, D, and N P Aramovich. 2013. "The Psychological Benefits of Creating an Affirming Climate for Workplace Diversity." *Group & Organization Management* 38, no 6: 659–689. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1059601113509835> (accessed January 16, 2019).

⁷Baker, S J, and K Lucas, K. 2017. "Is It safe to Bring Myself to Work? Understanding LGBTQ Experiences of Workplace Dignity." *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences/Revue Canadienne des Sciences de l'Administration* 34, no 2: 133–148.

⁸Holman, E G, J N Fish, R F Oswald and A Goldberg. 2018. "Reconsidering the LGBT Climate Inventory: Understanding Support and Hostility for LGBTQ Employees in the Workplace." *Journal of Career Assessment*. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1069072718788324> (accessed April 4, 2019).

Establishing a GSA at your local

Want a GSA? BOOM! you have one. Teachers interested in forming a GSA or QSA in their local only need to decide to form one. It can be as simple as finding one other person who is interested, but it can also start with just you and your enthusiasm!

There is no legislation that pertains to the forming of GSAs and QSAs for teachers, and interested parties may do so with the full support of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

Many locals have formed their GSA/QSA as a subgroup of their local's Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Committee. It is a natural fit because the express purpose of this committee is to work to "promote diversity, equity and human rights."

Your teacher group may also work well as a subgroup of the Professional Development Committee or any other place that seems applicable to your local.

SUPPORTS AVAILABLE FROM THE ATA

The ATA fully supports endeavours that serve the needs of SGM teachers and their allies. As such, there are a number of resources available through the Association that are pertinent:

- *PRISM Elementary Edition—Toolkit for Safe and Caring Discussions About Sexual and Gender Minorities*
- *PRISM Secondary Edition—Toolkit for Safe and Caring Discussions About Sexual and Gender Minorities*
- *Respectful Schools Online Toolkit*
- *Supporting Transgender and Transsexual Students in K-12 Schools*
- *Safe Spaces Brochure and Poster*
- *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Policy Brochure*

- *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity: Recommended Fiction and Nonfiction Resources for K-12 Schools*
- *Breaking the Silence—A Guide for Sexual and Gender Minority Teachers in Alberta*
- *GSA's and QSA's in Alberta Schools: A Guide for Teachers*

CONSIDERING A NAME

There are no restrictions on what to name your group. Some questions to consider when choosing a name:

- Does the name welcome all sexual and gender minorities?
- Is the purpose of your group clear from your name?

RECRUITING

Once your group is formed, how do you plan to spread the word and increase membership? Unlike student groups, you won't have a single location to plaster with posters or be able to share catchy jingles during the morning announcements. However, advertising and recruiting could be fun activities for your new group!

In all aspects of your GSA/QSA, but especially in recruiting, protecting the confidentiality of teachers is paramount. Please be mindful when inviting others to participate. For more information on this, please contact the ATA.

Consider some of the following ideas:

- Make a short announcement at your local meeting.
- Include an invitation in your local's or your division's newsletter.
- E-mail teachers whom you feel would be interested and invite them to coffee.
- Use the social media platforms that your local uses to communicate.
- Use your local's e-mail lists to advertise and recruit.
 Sample text: Did you know that our local now as a Teacher GSA? It's led by teachers for teachers! E-mail/follow on Facebook/join us, etc.
- Have each member of your group invite one friend to events or meetings.



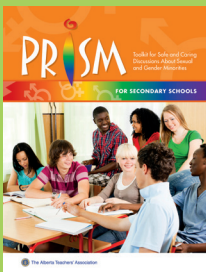
SAFE(R) SPACES

Safe, inclusive spaces strive to

- be welcoming, caring, respectful, safe and encouraging;
- recognize each person as a diverse individual connected to a community;
- recognize and accept diversity between (and among) individuals and groups; and
- offer equal access, dignity and safety for all individuals and groups.

Sample ground rules for Safe(r) Spaces:

- Respect
- Confidentiality
- Openness
- Right to pass
- Nonjudgmental approach
- Claim your opinions
- Sensitivity to diversity
- Anonymity
- Acceptance
- Have a good time!



*The PRISM
Toolkit for
Secondary has
an entire chapter
dedicated to safe
spaces!
Check it out!*



YOUR FIRST EVENT

Now that you have taken the first step and formed the group, your next step may be to plan an event. Perhaps it's a coffee date at a local café, or wine and appetizers at a restaurant. Perhaps a book club meeting or a movie. The possibilities are endless, but there are a few things to keep in mind to ensure that all attendees feel safe and respected during this event and all others to follow.

- How can you protect the anonymity and confidentiality of those who attend?
- Is it safe for your attendees to participate in public events without fear of being outed or persecuted in your community?
- Is your location affirming of sexual and gender minorities?
- Are there any other accessibility considerations?

What does a teacher GSA/QSA do?

What do you want your GSA to do? A teacher group may have a different purpose than a student group. What do you see as the role of your group? GSAs and QSAs in locals have wide latitude for how they function.

Your group in your local may want to engage with one or more of the following:

- Advocacy
- Fundraising
- Public service
- Resource sharing
- Support groups
- Social groups
- Professional development

A great number of resources exist that contain ideas for student activities to do at GSAs in schools and communities. These can definitely be used for adults in their GSAs as well! They can be great for education, awareness-building and ice-breaking in your new GSA/QSA. The ATA's *GSAs and QSAs in Alberta Schools: A Guide for Teachers* has great suggestions for activities and how to structure your gatherings. Find it on the ATA's website!

Other sources of activities and inspiration include

- Fun Things to Do from the GSA Network
- Alberta GSA Network
- DEHR grants and awards



BEING AN ALLY IN A GSA/QSA

Allies have an important role in GSAs. Standing in solidarity with people who have experienced exclusion helps to strengthen communities and move our society forward.

There are a few things for allies to keep in mind in their GSAs.

Always be mindful of your straight and/or cis-privilege.

Prioritize the voices and experiences of sexual and gender minorities.

Be aware of how much “space” you take up in your group.

Be willing to be corrected and learn.

Above all, listen.

Organizations and supporting resources

Besides the Alberta Teachers' Association, there are several other organizations that may be supportive of the work of your teacher group. Some ideas include, but are not limited to

YOUR LOCAL PRIDE CENTRE

- Pride Centre of Edmonton
- The altView Foundation
- Fruitloop Edmonton
- Outlink Calgary
- OUTreach Southern Alberta

YOUR LOCAL PRIDE WEEK ORGANIZATION

ALBERTA GSA NETWORK

RESOURCES FOR THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY – LAW CENTRAL ALBERTA

LGBT RESOURCES FROM THE ALBERTA CIVIL LIBERTIES RESEARCH CENTRE

RESPECTFUL SCHOOLS ONLINE TOOLKIT – SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITIES

Questions and Answers

I'm scared to ask my local to start a GSA. Can they say no?

The Alberta Teachers' Association fully supports the creation of GSA/QSAs for teachers! Don't be scared—they are here to support US!

Can the local 'out me' to my employer regarding my request for or participation in a GSA?

Confidentiality is paramount, and your local would never reveal who attends GSA meetings.

What obligation does my local have to create and support a teacher GSA?

Locals are strongly encouraged to demonstrate support for a teacher GSA and to provide whatever support is reasonable.

Does someone need to request a teacher GSA? Can't every local just have a committee from the get-go?

Many locals have created a GSA as a subcommittee of their Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Committee. Check with them first as they may already have one. If not, talk to your local president about the possibility of establishing one.

? Is there a mentorship program for those new to starting a teacher GSA?

There is no formal mentorship program for those new to starting a teacher GSA, but opportunities exist to connect with other locals through the Alberta Teachers' GSA Network Facebook page or in person at the ATA's annual Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Conference. You can also contact the ATA for contact information about other locals that have successfully established teacher GSAs.

? Do I need permission from my principal to join?

Nope! As a member of the Alberta Teachers Association, you are welcome to attend meetings at your discretion. Meetings are scheduled outside of school hours so that all teachers are able to attend.

? How does the group ensure confidentiality?

At the beginning of meetings, it is important for the GSA chair(s) to remind the group of the importance of confidentiality. Some groups even begin their meetings reciting an oath of confidentiality.

Notes

Get Social!

Please join the Alberta Teachers' GSA Network on Facebook! Let's build community and capacity together!



The Alberta Teachers' Association

[teachers.ab.ca](https://www.teachers.ab.ca)