

Jumpstarting a GSA

GSA historically stands for Gay Straight Alliance, but is now used to mean Gender and Sexuality Alliance. Some schools may opt to choose a different name to better represent the group, ex. Prism, Echo, or Unity.

The mission of a GSA is to create a safe, respectful, and supportive learning environment for all students, inclusive of but not divided by their expression or identity.

Step One: Ask around. The most important tool you will have when presenting your intent to start a GSA will be having people interested in being members. Don't be disheartened if there's only a handful of you—most start small!

Step Two: Identify an Advisor. Whether faculty or staff, student organizations require adult leadership. Once a group has come together, finding an adult in your school who will advise the group is the next step. You may already have one in mind (or, if you're a teacher reading this, you may already be one!)

Step Three: Write a Mission Statement. Do your homework on this one! Having a concise mission for your organization that you can present provides compelling encouragement to back up your request. **Some questions your mission statement should answer:**

- Who are we? Who can be part of our group?
- What do we stand for? What are the key elements of our group's philosophy? Examples included: safety, respect, diversity, community service, direct action and education.
- What do we do? What are our goals? What does our group want to achieve in the short, medium and long term? How will we achieve our goals?

"Students, advisors and community members meeting together to find ways to make Rogers High School, the Hillyard Community and the City of Spokane safe and accepting for ALL."

"The mission of Southern Guilford's Gay-Straight Alliance is to promote understanding of social misconceptions and foster respect for all individuals that are encountered throughout our future. We will utilize active and stimulated discussion among leaders and members to raise enlightenment of current social issues that will break down the barriers of oppression and privilege we see everyday, while maintaining diversity in thoughts and ideas."

Step Four: Bring it on. If you haven't already, now is the time to find out your school's rules for starting a club. You should have everything you need to fill out paperwork and submit it if you've got an advisor and a mission statement ready! Remember: under federal law, you have the right to have a GSA. It's important to be respectful and prepared to navigate uncertainty from your administration. Following the instructions for your club, bring your proposal, and if you're not supported, take careful notes as to why. Under the Equal Access Act you must be allowed to start a noncurricular club if your school offers other noncurricular clubs. There can be no disparities in rules or recognition from one club to another.

Step Five: Yes or No? Chances are, if you do your paperwork and are ready to go, your school will accept your proposal. The next step for you is to decide with your advisor a time and date for your first meeting, and get the word out!

If you are told by administration that you cannot start your organization, your next best steps are to contact either a local advocate (ex. lgbtq@fcsfl.org) or a larger organization such as the ACLU LGBTQ+ Discrimination line at (212) 549-2673.

Step Six: Hold your Meeting! Pro tip: bring snacks. When you're meeting for the first time, work together to establish a code of rules that emphasizes confidentiality and a respectful place for people to share things with each other. A great rule is not to make assumptions or label each other—this leaves room for allies and supporters as well as questioning individuals to safely participate!

***Step Seven: Register with GLSEN.** This step, while optional, is a great way to get connected with other organizations in your state & country! GLSEN actively maintains a national registry of organizations and will often provide resources, activity ideas, and free swag to your group. You can register your club at <https://www.studentorganizing.org>.

Additional Resources:

Data on the positive effect of GSAs in school:

<https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/Gay-Straight%20Alliances.pdf>

ACLU Backup and Pointers for GSAs:

<https://www.aclu.org/other/how-start-gay-straight-alliance-gsa>