10 Steps for Starting a Gay-Straight Alliance

1. **Do Your Research** – Typically, Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are student-led, non-curricular clubs. "Non-curricular" means that the focus of the club is not directly related to a school class, such as French Club or Math Club. Find out if your school has other non-curricular clubs, such as Chess Club or Key Club. Your GSA will have to follow the same steps that those clubs took in order to form. If you're not sure what the official school policies are for starting a club, ask a teacher or other faculty member.

2. **Know Your Reasons** – Every successful organization has a mission statement, which is simply a sentence or two that explain the purpose and goals of your group. It might be a good idea for you and the other members of your GSA to think about a mission statement for your club before presenting your idea to your administrators. The more prepared you are to answer questions about the GSA (what kind of projects you want to work on, why the school will benefit from having a GSA, etc.), the smoother the process will be for you.

3. **Find an Advisor** – Most schools require that clubs have a faculty advisor. This could be a teacher, a guidance counselor, a librarian, or anyone who works for the school and is willing to support you in forming and running your club. Some clubs have more than one advisor. Your advisor might be a good person to include in your discussion about a mission statement for the GSA, but remember: A GSA should be a student-run group, and you shouldn't expect or ask your advisor to do all the work for you.

4. **Identify Your Allies** – Ask yourself the question, "Who will support the GSA?" Will there be a lot of school staff in favor of it? What about the student body? Do you know adults in the community who would speak out and support the idea of a GSA at your school? Being able to identify a lot of support for the club will come in handy if you're met with any resistance. (Not being able to identify tons of support doesn't mean you can't have your club, though!)

5. **Make the Ask** – Schedule a meeting with the other leaders of your GSA, your advisor, and the administrators who are in charge of "okaying" new clubs. Give everyone a role at the meeting, and practice ahead of time. Let's assume that you receive an enthusiastic "Yes!" to your request. (For strategies on how to handle a "no", skip to page 3 of this document).

6. **Create an Agenda** – Congratulations! You've got your club. Now comes the big question: What are you going to *do* at your first meeting? And what about the meetings after that? Every good meeting has an agenda, so it would probably be good for the club leaders to sit down together and think about how to structure your first official GSA gathering. (For one activity you could do at your first GSA meeting, check out the "Elements of a GSA" resource on the GSA for Safe Schools website at www.gsafewi.org)

7. **Advertise** – Now that you've gone to all the work of getting your club approved, you want to make sure that people show up. Make posters to advertise your first meeting. Be sure to be really clear about the date, the time, and the location. If you think other students might not know what GSA is all about, you could advertise that the first meeting will include a Q&A session at the beginning. Be ready to talk about the kinds of projects the GSA would like to work on, what the GSA hopes to accomplish, and the fun stuff that you'll do as a group. *Hint: Have food at your first meeting. It works!*

8. **Hold Your Meeting** – A lot of GSAs start their meetings with icebreaker activities. Ask folks to share their names, why they came to the GSA, and a fun fact about themselves (example: If you could be a superhero, what superpower would you choose?). Remember: You should never ask students to share their sexual orientation. If some students choose to "come out" and talk about their own identities, that's great. But a student should never feel pressured to do so. Some groups do find it helpful, though, to have everyone share their preferred gender pronouns. To learn more about this, check out the "Why Pronouns Matter?" resource on the GSAFE website). As a group, establish ground rules for the club. *Here are some examples of good ground rules: Don't make assumptions. What is said here stays here. When someone else is talking, you should be listening. Respect one another with your words and your actions. Use "I" statements.*

9. **Create a Calendar** – Some GSAs find it helpful to create a calendar for the semester or for the school year, setting dates for future meetings and making note of important events (Day of Silence, LGBT History Month, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Organizing Weekend, etc.). Keep a "master" calendar in a place where all GSA members can access it. Make sure to announce any changes that are made to the calendar.

10. **Reflect** – After your first meeting, sit down with your GSA advisor and other leaders of the GSA to reflect. What went well? What didn't go so well? Did anything surprise you? What would you change for future meetings? Record your responses to these questions, and revisit them throughout the year. If your GSA decides to establish an "official" leadership team, it's a good idea for the student leaders to meet regularly outside of the GSA meetings to think about these questions.

How to Handle a "No"

Let's say that your school tells you that you can't have a Gay-Straight Alliance. What then? Here are some simple strategies you can use to effectively deal with that "no".

1. **Know *Their* Reasons** – If your administrators tell you that you can't have a GSA, you get to ask "why not?" Of course, you'll want to do that in a really calm and collected manner. We always want to assume the best intentions. Many people have misconceptions about what GSAs are and what they do, and having an open dialogue with the folks in charge might help clear up any misunderstandings they have about GSAs. Ask what questions they have about Gay-Straight Alliances.

If you think there is a good chance you will hear a "no" the first time you ask, spend some time brainstorming possible reasons why they might be against the idea of a GSA. Plan for how you might respond to the following statements: "*We don't allow clubs that are run by outside organizations." "Parents will be upset if they find out we have a club that talks about sex." "If we let a GSA meet, we'll have to let a Bible Club to meet, too."* These are all actual examples of concerns voiced by administrators about GSAs.

2. **Know *Your* Rights** – If you attend a public school that has other non-curricular clubs, the Equal Access Act states that your school cannot deny the formation of a GSA (or a Bible Club, for that matter). This federal law also says that schools cannot treat GSAs differently from other non-curricular clubs, so if Chess Club gets to advertise on the morning announcements and hang up posters in the hallways, the GSA does, too.

3. **Know Your Resources** – If you believe your school's reasons for denying the formation of a GSA are unfair, there are a number of different organizations you can contact to help you navigate the situation:

GSAFE is an organization based in Madison, Wisconsin that supports student and school efforts to create safe learning environments for LGBT and all students. If you're in Wisconsin, give us a call at 608.661.4141. You can find lots of resources on our website at www.gsafewi.org.

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) is a national organization that works to create safe schools for all students regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. You can call them at 212.727.0135.

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) works to protect and ensure the civil rights of all people, and has offices all over the country. Visit www.aclu.org to find an ACLU chapter near you. The ACLU has helped many students who heard "No, you can't have a GSA."