
Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) in Saskatchewan

An Environmental Scan

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Introduction

According to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, schools are caring communities.¹ The *Comprehensive School Community Health* approach states, “Each child, in each school, in each of our communities deserves to be healthy, safe, engaged and supported.”ⁱⁱ However, when it comes to meeting this goal equitably for all students, Saskatchewan lags behind in ensuring our gender and sexually diverse (GSD)¹ students are reaching their full potential, and gaining equitable access to all aspects of school life— academic, social, and extracurricular. Gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs)² are school-based groups which help to accomplish this goal. They are an integral part of our political, social and educational landscape with respect to:

- upholding human rights law,
- supporting anti-oppressive (pro-respect) educational frameworks,
- providing an inclusive, healthy environment which improves student learning,
- responding to students’ needs and creating a supportive social climate,
- honouring child and youth safety, and strengthening proactive bullying prevention,
- as well as incorporating family realities into the learning community.

Provinces across Canada have recognized the vital role that GSAs play in meeting these goals, supporting educational outcomes, and improving overall school community health. In some provinces, the importance of GSAs in school communities is protected by law. Ontario Bill 13, Manitoba Bill 18 and Alberta Bill 10 legally require a school meet the request of a student for a GSA. Conversely, Saskatchewan students are permitted a GSA on the basis of administration discretion. While school boards across the country maintain specific anti-homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia policies that bolster the effectiveness of GSAs in an integrated and holistic school community approach, not a single school board in Saskatchewan has explicit protection for GSD students. Fortunately there has been recent progress within the Saskatchewan context that demonstrates an increased commitment to GSD students, families, friends, communities and allies.

However, there is an intensifying need for tangible results in creating safer schools. An expanding youth voice is asserting that their lives matter. Parents are demanding that their children be treated with dignity and respect. And a growing community is asking that Saskatchewan schools support the implementation of GSAs

¹ Use of the term gender and sexually diverse (GSD) expands on the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and two-spirit (LGBTQI2S) to reflect ever-evolving communities of diversity in assigned sex, attraction, gender, and expression.

² The acronym GSA is more commonly and historically known to stand for gay-straight alliance. Today, the term has expanded to gender and sexuality alliance. This provides a more diversity inclusive framework and better captures the realities of those attending GSAs.

to help meet educational, social, and bullying-prevention needs. In doing so, Saskatchewan can move closer to schools being caring communities, for all students, and for all family realities in a more meaningful way.

Understanding GSAs

The term “gay-straight alliance” is said to have originated in the early 1980s to refer to school-based, student-run groups that provide a safe space for youth to discuss issues related to diversity in sexual and romantic orientation.³ In the 1980s the focus would have been on gay, lesbian and bisexual students.

Today, GSAs are welcoming spaces for *all* students that provide a niche of social interaction and education. They provide like-minded comradery and connection much like other school-based groups more commonly found in school culture, such as drama groups and astronomy clubs. GSAs are inclusive across the spectrum of diversity— gender, attraction, expression, family, and friend realities. There is no need for students to self-identify or articulate their orientation in order to join the GSA group unless they wish to do so; respect and acceptance of diversity are the only requirements for membership. As GSAs are recognized as anti-oppressive spaces within the school community, many students who feel they are ‘outside of’ the larger normative majority seek anti-bullying refuge, safety, friendship, and shared experience within GSA groups. Some school GSAs act simply as a crucial space where students are able to eat lunch safely, and find necessary reprieve from bullying and assault. This is especially relevant with the statistical reality that GSD youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers, and over half of GSD youth have seriously considered suicide.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, studies have found that Canadian schools with GSAs may reduce the odds of suicidal thoughts and attempts among both GSD *and* straight students.^{iv} In fact, any given school is likely to have just as many straight students who experience homophobic harassment as self-identified GSD students.^v A study undertaken in Saskatchewan found that all students, regardless of orientation or gender, felt GSAs met their educational needs.^{vi} Another study found that GSAs which are integrated into the school culture have a transformative effect which further reduces barriers to academic and social success.^{vii} Research-confirmed benefits specifically for GSD youth include:

- greater school attachment,
- improved attendance and increased retention rates,

³ It can be hard for persons in privileged positions in society (straight, cisgender) to understand the need for support groups which assist with an LGBTQ lived experience. As such, this short video can provide insight into what it is like to live outside the dominant norm. YouTube: *Love Is All You Need*. Trigger Warning Content: Suicide. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ROXTFkcf0>

- more meaningful school-based relationships,
- reduced instances of homophobic and transphobic bullying and assault,
- more meaningful engagement in extracurricular school activities,
- the reduction of stress and depression related to one’s identity and as a result improved mental health,
- as well as increased access to learning.^{viii}

The History of GSAs

The first school-based groups to officially call themselves gay-straight alliances were formed in 1988 and 1989 at two private schools in Massachusetts: the Phillips Academy and the Concord Academy.^{ix} In February of 1993, the Massachusetts Department of Education issued its education report titled *Making Schools Safer for Gay and Lesbian Youth*. Based on this report, the Board of Education voted to adopt a GSA model into their *Safe Schools Program*.^x This government-level action in Massachusetts spurred what is now considered the *Gay-Straight Alliance Movement*—which has had global implications.

Two other major events were critical in solidifying GSA groups in schools. In 1998, Matthew Shepard, a 21 year-old openly gay student in Wyoming was brutally beaten, tied to a fence, and left for dead. The story garnered national attention as a horrific hate crime, sparking gay rights demonstrations across North America and overseas. Shepard’s life inspired millions to erase hate, gave increased momentum to the need for support services for gay youth, and remains relevant through the *Laramie Project*. That same year, three civil rights groups acting on behalf of two East High high school students filed a lawsuit against the Salt Lake City Board of Education, alleging that the Board cut dozens of school clubs for the sole purpose of eliminating the school’s GSA.^{xi} In 1999, the federal court in Utah ruled in favour of the high school students and found that denying access to a school-based GSA was a violation of the federal *Equal Access Act*.^{xii}

Canada’s first GSA began in 1998 at Pinetree Secondary School in Coquitlam, B.C. at the leadership of high school students—in particular, Brent Power who was harassed and bullied for being gay. In 2000, 14 year-old Hamed Nastoh of Surrey took his own life.^{xiii} His suicide note revealed homophobic bullying, such as being called “fag,” as the reason for ending his life. His suicide prompted the B.C. Teacher’s Federation (BCTF) to actively support the establishment of GSAs. BCTF members were encouraged to act as sponsors for GSAs, and local associations were supported in efforts to educate members about the importance and value of GSAs in building safe and inclusive schools.^{xiv} With the developments in British Columbia, momentum increased and GSAs began sprouting up across Canada.

In Saskatchewan, Saskatoon's Mount Royal Collegiate was the first school in the province to implement a gay-straight alliance. It started up officially in 1999.^{xv} The group was supported by educators Patti Rowley and Travis Myrol, who have received provincial recognition in bringing the GSA movement to Saskatchewan.⁴ With the support of pioneer teacher liaisons Bob Birtles and Cathy Lacey, the province's second GSA began at Aden Bowman Collegiate, also in Saskatoon.

Evolution of GSAs in Canada

As GSAs in Canada increased, and their benefits were being articulated by youth, parents and educators, some provinces initiated legislative action to directly support their implementation in schools.

Legislative Action

A. Bill 13 in Ontario

In June 2012, the Liberal Government of Ontario passed Bill 13 into law by a margin of 65-36. Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty was a strong proponent, fielding opposition with a hardline stance; the safety of youth "transcends all faiths and partisan politics."^{xvi} The additional catalyst for explicit GSA legislative protection was prompted by the suicide of 15 year-old gay teen Jamie Hubley.^{xvii} Bill 13, *The Accepting School Act*, which amended the *Education Act* with respect to bullying and other matters, explicitly states that "the people of Ontario and of the Legislative Assembly believe that a healthy, safe and inclusive learning environment where all students feel accepted is a necessary condition for student success."^{xviii}

Bill 13 was the first in Canada to establish through legislative process that if a student requests a GSA, it is illegal for a school division, school principal, or others in a publically-funded school (public or Catholic) to refuse this request. It ensures that a GSA group is able to explicitly state their purpose, and retain the name gay-straight alliance if they wish to do so; this is meant to prevent the censorship of GSD-specific needs and issues under a broader mandate such as a social justice group, human rights group, or youth action circle.^{xix}

⁴ For further insight into Saskatchewan's first GSA, consult Appendix A for an interview with the founding educators.

B. Bill 18 in Manitoba

In September 2013, the NDP Government of Manitoba passed Bill 18 into law by a margin of 36-16.^{xx} Bill 18, *The Public Schools Amendment Act (Safe and Inclusive Schools)* requires schools to accommodate students who want to start specific anti-bullying clubs including gay-straight alliances. Bill 18 states under the heading “student activities and organizations, 41 (1.8) a respect for human diversity policy must accommodate pupils who want to establish and lead activities and organizations that (a) promote (i) gender equity (iv) the awareness and understanding of, and respect for, people of all sexual orientations and gender identities; and (b) use the name ‘gay-straight alliance’ or any other name that is consistent with the promotion of a positive school environment that is inclusive and accepting of all pupils.”^{xxi}

C. Bill 10 in Alberta

In April 2014, Liberal member Kent Hehr proposed private member’s motion 503, which would have legally required Alberta schools to allow for the creation of a GSA at the request of a student. A coalition of Progressive Conservatives and Wildrose MLAs voted it down by a margin of 31-19.^{xxii} Some MLAs who opposed the motion stated they supported the intent of the clubs, but felt it was an overreach of the legislature and did not want to interfere with school board autonomy.^{xxiii} Liberal member Laurie Blakeman stated, “It simply doesn’t make sense for school boards to wait on such an important issue.”^{xxiv}

Ms. Blakeman introduced *Bill 202: Safe and Inclusive Schools Statutes Amendment Act*. Days later Premier Prentice said her bill was no longer needed, and in December introduced *Bill 10: An Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children*. However Bill 10 gave school boards the final word, and allowed them to reject students’ requests to create a GSA.^{xxv} The bill would have forced students to take their school boards to court if they were prohibited from creating a GSA. It was fiercely contested publically. MLAs, provincial politicians, and prominent people across the country lamented it as backwards legislation. Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi called the debate “damaging and hateful,” memorably stating that it did nothing but fuel the stereotype that Albertans are “hillbillies.”^{xxvi} Canadian entertainer Rick Mercer took aim through twitter, “Rights are never absolute Prentice told reporters. Nice ring to it Jim. Maybe that should be on the license plate.”^{xxvii} Due to widespread opposition, Mr. Prentice announced that Bill 10 was on hold.

In March 2015, Bill 10 passed with the controversial amendment removed, legally allowing students’ access to GSAs in both public and Catholic schools. The legislation allows students to meet on school property, and protects the right to title their group a GSA. Prentice said he changed his mind because of what he read in the media and how students were responding to the debate, stating “today we took a stand for human rights.”^{xxviii}

Government Directives and School Board Initiatives

While Bills 13, 18 and 10 initiated legislative action to support GSAs in schools, the Nova Scotia government has made commitments through provincial strategies. In addition, school divisions in Edmonton, Ontario and B.C. have created guidelines and policies which serve as model examples of responsive action.

A. Nova Scotia

Mental Health and Addictions Strategy: In May 2012, the province released *Together We Can*. In it, the government identifies the GSD population as being “at significant risk of suicide.”^{xxxix} The plan directs the Department of Education and school boards to collectively respond positively to all reasonable student requests to establish or expand groups that would support the safety and inclusion of marginalized students, including GSAs.^{xxx} The plan set GSAs as a priority, and began implementation in the first year. The *Year 1 Action Report* states an increase in GSAs to a total of 76 throughout the province.^{xxxi}

Speak Up: An Action Plan to Address Bullying and Cyberbullying Behaviour: In February 2013, Nova Scotia released *Speak Up*, and the government renewed its affirmation of GSAs as an important resource for GSD youth and allies in schools and communities: “The action plan supports children, parents, and families and this support includes the development of GSAs in schools.”^{xxxii} *Speak Up* hired a government-level anti-bullying coordinator to help further achieve the GSA commitment across the province.

B. Edmonton Public School Division

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Policy: In March 2011, the Edmonton Public School Board became the first board in the Prairies to approve the development of a policy to support sexual orientation and gender identity minority students, staff, and families.^{xxxiii} The Board of Trustees approved the new policy in November, 2011. The Edmonton Public School’s website boasts, “Proud to be the first school jurisdiction in both Alberta and the Prairies to develop a comprehensive stand-alone policy and administrative regulation to support sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ) students, staff and families.”^{xxxiv}

School Division Direct Support of GSA Implementation: The Edmonton Public School Board has hired consultants who provide in-school and board-level support to sustain GSAs in their schools, as well as to advocate for GSD youth and families. The consultants arrange and host monthly meetings, which allow

GSA in various Edmonton schools to network and share strategies. The consultants also facilitate quarterly GSA division-wide professional development opportunities for all staff.^{xxxv}

C. Toronto District School Board

Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Policy: First published in 2011 the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) released a document titled *TDSB Guidelines for the Accommodation of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students and Staff*.^{xxxvi} The guidelines became board policy in 2012 as a result of a student's human rights complaint. The student experienced difficulties accessing services specific to his gender identity, and the shift in 2012 was adopted as part of the settlement agreement.^{xxxvii} The policy guarantees that students and staff have the right to use a washroom which best conforms to their gender identity, regardless of assigned sex at birth. The guidelines state that requiring students or staff to prove their gender is not acceptable, self-identification is the sole measure to be used with respect to gender identity. This is the same for gym classes, sports activities and change rooms.

The policy acknowledges that the existence of transgender people is often erased, or included only in highly stigmatized ways with respect to curriculum integration and access to accurate information. As a result, school board and school-based curriculum leaders must integrate trans-awareness and trans-positive advocacy training into staff professional development curricula.

D. British Columbia School Boards

Gender Identity Policy: In June 2014, the Vancouver School Board (VSB) updated its school policy to provide support specifically for transgender students. In particular, the policy states that transgender students are to be addressed with their preferred name, as well as be allowed to use the washroom and change room which corresponds to their gender identity. With respect to the underlying educational value of the policy, the board offers the following: "Our role is education and to ensure that ALL of our students have the best chance of being successful, and most able to focus on their learning in our schools."^{xxxviii}

Specific GSD Policies: In addition, 34 school divisions in B.C. currently have specific anti-bullying policies related to GSD identities.⁵ The title of the policy is unique to each division, however what underlies all of them is the explicit protection of GSD students, staff and families. Vancouver school division's policy is

⁵ The complete list of school divisions in British Columbia with diversity in gender and attraction related board policies and regulations can be found here: <https://bctf.ca/SocialJustice.aspx?id=17994>

titled, *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirit, questioning policy*, whereas Bulkley Valley's is titled *Gender equity and non-discrimination and diversity policy*.^{xxxix}

GSA Inclusion in Saskatchewan

A. GSA Information on Ministry of Education Website

In April 2013, NDP Opposition Leader Cam Broten put GSAs on the radar of Saskatchewan's political arena. He suggested that in support of *Day of Pink*, and all students seeking refuge from bullying, the government not ignore the requests of students and do more to address homophobia in Saskatchewan schools. Broten requested information regarding GSAs be uploaded to the Ministry of Education website.^{xi} Premier Brad Wall responded that the government would not stand in the way of such groups forming, but also that the government had to be concerned about the freedom of religion in Saskatchewan.^{xii}

Halla Scott, a student from the Regina Catholic division, stepped forward to say she had been trying to start a GSA, but was not receiving support. Halla said a guidance counsellor had suggested that forming the group would "go against religious values." Miles Meyers, the coordinator of Regina Catholic education services told CBC: "Catholics are called to show support against any form of discrimination, including against gay people." He said he "regretted that any student might feel he or she is not getting the support they want."^{xiii} At the time of Meyers statement, there were no GSAs in any Regina Catholic schools. In a letter to the *Star-Phoenix* editor Don Cochrane, a University of Saskatchewan professor asked, "How could any religious groups be so privileged that they could possibly veto sharing vital information that would help vulnerable students survive? It is time that Wall showed leadership on this issue. Young lives are at stake."^{xiiii}

Further debates in the legislature throughout April and into May resulted in the Premier meeting Broten's request. The Ministry of Education uploaded a link to the website *MyGSA.ca* under the *Comprehensive School Community Health, Anti-Bullying* tab for youth. Under the educators tab, two related documents prepared by the Public Health Agency of Canada were uploaded

B. Saskatchewan Anti-Bullying Action Plan

In November 2013, *Saskatchewan's Action Plan to Address Bullying and Cyberbullying* was released. The fourth theme, *Engage Children and Youth in Creating Solutions to Foster Positive Relationships*, includes three actions, one of which is "responding positively to student requests for school groups such as GSAs."^{xliv}

The *Star-Phoenix* quoted NDP Opposition Critic David Forbes to be unsatisfied: “It is light on detail and worse, it is light on action. The report is particularly lacking in regard to GSAs and related issues. A vague mention of GSAs leaves the government’s position unclear.” The *Star-Phoenix* went on to report that the ACC’s McIvor said she was happy with the reference to GSAs. It did remain to be seen however what actions would happen in schools: “There’s a lot of room for meaningful implementation.”^{xlv}

Implementation of the Anti-Bullying Action Plan

Government action in implementing supports outlined in the *Anti-Bullying Action Plan* was limited to a one-page document on the *I Am Stronger* website which provides steps to consider when starting a GSA.⁶

C. Growing Support for GSD Initiatives in Saskatchewan

Canada’s First GSA within a First Nations School

In 2005, Sakewew High School in North Battleford, established Saskatchewan’s first GSA in a First Nations school. In 2013, Egale Canada Human Rights Trust recognized the Sakewew GSA as the first in a Canadian First Nations school. They were invited to Toronto’s *OUTshine* conference to be honoured for this initiative.^{xlvi} Expressing the group’s determination to contribute to the growing momentum of GSA support in Saskatchewan, vice-principal Stewart said “We’re going to fight hard. All schools have to have GSAs. It’s how we stop the nightmare of discrimination.”^{xlvii} In addition to bringing pertinence to Saskatchewan in the Canadian context, the Sakewew GSA plays a vital role in the importance of intersecting identities in conversations about diversity and supporting students.

Saskatoon Public School Division

The Saskatoon Public School Division (SPSD) has risen as a provincial leader with respect to GSD inclusion. It is credited with being the first school division in Saskatchewan to embark on a division-wide initiative of staff professional learning around GSD issues. Director Avon Whittles has supported the work by championing the phrase, “We stand up; we do not stand by.”^{xlviii} To signal its commitment to GSAs, the

⁶ *The Gay-Straight Alliances in Saskatchewan Schools* document can be found on the *I am Stronger* website: <http://iamstronger.ca/uploads/editor/GSA%20in%20Sask%20Schools%20ENG.pdf>

division filmed *A Safe Place for Everyone: Gay Straight Alliances in Our Schools* and screened it as the school opening video for the 2014-2015 year to an audience of over 2,000 staff.⁷

Saskatchewan’s Teachers Associations

The Saskatchewan Teachers Federation (STF) has a *Special Subject Council* called the *Social Justice and Anti-Oppressive Forum on Education*. It is dedicated to supporting and educating in the area of GSD diversity inclusion, and is prepared to take steps to provide more official support for their members.⁸

With respect to individual initiatives across the province, noteworthy examples illustrate the growing need for GSD-related support. In 2013, The North East Teachers Association responded to the requests of educators, launching professional learning opportunities around GSD inclusion. Esterhazy High School in 2012, educator Sam Smart established Good Spirit School Division’s first GSA. In 2013, Warman High School with leadership from educator Mark Perry, was the first in the Prairie Spirit School Division to establish a GSA. The Prairie Spirit Teachers Association Executive has since committed resources to support staff in such efforts, and are currently creating policy. President Cindy Clarke states: “It is our hope that through our policy development process, we can lead by example and encourage not only our own school division but also surrounding school divisions, to develop their own policy in support of these efforts.”^{xlx}

Community Advocacy for Government Action

In October 2014, around 60 community members consisting of families, affirming church members, university professors, students, teacher association members, educators and supportive community allies from all ages and demographics, assembled for the *Stand Up March for LGBTQ Rights in Sask*. Event planners asserted, “We want to see legislation which mandates that GSAs are allowed in all schools. If a student says ‘I want a GSA in my school’ there is government action for that to occur.”^l Overall, the march was clear in its goal, “It’s a political call to action. We need to see government initiatives that prove that all students deserve an anti-oppressive school environment and access to education freely and safely.”^{li}

⁷ *A Safe Place for Everyone: Gay Straight Alliances in Our Schools* can be found on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKtBhK-V5cQ>

⁸ Appendix B: Saskatchewan Teachers Federation Statement: Executive Director Gwen Dueck.

Gender Identity to the Saskatchewan Human Rights Code

In December 2014, the Saskatchewan Government passed Bill 171 into law, explicitly adding gender identity to the provincial Human Rights Code. The amendment was applauded across the country, and proponents of safe schools eagerly await the implications within the education system. In keeping with the new legislation, the Ministry of Education is obliged to assist school boards in creating a school culture that is safe, respectful and supportive of transgender and gender variant students.

Barriers to GSAs

A. Discretion of Administration

Currently in Saskatchewan, students' requests to start a GSA in their school are subject to the approval of its administration. These requests are frequently and repeatedly denied. The reality remains: lesbian, gay and bisexual youth have a four times higher risk of attempting suicide than their straight counterparts.^{lii} That rate increases significantly for transgender and two-spirit youth, with a study finding that half of all transgender and two-spirit persons have experienced suicidal ideation.^{liii}

Research indicates that GSAs are literally a life-saving support for both GSD and non-GSD youth. It should not be withheld for reasons of personal or religious bias which disregard research-based evidence. Just as it is with other forms of oppression and discrimination (such as racism and sexism for example), it is the responsibility of the professionals in our school system to uphold human rights legislation, meet a professional code of conduct, and ensure equitable access to education and resources as directed by law.

According to the Canadian Association of Social Workers, "any professional's attempt to alter the identity or expression of a young person to align with social norms is considered unethical and an abuse of power and authority."^{liv} In this statement, denying the existence of groups which support and honour identities and expressions outside of what is considered normative, is defined as a professional abuse of power.

Administrator discretion is also problematic in silencing school staff who wish to act in the best interest of students. Educators across the province wishing to implement a GSA, or signal their allyship have been met with disapproval which threatens their job security. While some seek support from their teachers association or an allied superintendent, many fear for their reputation and their ability to continue a career in education in Saskatchewan. In this type of oppressive atmosphere, allied school staff need official government support.

B. Religious Opposition

It is important to remember that many religious communities are affirming of GSD persons and identities. We must not make the assumption that all persons of faith are inherently in opposition.

With respect to the Catholic religion, assisting marginalized demographics and respecting the human dignity of all persons are pillars of the faith. In April 2014, Regina Archbishop Daniel Bohan reminded Catholics of the Church's official position on discrimination against GSD persons: "As expressed in the Catechism: 'They must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided' (CCC, 2358). Any Catholic is reminded, therefore, to take this fundamental aspect of Church teaching into account in evaluating any speaker or position they may encounter."^{lv}

Finally, it needs to be remembered that government is secular. The decision to ensure the safety of all persons surpasses political party lines and religious influences. It is the job of the government to uphold and protect the rights of all citizens, thereby abiding by provincial and national human rights laws. If that is not occurring in our schools, non-partisan, non-denominational government-level intervention is required.

C. Overreaching Authority of the Legislature

School Board Autonomy: Ensuring all students have access to their right to an education transcends decisions made by individual school divisions with respect to context-specific needs. However, it is the opinion of some that in creating legislation specific to GSAs, the government is infringing on the autonomy of school divisions. This rationale allows for a whole plethora of problematic occurrences.

For example, a school may believe that there are no gay kids in their school and therefore that they do not need to dedicate resources to implementing support for this demographic. This is simply untrue given the Canadian statistic that 1 in 7 people are GSD.^{lvi} In addition, research-based evidence has proven that diversity-inclusive supports such as GSAs impact *all* students in positive ways. Straight and cisgender students are also targets of homophobic and transphobic bullying. Such an approach also ignores the reality that students are coming from a wide variety of family backgrounds. An increasing number of children and youth are coming from families with same-gender parent(s) or guardian(s), and/or with siblings and extended family members who are part of GSD communities.

A school division may also say that children and youth are finding adequate support in the groups and services already offered within their school. If this is in fact the case, then there is already a diversity-inclusive climate which allows GSD youth and allies to feel safe, their rights respected, and their identities

included in their school community. It stands to reason therefore, that this type of school climate would not be one in which opposition to a GSA would occur if a request were to be made.

It is also important to clarify a distinction in language. Legislation with respect to GSAs does not mandate every single school must have a GSA. It is instead meant to protect students and educators who *do* see a need for a GSA and request that one be formed in their school. Legislation would make it illegal to deny this request, therefore ensuring that administration and school board discretion remains neutral and focused on student safety and meeting educational needs equitably for all.

Parental Rights: According to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), “not recognizing a child’s own individuality, trying to control their life and failing to promote a child’s social development” is a form of emotional abuse.^{lvii} Denying a child the right to information that may be directly or indirectly applicable to their identity and/or individuality, and exercising control over the types of social groups and resources they are able to engage in, is therefore categorized as emotional abuse.

Most importantly we must remember the legality of parental rights claims which seek to undermine the implementation of GSAs as an educational support. Under Canadian human rights law, education is a service. Moreover, it is a service that is provided to the student – not to the parent. As such, the right of the student to be provided with a service, without discrimination based on a GSD identity, must take precedent over and above any right a parent may have.

Therefore, what demands our ethical, professional and legal attention is the rights of GSD children and youth to safety, to learn about who they are, and to be respected and accepted. We must not deny children and youth who have GSD parent(s), guardian(s) and family members a school environment in which their loved ones’ are represented in ways which are dignified, and accurate. We must not deny any student the right to learn about the realities which exist in their world, and to afford them the opportunity to be informed, respectful persons, prepared for that which awaits them beyond the classroom.

D. Retention of the Specific GSA Name

Within some schools it is possible to find groups existing in the school culture which purport to work on GSD-related human rights, and function largely in the way of a GSA. These groups have been known as social justice clubs, human rights clubs or youth action circles. Unfortunately these groups are often created with the intention of meeting the needs of a GSA, but fail in achieving the research-evidenced benefits.

For many youth who have requested a GSA in their school, the reality of approval has been conditioned on the name and scope of the group's creation. First, retention of the name GSA has been contentious in its inclusion of the word gay (for gay-straight alliance), or sexuality (for gender and sexuality alliance). It is believed that censorship of these words and identities would be less antagonistic.

This approach however leads to a perpetuated culture of shame, transgression and immorality attached to diversities in attraction and love. This is exactly the type of stigmatized and oppressive environment that contributes to increased rates of suicidal ideation and self-harm behaviour amongst youth; the exact types of environments a GSA works to make safer. Retention of the name GSA is imperative in ensuring all youth see themselves, their families and friends reflected in their school culture in ways that are healthy and respectful.

Second, a broad-based scope covers a plethora of general issues of equity and youth engagement. However a GSA meets the specific needs of GSD self-identified students, students who have GSD parents and those who are allies. One of the most powerful factors of a GSA is that students are surrounded by people with a shared or similar life experience. That solidarity and empathy, the foundations of feeling socially and emotionally supported, are often whitewashed when the focus is shifted away from GSD-specific issues.

An approach that ensures the school community does not stigmatize the identities of its students will retain the name GSA, will recognize the importance of doing so in respecting diversity, and will ensure that the group's focus is on meeting the particular needs of the youth demographic who attend it as a safe space.

Conclusion

Just as culture shifts and society evolves, so must our learning communities. Governments and school boards across the country are working to protect the rights of GSD children and youth through a commitment to resources and supports which assist in ensuring all students are reaching their full potential and gaining equitable access to all aspects of school life.

This is being done through legislating that a student's request for the life-saving support of a GSA cannot be denied, by creating policies which uphold human rights, and by supporting diversity inclusive professional learning and capacity building amongst school staff.

Saskatchewan's *Comprehensive School Community Health* approach to education states that each child deserves to be healthy, safe, and supported. However the reality remains that students across Saskatchewan are being oppressed in homophobic and transphobic learning environments. GSD students are facing discrimination and insults on a daily basis, and students across the province are being denied access to the school-based supports they need for their health and well-being. This reality has forced families to move, or send their children out of province for an equal chance at academic and social success. It has silenced numerous youth into suicidal ideation, self-harm, drug/ alcohol abuse and dropping out of school.

Saskatchewan students deserve an equitable chance at academic and social success. They deserve to have safe, responsive learning environments which respect and honour diversity in love and family realities. Saskatchewan children, youth and families deserve an education system which upholds their inherent right to dignity, and produces the resources to allow for this to occur.

A commitment to the implementation and support of GSAs is an important step in meeting the goals of caring and respectful school communities.

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