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Gay Straight Alliances as a Component of a Sexual Violence Prevention Strategy: History, Possibility, and Lessons Learned from North Carolina

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Author's Note:

Research has shown that the presence of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) in schools can act as a powerful protective or promotive factor in the lives of LGBTQI+ youth, directly impacting youth experiences in school while also acting as an indicator for out of school and even more longitudinal health outcomes. Given the relationship between GSAs and protective factors for youth, it is possible that they can act as a strong component of a comprehensive strategy to prevent sexual violence. This document articulates the argument for the use of GSAs in a comprehensive sexual violence prevention strategy and utilizes the experience of a North Carolina Rape Prevention and Education Grantee as a case study in the use of GSAs to this end.

**The acronym LGBTQI+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer, Questioning, Intersex) will be used to refer to people who hold non-normative sexual and/or gender identities/experiences/presentations. Unless otherwise noted, any acronym that deviates from LGBTQI+ (i.e., LGBT, LGB, etc.) is in keeping with the language used in research being cited. It is becoming more common for GSAs to be referred to as QSAs (Queer Straight Alliances); however, since most of the research continues to use the acronym GSA, the author will be using GSA in this document.

Gay Straight Alliances: A History

A Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) is a "student-run club in a high school or middle school that brings together LGBT and straight students to support each other, provide a safe place to socialize, and create a platform to fight for racial, gender, LGBTQ, and economic justice."[1] It is widely believed that the first school-based groups to call themselves GSAs were formed in 1988-89 at two private schools in Massachusetts. The GSA model was adopted by the State of Massachusetts Safe Schools Program in 1993. This is often cited as one of three key events that gave rise to the GSA movement.

Perhaps the first model for LGBTQI+ youth support groups in schools was Project 10, which showed up in Fairfax High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District in 1984. This model, which was originally not intended to include heterosexual youth, played a role in the later inception of GSAs.[2]

The Importance of School Climate

> *The problem of "sexual minority youth" experiencing hostile and violent climates at school is so widespread that Human Rights Watch has labeled it "endemic."*

It is well established that youth who hold (or are perceived to hold) non-normative sexual and/or gender identities experience early systemic and interpersonal discrimination that puts them at increased risk for adverse health outcomes. In fact, the problem of "sexual minority youth" experiencing hostile and violent climates at school is so widespread that Human Rights Watch has labeled it "endemic."[3] As a result, LGBTQI+ youth are more likely than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts to contemplate, attempt, and complete suicide,[4] get physically assaulted at school,[5] experience homelessness,[6] and become involved at disproportionate rates in the juvenile justice system.[7] The stresses experienced by LGBT youth also put them at greater risk for depression, substance use, and sexual behaviors that place them at risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). For example, HIV infection among young men who have sex with men aged 13-24 years increased by 26% over 2008-2011.[8]

LGBTQI+ youth are more likely to

- Contemplate, attempt & complete suicide
- Be physically assaulted at school
- Experience homelessness
- Become involved in the justice system
- Experience depression
- Engage in substance use
- Engage in risky sexual behavior

Positive & affirming school climates are associated with

- Less disciplinary problems
- Fewer suspensions
- Lower levels of alcohol and drug use
- Less bullying and harassment
- Increased positive outcomes for LGBTQI+ youth—especially those with intersecting marginalized identities

Given that youth generally spend most of their waking hours at school, the importance of the school climate cannot be overemphasized. Recognizing this has resulted in increased national attention to measuring school climate in recent years. School climate has been associated with student mental health, as well as behavioral and academic outcomes.[9] Additionally, school climates that youth experience as positive and affirming have been linked to less disciplinary problems, fewer high school suspensions, lower levels of alcohol and drug use, and less "bullying" and harassment.[10-16] The experiences that youth have at school may act as a barometer for future health outcomes.

Researchers and activists/advocates for youth have identified what they call a School to Prison Pipeline: a set of policies and practices that push students away from education and onto a pathway toward juvenile detention and the prison industrial complex. Research indicates that negative school climates have a disproportionate effect on marginalized and disenfranchised youth, including youth of color, LGBTQI+ youth, and youth with differing abilities. For example, "zero tolerance" policies regarding "bullying" often lead to suspension and expulsion of students for minor infractions or self-defense. In a 2014 study, LGBTQ youth of color report being targeted for infractions due to gender identity and expression and sexual orientation, as well as being punished for their own victimization experiences.[17] Positive school climate plays an important role in ending the School to Prison Pipeline and increasing positive outcomes for LGBTQI+ youth, especially those youth with intersecting marginalized identities.

School Climate and Gay Straight Alliances

Compared to peers attending schools without GSAs, LGBT students attending high schools with GSAs report hearing fewer homophobic comments at school, feeling safer at school, and having more supportive teachers and staff members.

Research suggests that GSAs in schools may buffer against risk in the lives of all youth by contributing to a positive school climate. Heck and colleagues (2011) surveyed 145 LGBT youth recruited from college organizations for LGBT students. They found that, among their sample, youth who attended a high school with a GSA reported significantly more favorable outcomes related to school experiences, alcohol use, and psychological distress.[18] In 2013, Heck and colleagues used Myer's Minority Stress Theory (2003) to look at how the presence of GSAs impacts the overall school environment. They found that, when compared to peers attending schools without GSAs, LGBT students attending high schools with GSAs report hearing fewer homophobic comments at school, feeling safer at school, and having more supportive teachers and staff members.[19]

Multiple studies have shown that the mere presence of a GSA in a school (and not necessarily participation in it) is linked to real and perceived school safety among both LGBTQ students and their heterosexual and/or cisgender counterparts. A 2003 statewide study conducted in Massachusetts found that the presence of a GSA was the most predictive factor for perception of school safety among both LGB and heterosexual students.[20]

GSAs may also motivate students to effect change in their own lives, in their relationships, and perhaps in even broader social justice contexts. Additionally, primary or secondary homophobic and/or transphobic victimization experiences can propel youth to get involved in GSAs as a call to action. Russell et al. (2009) conducted focus group interviews with 15 leaders of GSAs and found that involvement in a GSA empowered these

Presence of a GSA at school was the most predictive factor for perception of school safety among both LGB and heterosexual students

youth to organize and create change through activism. GSA involvement was associated with having more positive feelings about oneself and having a greater sense of control over one's future.[21] Sweat (2004) found that experiencing victimization or having friends experience victimization motivates LGBT and heterosexual youth to participate in GSAs. A desire to promote social justice was also identified as a motivating factor.[22]

GSAs impact school climate by enabling LGBTQI+ students to affect change and by transforming the school environment into one that is safer and more supportive. A school environment more conducive to learning and positive social engagement may, then, buffer against risk of violence for all people who engage in the school community.

What does this have to do with sexual violence?

Because risk factors such as bullying, environments accepting of gender inequity and low academic performance are correlated with first-time perpetration of sexual violence, changing an environment that fosters these risk factors may function as a strategy to prevent sexual violence. GSAs have been shown to contribute to positive school climates by reducing "bullying", increasing students' perception of safety, increasing academic performance, and many other factors previously mentioned. To this end, GSAs can act as a powerful environmental change strategy.

While there continues to be a dearth of research in the field of sexual violence perpetration and victimization, we know that factors associated with bias, stigma, rejection, and discrimination deeply impact the way that LGBTQI+ youth experience the world. For instance, research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and The Prevention Institute has made clear that that when schools do not tolerate harassment and discrimination against LGBTQI+ youth, the resulting climate functions as a protective factor for LGBTQI+ youth by creating school -level social and cultural norms that work against hetero/cis-sexism.

Cultural and social norms can create conditions where violence perpetration is more likely to occur. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "Cultural and social norms are highly influential in shaping individual behavior, including the use of violence. Norms can protect against violence, but they can also support and encourage the use of it. Additionally, the WHO has found that gender inequity, sexual activity as markers of masculinity, victim blaming, and the treatment of sexuality as a taboo subject are all norms supportive of sexual violence.[23] Some of the conditions necessary to perpetrate violence, then, can be found in the social and cultural norms of a community/society.

Given that school environments are subcultures where people of school age spend most of their waking hours, changing school norms can create conditions wherein people may be less likely to perpetrate violence against

LGBTQI+ (and all other) people. Changing those faulty norms may work to dismantle the conditions that cause first-time perpetration of sexual violence to occur.

An important developmental asset in the lives of youth is school connectedness. The CDC defines school connectedness as "the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals."[24] Current research has not yet explored a direct relationship between school connectedness and sexual violence; however, we know that sexual violence shares risk and protective factors with other types of violence. This means that some well-established risk or protective factors for, say, violence or early sexual initiation, could most likely act as risk or protective factors for sexual violence. School connectedness is a well-researched protective factor for both violence and early sexual initiation.[25] Research by the CDC and The Prevention Institute has already helped to establish that "cultural norms that support aggression toward others" and "harmful norms around masculinity and femininity," to name two examples, are risk factors for perpetration shared among multiple violence types, including sexual violence.[26]

Similar to school climate, research on school connectedness has firmly established it as a strong protective factor. Students who feel a sense of school connectedness are less likely to engage in many risk behaviors, including early sexual initiation, alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, and violence and gang initiation. Additionally, students who feel connected to their school are more likely to have high academic achievement, including high grades and test scores, have better school attendance, and stay in school longer.[27] School connectedness has been shown to reduce odds of depression and emotional distress.[28] To the extent that positive school climates lead to an increased feeling of school connectedness, they might also help to prevent sexual violence.

Additionally, we know that a connection exists between early "bullying" behaviors and later sexual violence perpetration.[29] This further suggests that if we attend to risk and protective factors for adjacent perpetration behaviors, we could most likely also work to modify risk and protective factors for sexual violence perpetration, in this case perpetration against LGBTQI+ individuals.

Given that youth spend most of their waking hours in school, coupled with the fact that LGBTQI+ youth are particularly vulnerable to non-supportive

The WHO has indicated that some social norms can be supportive of sexual violence, such as

- **Gender inequity**

- **Sexual activity as a measure of masculinity**

- **Victim blaming**

- **Treatment of sexuality as a taboo subject**

environments, it is important to implement programming that will decrease first time perpetration against LGBTQI+ people. Because risk factors such as bullying, environments accepting of gender inequity and low academic performance are correlated with first-time perpetration of sexual violence, changing an environment that fosters these risk factors may function as a strategy to prevent sexual violence. GSAs have been shown to contribute to positive school climates by reducing "bullying", increasing students' perception of safety, increasing academic performance, and many other factors previously mentioned. To this end, GSAs can act as a powerful environmental change strategy.

How do GSAs function as part of a comprehensive sexual violence prevention strategy?

The Socio-Ecological Model (SEM) of behavior helps make clear that multiple spheres of influence impact individual behavior like the perpetration of sexual violence. Consistent with this conceptual frame, the CDC urges that sexual violence prevention strategies address risk and protective factors in each of these spheres-individual, relationship, community, and society.[30] Understanding that schools function as communities for youth, it becomes clear that GSAs comprise a community level prevention strategy. GSAs impact school climate and create safer conditions for LGBTQI+ (and other) youth. This reduces risk and increases protective factors, possibly for sexual violence.

It is important to note that a GSA, in isolation, will not prevent sexual violence against LGBTQI+ youth. Youth are impacted by multiple influencers, including family, peer groups, the community outside of school, and the larger society in which they live. Thus, it is important to also create strategies that attend to the risk and protective factors that exist within each of these spheres in order to achieve broad impact.

In 2012, a Rape Prevention and Education (RPE) grantee in North Carolina was the first program in the state to integrate a GSA into a comprehensive sexual violence prevention strategy. The following case study highlights their successes, missteps, lessons learned and lingering questions. This case study was written by the author after consultation with one of the prevention coordinators on this project. The names of programs, schools, and persons involved are kept confidential.

The Use of a GSA in a North Carolina (NC) RPE Program: A Case Study

In 2012, a county-based Sexual Violence Prevention Task Force (SVPTF), funded by and mandated through the NC RPE Program,[31] was talking at one of their meetings about the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ people in the county, specifically LGBTQI+ youth. As a number of Task Force members worked in staff and administrative positions at local schools, there was a fair amount of knowledge in the room about the school climate for LGBTQI+ youth. A number of adults shared that they were concerned about some of the LGBTQI+ youth they work with seeking relationships online due to the lack of community support for them in the county. The lack of local community support for LGBTQI+ youth, they surmised, acted as a risk factor for experiencing sexual violence perpetration via relationships formed online. This initial conversation, focused on the need to find a way to support LGBTQI+ youth in the community, eventually led to the formation of the GSA.

NC has no anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQI+ people in its state law. Amendment One, NC's now overturned law defining marriage as between one man and one woman, passed by a large majority in 2012. The hostile statewide climate leading up to the vote featured, among other things, North Carolinians posting videos to YouTube of themselves taking firearms to anti-amendment yard signs. The only legislative basis for school-based protection for LGBTQI+ youth is NC's School Violence Prevention Act; however, this legislation has had questionable impact because of the state's decentralized education system. Each school district has almost absolute power to make unilateral decisions, in practice making consistent policy across the state extremely unlikely. The RPE-funded Agency (referred to as "agency" in this case study) to which this case study is referring is located in a designated rural county with no active and public programs for LGBTQI+ adults let alone supports for youth.

The agency had run other school-based clubs and saw the club-based model as successful. Still, they were fairly certain that neither the agency (who had been in the schools facilitating sexual violence prevention programs for years) nor the key stakeholders and allies to LGBTQI+ youth had the capital to convince any school in the district to organize students around the idea of a GSA. Students at one of the high schools had attempted to start a GSA in the past and the principal had blocked this attempt despite the fact that the Department of

> *NC has no anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQI+ people in its state law.*

Education has been clear that GSAs must be treated like and given the same opportunities as other clubs in the school. For that reason the concerned adults on the SVPTF began to think about a community-based GSA model not tethered to the school district.

Since the agency was already delivering sexual violence prevention programming to two high schools in the county, they obtained administrative permission to run focus groups about what the community climate was like for LGBTQI+ youth and generate possible intervention ideas. It became clear as a result of the focus groups that there would be major barriers to having a community-based GSA disconnected to the school system. Some barriers articulated by students were transportation and lack of parental support, which would prompt youth to either not tell their parents where they were going or to simply not take part in the club.

After the focus groups, the conversation among agency staff and adult allies shifted. The agency grew concerned about how it might be able to support a community-based GSA without parental affirmation; whether their involvement in a GSA outside of the school system would be considered a therapeutic intervention that they would then need parental permission for;[32] and how the larger community would receive a GSA supported by the agency and facilitated by adults who are either out themselves or strong supportive allies. Some staff feared that the agency's standing in the community would not make it through this and that they would lose their community partners.

Despite concerns, the SVPTF and the agency committed to continuing to consider the community-based GSA, still thinking they would not have access to a school. What happened next was described by key stakeholders as serendipitous. In the 2012 school year, agency staff was asked to conduct training for school social workers and guidance counselors about sexual harassment. During the presentation, agency staff talked about LGBTQI+ students and their experiences in schools. Directly after the presentation a guidance counselor from one of the high schools approached agency staff and said he wanted to help start a GSA. This was incredibly important because starting any club at a school requires school personnel, so the agency would not have been able to support students as an advisor anyway.
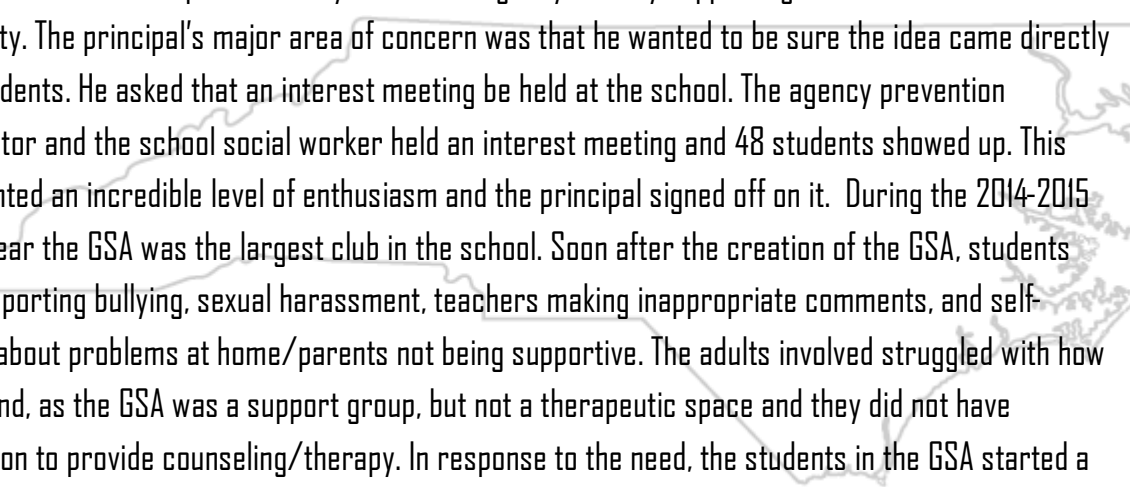
The agency's prevention coordinator met with the school guidance counselor and students at the school who had been involved in the focus group to talk. The guidance counselor and prevention coordinator scheduled a meeting with the school principal. The prevention coordinator talked about the fact that the school was required to allow students to have a GSA if there are other clubs. The principal gave his blessing, but asked them "not to make too much noise" and asked to be kept "in the loop." The group decided to spend a good chunk of the first year functioning more as a support group than an advocacy group.
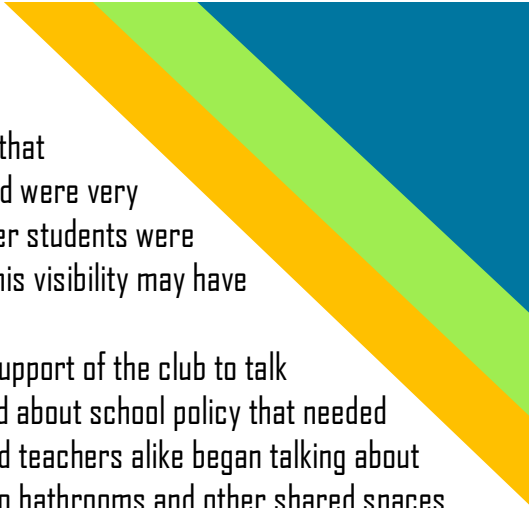
Toward the end of the first school year, the club had its first public event, a community movie night open to students and community members. When it was first advertised, some push back occurred. The school principal received multiple calls from concerned parents, as well as a threat to protest the event. The principal ended up attending the event himself to make sure there wasn't going to be an issue. While a handful of students showed up, the room was mostly populated by community members who wanted to show support.

In 2014, the agency supported the development of a second GSA in a different high school. After a community presentation about LGBTQI+ folks and sexual violence, a school social worker from the second high school approached the presenter and said they wanted to do something. Recently there had been an administration change at the school and the school social worker felt the time was right for adults to support youth in the school who wanted to start a GSA. The agency prevention coordinator held a meeting with the new principal and the school social worker. At that point the agency prevention coordinator was able to point to two years of the agency already supporting a GSA at another school in the county. The principal's major area of concern was that he wanted to be sure the idea came directly from students. He asked that an interest meeting be held at the school. The agency prevention coordinator and the school social worker held an interest meeting and 48 students showed up. This represented an incredible level of enthusiasm and the principal signed off on it. During the 2014-2015 school year the GSA was the largest club in the school. Soon after the creation of the GSA, students began reporting bullying, sexual harassment, teachers making inappropriate comments, and self-reports about problems at home/parents not being supportive. The adults involved struggled with how to respond, as the GSA was a support group, but not a therapeutic space and they did not have permission to provide counseling/therapy. In response to the need, the students in the GSA started a weekly peer to peer support group where students would provide each other the space they needed to process their experiences outside of traditional therapeutic spaces.

The agency prevention coordinator believes that the GSAs functioned to mitigate risk and increase protection in the following ways:

- They created space to talk about LGBTQI+ people in the school where that space had not existed before. Students wore bracelets, had shirts, and were very visible. They started conversations. The administration, staff, and other students were forced to acknowledge that LGBTQI+ students existed at the school. This visibility may have contributed to a more positive school climate.
- In the second high school mentioned, a handful of students used the support of the club to talk more about their gender identities. As a result, a conversation started about school policy that needed to change to ensure that students were being supported. Students and teachers alike began talking about needed policy changes, from demographic options on student forms to bathrooms and other shared spaces.
- The adult allies talked a lot in the beginning about creating a curriculum for the club, trying to address risk factors through lessons. They quickly moved away from that and believe it was a good decision. They began looking at risk factors less as things that need to be individually addressed by name and taught about, and more about the organic nature of mitigating risk. They realized that the club itself was breaking down isolation and increasing the visibility of LGBTQI+ students in the school in a positive way. Additionally, they were struck by how enabling the youth to self-direct, to really own the club, seemed to help build their resilience.
- Conversations about the GSA prompted agency staff to re-examine their own policies and procedures around working with LGBTQI+ survivors. The agency had a non-discrimination policy, but had not seriously approached the work from an intersectional anti-oppression lens. Conversations among staff and community members prompted an overhaul of how the agency works with community members to better ensure that the agency is an affirming place for LGBTQI+ survivors.

The clubs have been up and running for three years and almost two years, respectively. Staff and students can relate anecdotal stories indicating their success. However, neither the RCC nor the schools have had the resources to formally evaluate these programs. A great need exists for evaluation of sexual violence prevention strategies in general and, arguably, an even greater one exists to evaluate "non-traditional" programs and policies for sexual violence outcomes due to what we know about risk and protection.

RCC staff faced many challenges during the course of this project. While agency staff worked with school staff, they found that they frequently felt "out of the loop." They were not included in some of the formal and informal communication processes which take place within the schools. As a result, while they were receiving disclosures and hearing about students engaging in very high-risk behaviors, they were often not kept abreast of how student concerns were handled by administration. Students began providing peer-to-peer support using the GSA space, which enabled many students to get help from each other when they were struggling. It created lasting connections and positive peer relationships for those students.

Since this document was conceived turnover at the agency has caused some concern about continued administrative and adult ally support for the GSAs. This highlights that we must center the need for sustainability of the project from its inception to ensure that students continue to receive the support they need to maintain this student-led project.

Conclusion

> *A comprehensive approach to sexual violence prevention that centers the way in which power and privilege play out in a given society will prevent sexual violence. Because the trickledown effect of systemic oppression informs the way marginalized and disenfranchised people are treated every day, we believe that ending all forms of oppression will also end sexual violence. Working to dismantle discriminatory and bias climates in schools could go a long way to preventing sexual violence against all individuals.*

GSAs are well-positioned to act as successful community-level sexual violence prevention strategies. The GSA Network has a number of resources to help youth and adult allies get started: www.gsanetwork.org.

Additionally, consideration of a GSA as a component of a sexual violence prevention strategy takes work. We do not yet have a model for how to neatly integrate and evaluate this project for sexual violence outcomes. We do, however, have a robust field of committed sexual violence preventionists working on the ground and many people around the country evaluating the impact of GSAs. Partnerships between these two entities could potentially give rise to more sensitive measurement tools that help us understand how GSAs may function as a piece of the sexual violence prevention puzzle.

Finally, a GSA in isolation will not prevent sexual violence in the lives of LGBTQI+ youth, particularly when those youth hold multiple marginalized identities/experiences. A comprehensive approach to sexual violence prevention that centers the way in which power and privilege play out in a given society will prevent sexual violence. Because the trickledown effect of systemic oppression informs the way marginalized and disenfranchised people are treated every day, we believe that ending all forms of oppression will also end sexual violence. Working to dismantle discriminatory and bias climates in schools could go a long way to preventing sexual violence against all individuals.

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32. NC does not clearly define how rape crisis center/intimate partner violence advocates will be treated legally when it comes to serving minors. Consequently, many programs err on the side of not serving minors.