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## The Effect of GSAs in High Schools

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### Gay-Straight Alliances and The Positive Impact Their Presence in High Schools Has

Nearly half of the high school students in the United States say they attend a school where there is an active Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). GSAs work in a number of ways depending on how each school has decided to structure their own and what students ask for and believe works best for their school. The clubs are generally student lead and supervised by on average two faculty advisors. GSAs promote positive growth and positively impact students' mental and physical health as well as their academic success.

It is the job of GSA advisors to work with administrators on the students' behalf or facilitate meetings between administrators and students. Advisors advocate for and with students for policy changes through meetings and conversations with administrators and teachers (Deming et al.). Some club meetings may be centered around discussion on what changes members would like to see in their school, and advisors will take the feedback they get during these discussions to administrators to work towards making those changes in the school. Some schools may prefer to only have the club's advisors meet with administrators while some administrations enjoy seeing students advocating for themselves and the changes they want to see. In either situation, the changes both advisors and students advocate for begin in the open spaces on GSA meetings. GSA meetings create a space where students can feel comfortable discussing what school policies or perhaps what lack of school policy they are unhappy with and

be given the opportunity to take action towards making the changes they want to see in their schools.

Possibly one of the most notable differences the presence of a GSA in a high school makes is the decrease in suicidality among students. As many studies find, Poteat states, “Adolescent boys and girls (heterosexual and LGBTQ alike) reported lower suicidal ideations and attempts” (8-9). This could be due in part to the effect GSAs have on school atmosphere and the bullying students face. What could also contribute to this is GSAs’ promotion of growth of positive self-identity, mental health (Poteat et al.). Students at schools which have a GSA report feeling they can identify a teacher or faculty member they can trust more often than students at schools which do not have GSAs. Feeling that they have someone trusted they can talk to in the place where they spend the majority of their times as adolescents is immeasurably important. Students were less likely to attempt suicide when they could identify at least one staff member who they felt was supportive (Deming et al.).

Higher amounts of illicit drug use are reported among queer adolescents than their straight counterparts. Heck suggests this is “often linked to minority specific stressors, which are rooted in societal heterosexism” (2). Facing higher amounts of bullying due to their sexual minority status, brings overwhelming stress into youths’ lives and puts them at increased risk for drug abuse. Students at schools without a GSA were at a higher risk for misuse of cocaine, hallucinogens, marijuana, and recreational use of ADHD medication. However, decreased drug use in schools where there is a GSA is not confined to only queer students. Where a GSA is present, straight students also display a decrease in drug misuse. An increase in perceived school safety due to the presence of a GSA lowers stress levels for queer students and in turn lowers the

risk of those students turning to drug abuse. In addition to the impact on school atmosphere, GSAs provide a substance-free socializing environment run by an advisor for students to spend time together in. This safe and healthy environment makes it easier for students to socialize with each other without the possible expectation of drug use in other social spaces.

A large part of why the presence of a GSA can contribute to an improvement in academic performance is the sense of accountability the space can provide. When a student feels their academic wellbeing is being paid attention to and cared about, they feel more motivated to do well. One student who participates in their school's GSA said, "It was like all of a sudden I had this group of people who checked in on me and made sure that I was following through with all my assignments and showing up to class" (McCormick et al. 4). This sense of accountability and community provided by the club's presence gives students more motivation to do well as they feel others are concerned with their academic and social experiences (McCormick et al.).

Compared to students at schools where a GSA is present, "Participants without a GSA reported experiencing more victimization perpetrated by parents/caregivers and peers at school, less acceptance from parents regarding their sexual minority status, and that their communities were more hostile for LGBT people" (Heck 3). It cannot be assumed that the presence of a GSA in a student's high school will have a great effect on the attitudes of that student's parents. However, the presence of and participation in a GSA in that student's school can have a great effect on the student's resilience (Ioverno et al.). The support students who participate in their school's GSAs get helps them become more resilient. Building this resilience helps them better face some victimization, and lessen the negative effects it has on the students. While the presence of a GSA can have this effect on students who participate in the club, the club's impact

is not limited to its participants. Ioverno finds “the presence of a GSA at school was associated with fewer homophobic bullying experiences the following year “ (7). The club’s presence makes a change in the school’s overall atmosphere overtime.

In addition to providing a safe and supportive space for queer students and their allies, GSAs do a number of other things which help grow and empower students (Poteat et al.). What activities this includes differs from school to school. Many GSAs will organize events for Coming Out Day or Coming Out Week in October every year. This can range from hanging posters in hallways to holding fundraisers during lunch block. As most GSAs are majority student run and lead, the club’s members are the ones who organize and run these activities. This student run aspect to club activities gives club members the chance to get their voice out if they choose to. It gives students the chance to grow new leadership skills, whether that includes organizing groups, keeping track of funds, communicating with administrations, or setting up small events.

While GSAs do act as safe spaces in schools where queer students and their allies might not always feel safe, these clubs do much more for schools and their students than simply providing a safe space. GSAs give leadership opportunities to their members and empower them to be able to act in their own interest and for what they believe is right. The presence of GSAs has positive effects on overall student health, decreasing suicidality in both queer and straight students regardless of whether or not they are club members (Poteat et al. 8-9). The decrease in stressors to sexual minority students and the availability of a substance free social space leads to a decrease in drug abuse among students. GSAs provide students with a group to whom they feel accountable, making them more likely to keep up with school assignments and attend class.

In addition to providing a sense of accountability, the club provides students with a space in which they can grow, become empowered, and become more resilient. This resilience can contribute to students perceiving themselves as facing less victimization on account of their sexual minority status.

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