



Starting (or reigniting) GSA spaces

This resource has been designed for caring adults who are supporting students as they start (or reignite) a Gender & Sexuality Alliance (GSA) in school communities. A GSA is a **student-initiated and student-led** club within a school. The goal of a GSA is to provide a safe and supportive environment for 2S/LGBTQIA+ (and sometimes straight-allied) students to socialize, learn, offer peer-to-peer support and facilitate community connections. GSAs also offer space to address discrimination, harassment and intolerance specifically as it relates to the 2S/LGBTQIA+ community, and to work towards creating mentally healthy school environments.

Why are GSAs in schools important?

“When identity is affirmed and celebrated, students feel a sense of connectedness to the school community. This is a protective factor for students which can positively impact their social relationships at school and academic achievements.”

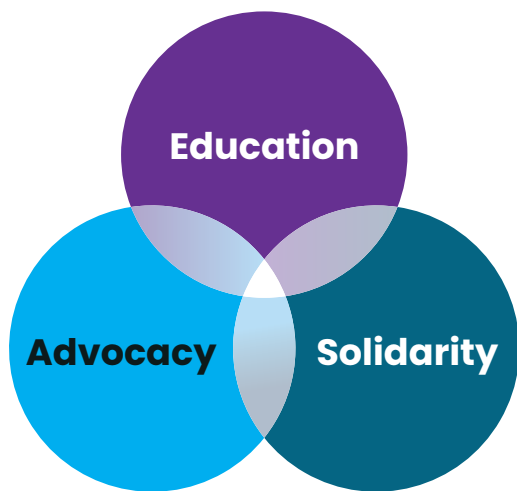
#HearNowON 2024

Schools have a responsibility to create inclusive and welcoming learning environments where all students and their families are reflected (Egale 2025, p.3). “In an inclusive education system, students must see themselves reflected in the curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, so that they can feel engaged in and empowered by their learning experiences” (Ministry of Education, 2025). In [#HearNowON 2024](#), students identified the importance of having a sense of connectedness or belonging. Participants shared that this could be achieved through various efforts including GSAs and affinity group spaces. GSAs can be a key part of what shapes students’ experiences at school and can offer a variety of protective factors that support their overall mental health and well-being.

GSAs can provide students a supportive and inclusive space that may positively impact their mental health and well-being and set the stage for them to thrive by:

- fostering opportunities to establish strong and positive relationships with both peers and caring adults while strengthening their social network
- offering a space for meaningful mental health discussions, which are specifically highlighted as having positive impacts (Poteat et al., 2020)
- cultivating a sense of safety and belonging in school while facilitating access to caring adults are two positive childhood experiences
- promoting student-led and adult-supported spaces – this may lead to positive long-term outcomes, including stronger self-esteem and self-worth, and improved educational and economic opportunities
- providing space for students to educate themselves and engage the broader community in efforts to create more mentally healthy schools





Education

Members are invited to learn, discuss and teach about various topics related to identity and belonging. For example, training and workshops.

Advocacy

Members are pursuing a social change initiative. For example, advocating for changes in oppressive policies or practices.

Solidarity

Members come together for support, access to identity-specific wellness practices and personal growth. For example, a Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA).



Affinity groups aim to bring people with shared identities together to explore education, advocacy and solidarity. They can help create communities where individuals feel affirmed, connected, supported and comfortable showing up in their most authentic way. For more information refer to the [Affinity Groups – Creating and Sustaining Affinity Groups Student Engagement Toolkit resource](#).

A major finding in [Egale's Still in Every Class in Every School report](#) found that 2S/LGBTQIA+ youth with supportive adults both inside and outside of the home are FOUR TIMES more likely to have feelings of good or excellent mental health.

How can we begin?



“Creating and sustaining a GSA starts with understanding how students are already forming connections.”

Jenna D., zine p. 6

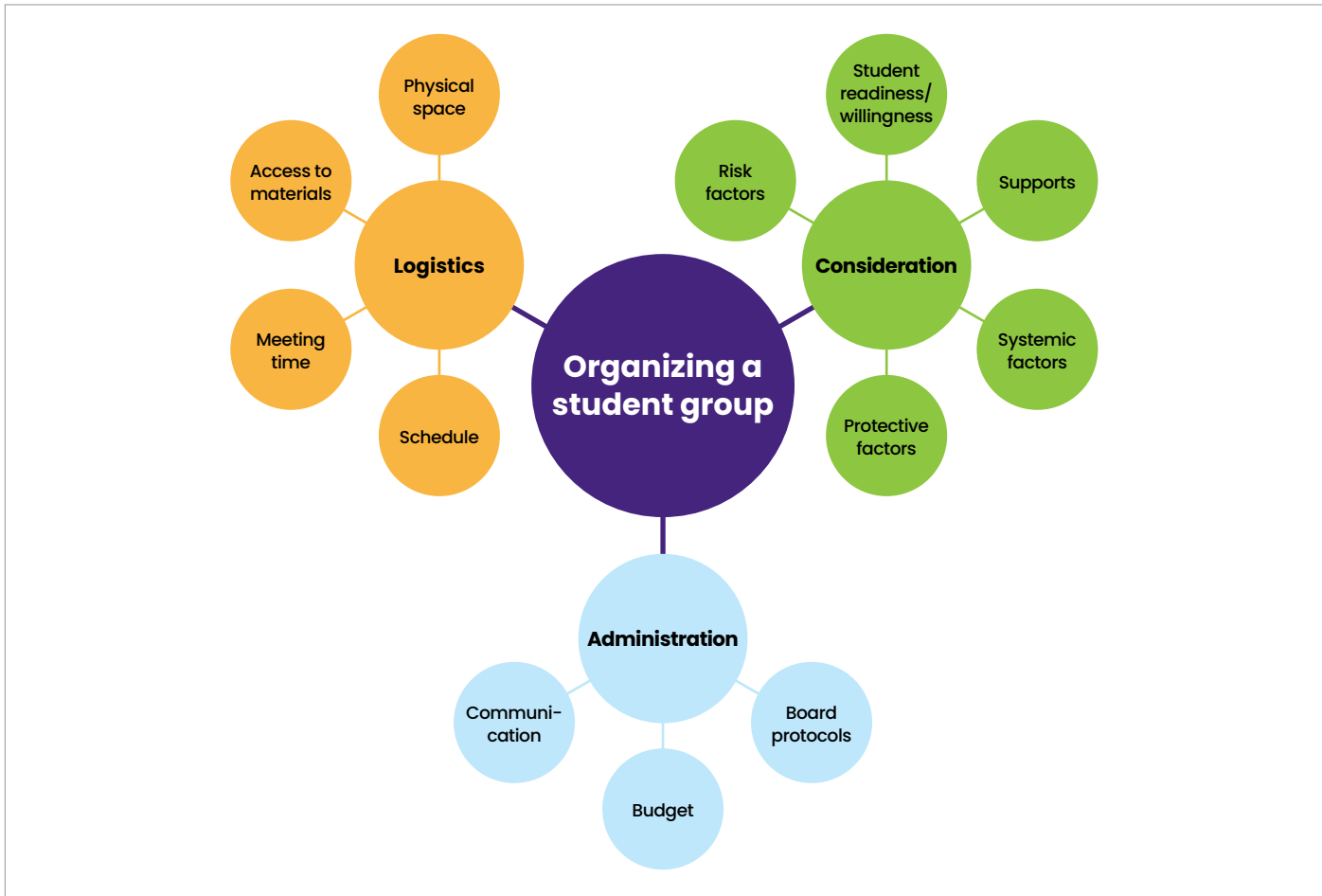
HOW CAN WE BEGIN?	
<p>Self-reflect</p> 	<p>Before we can create safe and supportive environments with 2S/LGBTQIA+ students, we must first reflect on whose identities are visible, affirmed or left unacknowledged within our school community. The quote, “The absence of recognition is a form of erasure,” reminds us that invisibility can impact the experiences of a student, and affect them just as much as what is openly acknowledged.</p>
<p>Build relationships</p> 	<p>All GSAs will present differently depending on the needs and interests of the students involved in the group. Whether you are starting or reigniting a GSA at your school, it is always best to build relationships with the students and ask them what they want the space to be.</p>



HOW CAN WE BEGIN?

<p>Engage and promote</p> 	<p>There are many ways to advertise, recruit and organize student groups. Engage student participation from the very start—whether there are one or two students whom you have an established relationships with, or if you need to build relationships with students prior to proceeding. This approach can help the group be more successful and self-sustaining (or lasting) from the start, while also reducing the pressure on facilitators during the early stages.</p>
<p>Coordinate with students</p> 	<p>Explore consistent scheduling for group meetings, establish communication plans for informing administrators, teachers, parents and caregivers and account for any budget needs for supplies or snacks, while following your board’s protocols. It is also helpful to explore the greater school climate and culture and systemic factors that may impact/ influence your GSA/affinity space.</p>

Here is a chart to display additional considerations:



The presence of a GSA in schools not only supports 2S/LGBTQIA+ students but also contributes to a more positive, supportive climate for the entire student body. This impact was reflected by students in #HearNowON 2024 which reported that “students across all focus groups emphasized the importance of representation and its positive impact on their mental health. Seeing themselves in the supports and services they were receiving was a source of motivation and encouragement.”

How can we support students' intersecting identities?

"Students will not all experience a GSA in the same way, and their race, culture, gender, sexuality, or other identities shape how they feel in the space."

Jenna D., zine p. 6

Intersectionality, a term coined by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, is an important lens to help us understand the various identities and lived experiences an individual can hold. It is important to understand how to support students with intersectional identities.

Learning about and engaging with various perspectives and experiences in meaningful, respectful ways can foster conditions for belonging and inclusion. It also helps every student to consider and appreciate a range of strategies and supports for promoting mental health and wellness, rooted in authentic and respectful understanding of multiple ways of knowing and being.

Actions to consider

- Seek information that will help you work better alongside the diversity within student populations.
- Avoid making assumptions about a student's identity/identities.
- Recognize the privilege(s) you hold through the different ways in which you navigate and are received by the world around you.
- Utilize your privilege(s) to advocate for and support students.
- Co-create and facilitate spaces where students feel free to share about their experiences without judgement.

Note: For staff that share a similar identity with the group that is being organized, this is heart work, and it can feel deeply personal. When you share the identity of those in the affinity group, what is discussed in the group may impact you. It's important to be aware of this and use tools and strategies to take care of yourself. This may mean co-facilitating with a colleague or community member to help ensure that the space is supportive for you as well.

Additional resources to explore

- [2S/LGBTQIA+ youth and faith](#) (Egale)
- [A guide to virtual GSAs](#) (Egale)
- [Avoiding racial equity detours](#) (edchange.org)
- [Creating intersectional action clubs and affinity spaces](#) (Egale)
- [Delivering group programming for 2S/LGBTQIA+ youth](#) (YouthREX)
- [Discuss your leadership model](#) (GSA Network)
- [Elements of a GSA](#) (GSAFE)
- [Identity-Affirming School Mental Health Frame](#) (SMH-ON)
- [Peer Support Reference Tool for Students](#) (SMH-ON)
- [Student engagement toolkit](#) (SMH-ON)
- [Tips for having difficult conversations](#) (Egale)



How can facilitators prepare themselves?

“Supporting a GSA is not about being an expert; it’s about being open, present, and committed to helping students create a space where they feel safe, respected, and supported.”

Dillon, 2022

Student engagement is an ongoing process committed to co-creating conditions and opportunities with students to meaningfully participate and influence outcomes that may affect them. True engagement centers on valuing and amplifying perspectives and experiences of every student. This requires a practice of critical reflection by school and system staff on personal and positional biases, and systemic barriers that impact engagement.

When we enter affinity spaces like GSAs in service of students, it is important not only to understand our own identities, but also to examine what biases we may hold both knowingly and unknowingly toward others. Our biases are reflected in the ways we interact with others, the vocabulary we use, the questions we ask or don't ask and the assumptions we make. As staff, we hold power in our positions. Consider the power dynamic between staff and students in your setting and think about ways to minimize imbalances in your role as a caring adult. Shifting to work alongside students instead of leading them requires you to first reflect on your position and acknowledge the power differential that exists.

The practice of being a caring adult and ally involves:

- recognizing that you will never fully understand the lived experience of someone else’s identity
- committing to do your best to conceptualize, empathize and advocate in solidarity
- listening to and amplifying the perspectives and lived experiences of the communities we serve
- taking initiative to better understand the school climate and culture from the perspective of the students you are supporting

Note: An ‘ally’ is someone named or identified by students as such. Not all caring adults may be identified as allies. To learn more about this distinction, please visit: [Student Engagement Toolkit: Actions of a Caring Adult in Student Engagement Initiatives Related to Mental Health](https://www.smho-smsso.ca/Student-Engagement-Toolkit-Actions-of-a-Caring-Adult-in-Student-Engagement-Initiatives-Related-to-Mental-Health) (smho-smsso.ca).

As trusted adults who are leaning into supporting 2S/LGBTQIA+ students in affinity spaces, we each have personal reasons why we are called to this important work. It is highly likely that you also carry transferable skills from either work or personal interests that will aid in your efforts to create safe and supportive environments with 2S/LGBTQIA+ students. **Most importantly, your relationship with students sets the foundation for a successful group/gathering.**

To better support yourself and students in this space, consider seeking the support of a co-facilitator. Co-facilitation makes it possible to:

- Ensure smoother supervision of a group.
- Protect consistency for group meetings.
- Support succession planning of the group (e.g., should one of the facilitators have to change).

Establishing roles early enhances the support between facilitators, allowing you to better assist one another while maintaining the group’s structure and goals. If there are staff members who have previously been involved in supporting this work, it may be helpful to consult with them to learn more about their successes and challenges as a facilitator.



Expression of gratitude

“For many students, GSAs are not just clubs; they are spaces where they can feel seen, accepted, and protected.”

Grace B., zine p. 10

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to creating and supporting GSA spaces that foster safety, belonging and empowerment for every student. As caring adults, your support can directly shape the existence and dynamics of GSAs and affinity spaces alongside the leadership and contributions of students. These spaces are often welcoming spaces of joy as they consistently and authentically affirm identities and value student contributions and belonging.

Reflect on some of the moments of joy you have had within your role, or in similar roles in support of students.

- What are some of the ways in which you know you are serving students in an impactful way?
- What experiences of joy or impact have affirmed your commitment to this work?

Additional resources

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES	
School Mental Health Ontario resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2S/LGBTQIA+ Student Mental Health Social Media Bundles• Caring Adults: Supporting 2S/LGBTQIA+ Students
Community resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2-Spirited People of the First Nations: a resource for 2-spirit people that celebrates strength and provides physical, mental, emotional and spiritual advocacy.• Egale Canada: a resource for affirming adults in the school community who would like to learn to be supportive and affirming to 2S/LGBTQIA+ youth.• Franco Queer: an organization for 2S/LGBTQIA+ francophones in Ontario and outside of Quebec. They offer services for migrants and newcomers, social spaces and more.• PFLAG Canada: national organization focused on supporting parents and caregivers of 2S/LGBTQIA+ youth.• Wisdom2Action: provides capacity-building, mental health awareness, 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion and support, community engagement and more support for organizations to build safer community spaces and increase their capacity to serve their communities.
Gender-affirming care resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rainbow Health Ontario• Point of Pride: Affirmative Care for Trans Folks• Trans Care Plus• Native Youth Sexual Health Network
Crisis supports for youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Black Youth Helpline – call, email; 9 a.m.-10 p.m. ET• LGBT Youthline – chat, text, email; Sunday-Friday 4-9:30 p.m. ET• Hope for Wellness Helpline for First Nations, Métis and Inuit – call, chat; 24/7• Naseeha Youth Helpline – call, text; 24/7 helpline for Muslims• Kids Help Phone – support from professional counsellors and trained volunteers offered in over 100 languages



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