"WHEN YOU CAN GO INTO A CLASSROOM AND FEEL SAFE... YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE SCARED TO SHOW WHO YOU ARE... YOU CAN BE YOURSELF AND BE ACCEPTED FOR IT... YOU DON’T HAVE TO HIDE AWAY AND BE IN A LITTLE CLOSET... AND BE LIKE ‘I CAN’T BE GAY, I CAN’T BE ME’... BECAUSE IT’S A SAFE SPACE”

- STUDENT
This report

We report on Waterloo Region, Ontario, GSAs, their importance, their challenges, and areas where more work is needed. We interviewed 38 LGBTQ students, allies, teachers, administrators and community service providers about Waterloo Region GSAs. They spoke to the strengths of GSAs, the impact they are having, and areas where more work is needed. This report provides valuable information for students, teachers, and administrators about the importance of Waterloo Region’s GSAs in creating safer environments for LGBTQ youth.

We found that GSAs:

• promote acceptance, friendship and safety for all students in schools.
• provide LGBTQ youth opportunities to serve as role models.
• need straight allies to work in partnership with LGBTQ youth.
• are dependent on principals and other senior officials in determining their success.

Implications for schools:

• LGBTQ youth still require significant supports to help keep them safe in schools.
• Issues for transgender youth, both in GSAs, and in schools, require urgent attention.
• Administration sets the tone for whether schools will be welcoming of GSAs, and whether GSAs will be successful.
• GSAs need visible forms of support from administration, such as principals’ presence at GSA-sponsored events.
• Teachers (especially those who are LGBTQ) need direct support from their principals and other senior administration.
• School staff require training about the issues facing LGBTQ youth.
• Community resources knowledgeable about LGBTQ issues are very important partners in keeping LGBTQ youth safe.
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INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, experience significant bullying, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and heterosexism in schools (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). An Egale Canada study reports that the majority of LGBTQ students are verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation and/or gender expression (Taylor et al., 2011). LGBTQ students also report alarmingly high rates of physical and sexual harassment; one-fifth report being physically assaulted because of sexual orientation and/or gender expression and between 35.7% and 49.4% report experiencing sexual assault at school.

GSAs are school-based organizations or clubs that work towards creating positive and safer spaces for youth and their allies. GSAs create visibility for LGBTQ issues in schools and offer a place for youth who are struggling to feel safe. The activities of GSAs vary across schools but usually two common goals drive their work: 1) advocating for LGBTQ rights in schools, and 2) providing a supportive place for youth who need it. GSAs also connect LGBTQ youth to community resources outside of schools.

Definitions

Gay-straight alliances: school-based organizations or clubs that create positive and safer spaces for LGBTQ youth.

LGBTQ: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual and queer/questioning.

Sexual orientation: a consistent and unchangeable pattern of attraction to persons of the opposite sex or gender, the same sex or gender, or to both sexes or more than one gender.

Gender identity: someone’s felt or personal sense of being a man or a woman (or as someone outside of that gender binary). For transgender people, the sex they were assigned at birth and their own internal gender identity do not match.

Heteronormativity: an assumption that heterosexuality is the only normative sexual orientation.

Ally: non-LGBTQ individuals who support LGBTQ individuals and advocate for their human rights and safety.

OUR STUDY

Thirty-eight LGBTQ students, allies, teachers, administrators and community service providers directly involved with Waterloo Region GSAs spoke with us at length about:

- homophobia and heteronormativity in schools
- the experiences of LGBTQ youth
- the need for GSAs
- the activities of GSAs
- their personal experiences with GSAs
- LGBT-affirming school policies
- the Accepting Schools Act

To enhance the readability of this report, we have organized it into: 1) our key findings, 2) the work that still needs to be done, and 3) recommendations for school administrators and teachers. We use direct quotes from the interviews to illustrate key findings.
WHAT DID WE FIND?

GSAs provide crucial supports

GSAs help to nurture substantial and positive changes in students’ lives. They connect youth with one another and help to build friendships and bonds between students who may have had difficulty doing so in the past due to bullying, or fear of being out. GSAs also connect LGBTQ youth with other LGBTQ community members and resources, decreasing feelings of isolation and helping to foster safety and a greater sense of community. GSAs also provide unique leadership opportunities for youth, helping to build students’ self-esteem and self-worth. LGBTQ students in schools with GSAs also experience lower rates of school truancy, dropout, alcohol and drug use, general psychological distress, depression, and suicide.

“Two of them, for example, were having trouble with attendance at school. Both have had perfect attendance this year. When we asked them… ‘What do you think has made the difference?’ they said ‘We like being in school now, we have friends,’ and they pointed around the table. And then I said ‘oh, so has this group made some difference?’ ‘It has made all the difference in the world,’ both of them said. - School administrator

“I had a kid who came up to me and said ‘I want to thank you for starting the GSA’ and I was like ‘okay, but I don’t even know who you are’, and he said ‘yep, I know but just knowing you were there and seeing you’ he said ‘I would walk by your room when GSA was starting and that’s all I needed and it got me through.’ - Teacher

GSAs IN WATERLOO REGION

There are two publicly-funded school boards in Waterloo Region, the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) which consists of 17 high schools, all of which have GSAs, and the Waterloo Catholic District School Board (WCDSB). Two of the five high schools in the WCDSB have GSA-like groups called PRISM.
GSAs in the WRDSB work closely with the OK2BME program of KW Counselling Services, which offers counselling and support groups for LGBTQ youth, as well as education and training to service providers, school-based stakeholders, and the broader community. They also partner with the WRDSB GSAs to provide education, resources, and one-on-one support to LGBTQ students in high schools. Once a year, the WRDSB and OK2BME sponsor a Waterloo Region GSA conference, a one day, free conference for grade 7 – 12 students that includes speakers, workshops, and a chance to meet members of other GSAs.

**COMMON MYTHS ABOUT GSAs**

- GSAs are exclusively for LGBTQ youth.
- GSAs are entirely about sex.
- GSAs ‘recruit’ people to become gay.

“…sometimes people assume that GSA is just gay people, there’s no people that are straight in there and they’re just going to think I’m gay if I go and even if you are or you aren’t people are just going to think that.” - Student

“…some of the email and some of the comments I was getting from parents…they thought that GSAs… it’s going to be a free-for-all sex fest, right?” - School admin

“I actually had a parent call me, and ask me, essentially whether I was recruiting…she wanted to ask me as leader of the GSA and say “My daughter says that she’s gay, but she’s not. And she’s not going to these meetings if you’re going to turn her into…a person who’s gay.” - Teacher

**LGBTQ bullying and invisibility is an ongoing issue**

Bullying of LGBTQ youth remains a persistent problem in Waterloo Region schools. We heard about both overt and more subtle forms of discrimination, including physical and verbal abuse, silencing, teachers and principals ignoring the problem, and the negative effects on youth. This is a problem that GSAs, on their own cannot fix. Bullying based on gender identity and sexual orientation is pervasive, requiring complex, system-wide solutions. Some solutions identified by interviewees included a need for school wide assemblies focussed on LGBTQ bullying, education for teachers, and more LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum.

“As long as I’ve been working with young people, which is a really long time, they’ve always said that the worst bullying is always the kids that are LGBT. Kids have recognized that but adults haven’t.” - School admin

LGBTQ students feel invisible, both in schools and in society; they do not see themselves reflected in their school environments, or in what they learn. Our interviewees believed it important for LGBTQ youth to understand that they are not alone, that others came before them and played important roles in history, and continue to do so. The heterosexism that dominates the minimal sexual health education provided to students, contributes to their invisibility because it does not include their unique needs. Moreover, they felt that when LGBTQ issues are not addressed, it creates a knowledge vacuum that forces youth to rely on sources that may provide inadequate, unreliable, incorrect, and harmful information.

“We don’t want people to only talk about LGBTQ issues in the context of bullying and discrimination. That’s where it becomes so significant to integrate it into history and math or whatever. Not bullying, and not just negative stuff. Well, what about the contributions of LGBT people?” - Teacher

“People don’t get ideas from sex ed class. There’s so much available to students that they’re going to find it, no matter what, and it might as well be introduced in an environment that will be helpful to their
development. Instead of them finding it out on their own and learning about it… learning some really unhealthy habits, entering into some really unhealthy relationships, and learning afterwards that those relationships are not the best, that those practices are not safest” - Student

“You have to make sure that what’s normal in your classroom is that maybe kids have two dads or two moms, or maybe their uncle has a partner, that needs to be reflected in what a family is.” - Teacher

**ACCEPTING, INCLUSIVE AND SAFER SPACE FOR ALL**

We learned from our participants that GSAs promote acceptance, friendship, safety, and communication, creating a positive atmosphere for all students regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

“It doesn’t matter if there’s just one person coming, the fact that it’s there, sets a tone and it allows students to know that there is a place for them to go if they should need it.” - School admin

“GSAs create a positive space so when you walk into the GSA room you know that you’re going to be accepted because the people in there accept you...and you work together with your GSA to create that bond of safe space... beyond those doors of that classroom.” - Student

**Importance of role models**

Participants spoke to the need for role models for LGBTQ students, both in schools and in society as a whole. GSAs provide opportunities for LGBTQ youth to serve as role models to those struggling to accept their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

“WHO THE PRINCIPAL IS AND THE ADMINISTRATION IS, PLAYS A BIG ROLE IN BEING ABLE TO PARTICIPATE OR NOT, OR SUPPORT A GSA OR NOT, AND IF THE TEACHERS AREN’T GETTING THAT KIND OF SUPPORT FROM THEIR ADMINISTRATION THEN IT’S KIND OF HARD TO HAVE A CLUB. IT’S THE TEACHERS FEELING SUPPORTED WHICH TRICKLES DOWN TO THE STUDENTS GETTING THE SUPPORT THEY NEED AND THE CREATION OF A GSA.”

- SERVICE PROVIDER
"You know, there’s nothing more powerful than the grade 11 student that has a conversation with a group of grade 6 and 7 students about ‘You know what, this was my experience, but this doesn’t need to be your experience’, right? Because it’s that peer relationship, it’s that leadership. And sometimes that’s a more powerful message from students than it is from staff, or from administrators, or from parents, right? It’s the peer group.” – School admin

Role models were regarded as particularly important for gay male youth who infrequently attend GSAs, yet are most likely to be bullied in schools.

GSAs make all students feel safer

Our participants reported that GSAs provide a space where students can feel safe to discuss issues of concern to them. Even students who did not want to attend GSA meetings, said they felt safer and more comfortable in the school just knowing the GSA was there if needed.

“We’re just trying to ensure that gay students stay in school and are able to have a positive high school experience and to help them develop as people in the future…” - Student

“I would walk by your room when GSA was starting and that’s all I needed and it got me through.” - Student

The importance of allies

Allies are an integral part of GSAs, as they prevent LGBTQ students from further isolation in schools. Our participants report that allies foster a sense of hope in LGBTQ students - that even those who may not completely understand the issues they face can offer support and advocate for their right to a safe and inclusive education.

“I think having allies shows that straight people don’t hate us and that there is support from people who are straight who don’t go through the issues, right? That they’re at least understanding that we go through shit and that we’re at least human, there’s understanding and there’s just more support… we’re a part of their lives as well.” - Student

“...there’s even that...piece about whether allies should be a part of GSAs...or a part of LGBT affirming... initiatives...we can run a risk of isolating ourselves or developing youth who feel further repressed, you know?” - Service provider

“When we no longer need a GSA, my work is done... but the goal is that kids won’t need it and that they’ll say...’What do you mean ‘place where I can feel safe?’ I’m safe everywhere’, that’s our goal.” - Teacher
WHAT MAKES WATERLOO REGION GSAs SUCCEED

Support from senior administration

Successful GSAs combine grassroots organizing on the part of students and teachers with support from school administration. Our participants felt that while students and teacher-leaders brought passion to their GSA work, they also need to know that senior administrators are working to support them.

“I think some of our more successful GSAs started [as grassroots initiatives], but you also need the top-down support as well because at the end of the day, the students and staff on the floor, they need to know that they’ve got some backing as well.” – School admin

“It can’t just be seen as that group that meets once a week and that’s their job, to make the school safe. No, it has to be at all levels. It has to be seen as important to the administration, and the teachers need to be on board, it can’t just be the GSA. It has to be teachers having signs and posters on their boards, on their walls, letting kids know it’s a safe environment.” – School admin

“Who the principal is and the administration is, plays a big role in being able to participate or not, or support a GSA or not, and if the teachers aren’t getting that kind of support from their administration then it’s kind of hard to have a club. It’s the teachers feeling supported which trickles down to the students getting the support they need and the creation of a GSA.” – Service provider

It is important for LGBTQ students to see openly supportive administration. When they see such support, they realize they are not alone. When administrators are present and interacting visibly at GSA-sponsored events, it sets a tone for schools, about acceptance and inclusivity, and the importance of LGBTQ youths’ right to a safe education. Such open support for GSAs also sends a message to students that being an ally and being supportive of LGBTQ peers is the right thing to do.
Community supports

Our participants spoke about the value of strong partnerships between school boards and community organizations knowledgeable about LGBTQ issues. These organizations offer resources that teachers, students, or administrators may need in supporting LGBTQ students. They can provide speakers, training and workshops for GSA leaders, and can advise on policy development. This was regarded as crucial to ensuring the well-being of LGBTQ youth and to successful GSAs.

“We shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that if we had to do this work solely by ourselves without the OK2BME supports, without the expertise and so on, we would never be where we are today. It really is about collaborating with people that have expertise.” – School admin

Consistent policy enforcement

Most school boards already have policies in place regarding bullying - the WRDSB’s Equity and Inclusion Policy is one such example. Our participants report inconsistent follow-through in enforcing policy in individual schools. Interviewees believe that school administrators need to ensure that board policies regarding equity and inclusion are consistently implemented.

“So, we can have all the policies that we want, but if we’re not trying to really, intentionally move those forward board-wide, then sometimes nobody ever really looks at them. So no, I don’t think we need more policies. I just think we continue to do what we’re doing and educate administrators and teachers about the importance.” – School admin

Provincial legislation: It’s all in the name

An amendment to the Government of Ontario’s Education Act, was passed in 2012, redefining bullying in the school setting and adding greater emphasis on LGBTQ specific issues. The Accepting Schools Act (ASA) was a specific amendment that allowed those who want to start GSAs to use the name ‘gay-straight alliance’.

Participants expressed a desire to see schools honour provincial legislation by allowing GSAs to be explicitly called GSAs. Many believed that in ‘taking gay out of the name,’ a negative message is sent to all youth about the real purpose of GSAs (support). They also felt that in not allowing clubs to be called GSAs, school officials were complicit in further stigmatizing, isolating and harming LGBTQ youth. They felt that the vulnerability of LGBTQ youth was an urgent enough situation to warrant immediate attention.

“They need these types of legislation in order to justify what they do…and nobody can question you because you’re doing something that is fulfilling the obligation.” – School admin

“But to say that your group is going to be called ‘Celebrating Difference’ because you’re different, I think that it further personally alienates LGBTQ students, and isolates them, and makes them feel less than…” – School admin

“How long do you plan on being subtle? And in that time, how many kids are going to hurt themselves or take their lives because they’re not getting the support they need because there isn’t … those bold steps that are being made by their adults?” – School admin

SUPPORTIVE TEACHERS

Students trust that teachers will be a reliable source of support when needed, and someone they can confide in. Our participants report that supportive teachers have a crucial impact on LGBTQ students in schools. It was important for students to see positive role models in their teachers, and to see them correcting misinformation and addressing discriminatory actions among students. Support came in many forms, including teachers providing LGBTQ positive messages in
classrooms, offering safe spaces for LGBTQ youth, or even simply wearing a lanyard identifying them as allies.

“This is the kind of passion that these GSA teacher leaders have. And people don’t know that and they’re doing it above and beyond, and not because it’s volleyball or chess club or whatever. It’s because it matters to these kids’ lives.” - Service provider

“It seems really important to them that they have a couple of staff members working with them who’ll have their back. They know my door’s open all the time and the other facilitator, he’s fantastic. His classroom door’s always open, even when he’s teaching. He tells them if you really need me, come to the door, we’ll work something out.” - Teacher

STILL WORK TO DO

Despite the valuable work GSAs are doing in Waterloo Region schools to improve safety and quality of life for LGBTQ students, our participants identified key areas where significant efforts are still needed.

Working towards inclusion

Ensuring that LGBTQ youth are regarded as part of the school community is imperative to shattering myths and stereotypes and improving youth well-being. Schools can utilize classroom training modules, school-wide assemblies, support visible and active GSAs, and organize ‘pink days’ to raise awareness about bullying of LGBTQ youth.

“Until we actually understand what it looks like from the other side it’s really difficult to change people’s minds.” - Teacher

“I have a friend who didn’t believe that homosexuality was right. He thought it was a sin and he didn’t believe in gay rights. It was only when he found out that I was gay and got to know me that he learned that what he was doing was wrong. That’s really the biggest challenge;
you have to really get into the people’s heads. Become a part of their lives.” - Student

Challenging stereotypes by increasing knowledge

Our participants reported that many students and adults in schools lack accurate knowledge about LGBTQ individuals, and instead hold negative stereotypes and misinformation. Accurate information and education are crucial in supporting LGBTQ students and reducing their vulnerability. School board trustees and administration should advocate for professional development training on LGBTQ issues for school personnel.

“I want to make sure that it’s not like ‘Okay, who will coach basketball this year? Who will do this group… [GSA] group or whatever? Great’, you know. That they make sure that they have the people that have the training, they have the background, have the sensitivity to deal with these young people. That’s a concern.” – School admin

The value of progressive discipline

Progressive discipline is a proven alternative to more harsh forms of punishment in reducing bullying in schools. Progressive discipline serves to educate and rehabilitate students who bully instead of simply punishing them. The Ontario Ministry of Education defines progressive discipline as an approach that promotes positive student behaviour, while enabling principals to choose appropriate consequences for addressing inappropriate student behaviour. It includes several important elements such as engaging parents, helping students learn, and offering supports. Our participants believed it important for school administrators to emphasize and implement progressive discipline in order to reduce LGTBQ bullying in schools.

“Let’s try to shift behaviours that are based on fear and hatred. In the long run I’d like to see kids just learning about what it is to be LGBT and accepting that as a norm as opposed to learning through bullying someone that it’s wrong to bully.” - Service provider

“Stronger punishments for bullies is not okay. It’s almost like the blind leading the blind because you’re punishing somebody who is punishing someone else for their views…” - Student

Handling of LGBTQ student issues

Some teachers were not adequately equipped to handle the issues faced by LGBTQ students, including addressing bullying. This left LGBTQ students without supports, increasing their vulnerability. Teachers expressed a need (and a right) to request specialized training that would increase their knowledge of issues facing LGBTQ students. Teachers also expressed a need for knowledge about community resources to refer youth to.

“If they were ignorant on how to handle LGBT issues, then how do you expect counsellors, not only counsellors, but teachers, or anyone who are exposed to these kinds of problems, would be able to handle it”. - Student

The strain on teacher leaders

Waterloo Region GSA teacher leaders expend extraordinary efforts providing a safe, welcoming environment for their students. This can often cause serious emotional and physical strain, especially when there is a lack of resources and support from administrators. Leaders felt it important to be able to count on administration and other staff to support their efforts. Such supports could come in the form of other trained and informed teacher leaders to lessen the strain, financial assistance for GSA activities, and visible support and acceptance by administration and other teachers.

“I feel like I’m the only one and I’m getting tired, and I’m losing, I’m running out of ideas, I’m losing steam.” - Teacher
Support for LGBTQ teachers to be visible role models

LGBTQ teachers often felt that being open about their sexual orientation could compromise their job security, making them reluctant to disclose. They feel it important for administrators and teachers to show support for colleagues wishing to come out. They also believed it challenging for closeted staff to be able to offer supports to LGBTQ students.

“What kind of support is there for me if I come out in the classroom? And the answer at that point from that superintendent was ‘none, please don’t do that’…” - Teacher

The needs of trans youth

Participants reported that many school personnel and GSAs were ill-equipped to address the needs of trans students. Trans issues were regarded as unimportant by some teachers who failed to realize the complex reasons behind the invisibility of trans youth; many have said ‘we don’t really have any of those students’. At the same time, others were well aware of the very significant risks facing trans youth if they are left without supports. It was suggested that teachers and administrators need professional development to understand the broad and unique range of vulnerabilities facing trans students.

“We need to talk about what it means to be trans and we need to talk about it’s ok if you don’t know and you’re not really sure and you haven’t really pegged yourself into a box, [and want to say] ‘that’s who I am!’” - Service provider

CONCLUSION

Our research demonstrates the pivotal role schools, teachers and administrators play in LGBTQ youths’ lives, despite the few areas that GSAs need to improve on. GSAs provide youth with opportunities to meet and connect with each other, to become role models, while promoting acceptance and safety for all students in schools.

Research from British Columbia has found that established GSAs are associated with lower suicidal rates for LGB youth and heterosexual boys (Saewyc, Konishi, Rose, & Homma, 2014), as well as lower rates of problem drinking among LGB females (Konishi, Saewyc, Homma, & Poon, 2013). These findings mean that our research has provided a glimpse into the numerous outcomes of GSAs for LGBTQ youth. GSAs in the Waterloo Region are successful because of the passion and sincerity GSA leaders bring into their work, as well as the supports from OK2BME. With their continued work, we can expect GSAs to become increasingly successful at making schools a safe, positive and inclusive space for all students.

“We teachers need to understand the needs, particularly trans students right now who I’m seeing are having the most difficulty, because teachers don’t understand or have difficulty understanding how to meet needs of trans kids the best.” - Service provider
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REFERENCES


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