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Weighing Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA's) Against Generic Human Rights Clubs

From Egale Canada's Every Class in Every school (p139 - 140)

"Based on the analysis presented in this report, we strongly recommend the following:

*9. That schools strongly support the efforts of students to start GSAs, or similar LGBTQ-inclusive student-led clubs, and that in schools where students have not come forward, administration should ask teachers to offer to work with students to start such clubs. **It is not safe to assume that LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ parents would prefer to go through school isolated from their peers and teachers.** "*

Understanding the importance of GSAs, and how they differ from generic human rights groups can be achieved by considering several factors:

1) Visibility

The explicit outreach a GSA can do to LGBTQ communities is often unmatched by generic human rights groups. While human rights groups can be publically known as supporting a number of causes (including LGBTQ rights) it would be difficult for all of their branding, promotion, and outreach to reflect this at the same level as a GSA. As this is the core message of GSA groups, GSAs present greater opportunities to impact LGBTQ students, as well as the broader student body with messages regarding LGBTQ safer and more inclusive schools. They do this:

- a. Within the school
 - i. GSAs can act at a school level by simply existing, even effecting students who don't necessarily attend meetings. The presence of posters, announcement, events and activities can have an effect on the school environment, presenting students with the idea that LGBTQ identities have a place in the school, and society at large. Directly engaging LGBTQ youth and their allies within school, as well as those who are ambivalent regarding LGBTQ themes, is an excellent means towards addressing



school climate, isolation, promoting social connectedness, issues which are further elaborated on in *Every Class in Every School*.

- b. Within the broader community
 - i. The same potential exists for the GSA to indirectly impact staff and parent communities that are part of the school community. The existence of a GSA is something that can be discussed and broadcast throughout the surrounding neighbourhood (both through supportive and damning conversation) meaning that word of a LGBTQ specific safe-space existing in a public institution will reach many different ears, and maybe most significantly, those of LGBTQ youth.
 - ii. The GSA itself, through its visibility, can provide a strong point of connection for local LGBTQ focussed service providers and youth organization to facilitate information sharing, presentations, and a number of positive interactions between the school and the broader community.

2) Commitment to LGBTQ Safer Space

GSAs are themselves about the creation of safer space within the school environment. Once safer space is established, students and educators can begin organizing around making the entire school community safer and more inclusive.

With LGBTQ issues at the core of a GSAs mission, these groups have particularly powerful potential to address the numerous issues facing LGBTQ youth, including invisibility, bullying, discrimination, coming out, challenges at home, etc... While generic human rights groups have some potential to address these issues, the focus on a broad diversity of human rights topics means the specific challenges facing LGBTQ youth cannot be addressed as comprehensively. In worst-case scenarios, generic groups can ignore existing homophobic, transphobic behaviours in the larger school community and even reproduce them within the smaller community of the human rights group.

At the root of a GSAs work is the acknowledgement that not all spaces can be safe for LGBTQ people, and that the creation of a safer space involves the direct and explicit acknowledgement and neutralizing of a number of existing social stigmas and



stereotypes regarding LGBTQ people. Again, since a GSA is designed for this exact purpose, it is currently the best tool to address this job.

3) Overall accomplishment towards LGBTQ safer and inclusive schools

From a very practical perspective, GSAs can get more done for the LGBTQ community because they are specifically focussed on LGBTQ issues. While generic human rights groups are equally capable in terms of output, at the end of the day the focus of their work will not be as LGBTQ specific, and hence impact the LGBTQ community less than that of a GSA.

This is particularly relevant because GSAs have *so much* work to do. Simply providing a constant supportive space in the school can be work enough, but further tasks can include hosting events and presentations, expanding LGBTQ library and class materials, partnering with local youth groups, collaborating with existing school clubs, taking field trips, and a number of other projects working to promote the school as an LGBTQ safer and more inclusive environment.

4) Institutional Response

Supporting a GSA is an excellent opportunity for schools to explicitly take leadership on LGBTQ inclusion and safety in school. Related to the above point of visibility, having a GSA, or a safe space group that explicitly and singularly address LGBTQ issues means the school is clearly broadcasting their support for LGBTQ safety and inclusion in schools. This message, when matched with comprehensive and inclusive policy regarding support of a diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities is an extremely significant message to youth, staff, and parent communities alike. While endorsement of a generic human rights club can act to broadcast a schools support to a number of issues, the potential for that message to resonate specifically with LGBTQ youth, educators and parents is somewhat lessened.

Why not have both?

The above points illustrate a variety of ways in which a GSA can more effectively address the challenge of creating safer and more inclusive schools around issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. Hopefully these arguments are compelling enough to convince anyone of



the importance of GSAs. However, it should be said that what are referred to here as “generic human rights clubs” are often valuable and important additions to thriving school community. With that in mind, none of the arguments should be taken as reasons *not* to have a human rights club at your school. Indeed, these clubs can present a number of opportunities to engage students interested in a broad number of causes. At the same time, clubs such as these present opportunities for cooperation and interaction with a number of other school clubs, including GSAs. With that in mind, why not have both at your school?

Egale Canada is Canada’s LGBT human rights organization: advancing equality, diversity, education, and justice.