

Q & A About Middle School G/QSAs (Gay-/Queer-Straight Alliances)

These questions were collected at Upsidedown's Community Forum on Middle School G/QSAs and answered by our expert panelists: Chris Brook of the ACLU of NC, Dolores Chandler, MSW, Laura Wenzel, MSW, and Molly Parks, Psy. D.

Is there a plan to create more GSAs/QSAs? If so, what is it?

Come to iNSIDEoUT events to meet students from schools who don't have them, network. Bring your friends from schools who don't have G/QSAs to iNSIDEoUT. Help us spread the word to find new members, and provide them with resources and support. Get involved and make this a focus for iNSIDEoUT and work with other youth leaders to develop a long-term vision and plan!

How can I as a middle school teacher be most open/supportive to a GSA/QSA forming at my school if no students have approached the topic?

Let students know that you're there as an ally. Put a sign up in your classroom that says "Safe Zone" or "All are welcome". Talk about the issues and let folks know that you are supportive and affirming. That will increase the chance that a student will come and talk to you, and let students know that you're willing to be an advisor, if folks are interested in forming a QSA/GSA. Also, if you identify as LGBTQ and you're not out, I invite you to think about being out to your staff and students. It's hard for school to be a safe place for students to be out if teachers and administrators are afraid to be out at their jobs. And it's crucial that young folks see that LGBTQ folks exist and that they are leaders, teachers, preachers, politicians, siblings, parents, rock stars and everything else that exists in the world.

What is intersectionality?

I see intersectionality as a way of living and working that strives to build a world where all people can be their full selves all of the time. It's a framework that acknowledges the fact that we are not one dimensional. We are complicated people with multiple identities that don't exist independently of each other but that intersect and inform our lived experience. To use myself as an example: I am a mixed-race, trans identified queer person. These are all things that impact my experience in the world and impact the extent to which I am included or excluded from society or certain communities. Sometimes, society or a specific community tries to force me to compromise one or more of those identities by disrespecting it (ex: asking me "What are you?" when someone is trying to figure out what the color of my skin means) or ignoring it entirely (like not giving me the option to identify myself as something other than male/female). Intersectionality means that I get to be all of those things all the time and that those identities are seen and respected. What I think is important about intersectionality is that it requires us to cultivate an understanding of power, privilege and oppression work in our society. Some identities in our society are more valued, highly desired and afforded more privilege, like whiteness, maleness & masculinity, and heterosexuality, while others are devalued, exploited and oppressed or marginalized like blackness, homosexuality or gender non-conformity, femaleness & femininity. Intersectionality is about recognizing, not only which of our identities are marginalized but also the ones that afford us privilege and being aware of how they impact our work and life.

Because there is so much pressure and depression around middle-high school age, what can we do to help students relieve this stress? (think beyond QSA clubs...)

Pay attention, listen, and don't let people disappear! If you notice that one of your fellow student's behavior has shifted, like if they're not hanging out or they're not talking, or you don't know what's going on with them...reach out. Let them know that you see them and that, even even if they don't want to talk about it, that's ok...you're still there for them. And if they do want to talk about it, you will listen. And if you notice that something is really off, like if they've talked about hurting themselves, don't be afraid to tell an adult that you trust.

Also, here are some things you can try to relieve stress:

- Go for a walk or hike, alone or with a friend of two...really, any kind of exercise is a good idea.
- Slow down. If you've got too much going on, take a break.
- Try doing something that keeps you from thinking about the billion and one reasons why you're stressed like meditating, yoga, playing an instrument, drawing, having a private dance party.
- Get good rest and eat well. Make sure you take a minute to decompress before bed. Take a hot shower, drink some chamomile tea, etc.
- Ask for help. Seriously, asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

What are 4 NC middle schools that have had GSAs?

Phillips Middle School, Smith Middle School, Centennial Campus Middle School, Carolina Friends Middle School, Stanback Middle School.

Are there more middle schools in Durham/Orange/CH encountering pushback? (places where students want to start a GSA but can't?)

It is very likely that there are...if you are experiencing an unsafe school environment or resistance to starting a G/QSA, please let us know: insideoutamy@gmail.com

As a way to overcome resistance to the groups and increase diversity, what do people think of calling them tolerance clubs instead of GSA/QSAs?

What brings us together as organizers and members of G/QSAs is our passion for LGBTQ+ liberation and the need to be supported and affirmed in our identities as LGBTQ+ people. We want to eliminate the fears that lead people to avoid these terms and to avoid speaking about sexuality and gender in the first place. Gender and sexuality are important parts of who we are, but using the word "Tolerance Club" is a way of trying to hide these parts of us, to hide what these groups are aiming at. Also, we strive for much more than mere tolerance, and the other proposed names are also vague and confusing. We think it is important to name what it is that brings us together. It is also important to remember that G/QSAs include straight people too.

How do folks in more rural schools where they may be the only out queer or trans student get a GSA started or even measures just to be safe?

Find allies. Talk to teachers, students, administrators, and counselors to find out if they are supportive. Start a list of people in your school who are supportive, collect their contact info, and let them know you want to start a G/QSA. Take a look at your schools' policies to see if they are LGBTIQ-inclusive and affirming. Come to iNSIDEoUT events where we can help you do this! Invite iNSIDEoUT to your school to help you strategize. Talk to school officials to find out steps for starting a club in your school. Check out our website for more resources:

<http://insideout180.org/gsasqsas/resources/>

What did you think of queer issues as a kid?

I was a teenager in the 1970s. The terms “lesbian” and “homo” were common epithets and in my freshman high school year I wondered how those who called me names knew so much more about me than I knew about myself. At that time and place, the concept of bisexuality was unheard of, so I spent my adolescence thinking I was confused and indecisive. A therapist told me that I was going through a normal phase and that I would grow out of it. I guess I am just slow, haha. No-one else knew how I really felt. I hung out with a bunch of people in theater and I and others suspected some of the boys of being gay. We gently teased them about it, but I saw it as part of them, not as good or bad. I had other friends who were in student government and kind of power-trippers, and they would encourage us to scream epithets when we drove by the local gay bar. Of course, to fit in, I joined in. Gay people were not their only target -- I wouldn't say they were particularly homophobic as much as just trying to prove their superiority over everybody. My freshman year of college, I was a reporter for the student newspaper, and I was assigned to interview a student who was working on gay rights issues. I was really nervous about the meeting. I thought the student would be able to see inside my soul and give me a label I wasn't sure of. Of course, he didn't, and I relaxed considerably after that! A couple of years later, I became close friends with some women who turned out to be lesbian. I had very high respect for them and they were very sweet to me, and after that I felt comfortable with my sexuality. I'm very glad to be part of the effort to reduce all that confusion and insecurity for today's young people.

What are some ideas for incorporating an awareness of intersectionality into G/QSAs? – Anti-Racism trainings at club meetings? Other?

Actually, iNSIDEoUT's website has a great handout on being an inclusive Q/GSA:

<http://insideout180.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/antiracistgsas.pdf>

The other thing that I would add is to encourage students to try to seek out diverse advisors and advisors who understand these issues because they can be great allies through a process that is sometimes uncomfortable. Also, try to build relationships and partner with other clubs at your school.

How do I start a GSA if there are no other middle school clubs?

I recommend starting by finding a supportive teacher who can serve as the GSA advisor as well as an advocate for the club with the school administration. Once students have an advisor on board, I would work with the advisor to schedule a meeting with the school principal. At that meeting the student leaders and advisor can explain the purpose and need for the club as well as seeking the principal's support for starting it up. If this is unsuccessful, then, depending on the county, it might make sense to have a similar conversation with the school superintendent to get things started from that level.

If these efforts are unsuccessful, then I encourage you to get in touch with the ACLU. (www.acluofnorthcarolina.org -- cbrook@acluofnc.org) Perhaps there are middle schools without any student clubs, but I would approach such claims with a healthy dose of skepticism. This could be a way for the administration to try to dodge this issue. Even if this is the case, there should be a robust discussion with school administration surrounding whether a blanket prohibition on student clubs is best serving the students. (Hint: It probably isn't!)