

Findings

Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs

How Homosexual Student Organizations Harm our Schools

By Stephanie Evans



During the 2005-2006 school year a small group of students at South Rowan High School in China Grove, North Carolina, petitioned their principal for permission to start a gay-straight alliance (GSA). The request immediately sparked controversy and culminated in over 700 concerned parents, students, and community leaders gathering to protest the formation of the GSA.¹ The public outcry convinced the School Board to adopt a policy banning all sexuality clubs, “based upon any sexual grouping or activity of any kind.”² Organizers of the GSA have threatened to challenge the decision in court, claiming that the policy violates the federal Equal Access Act (EAA). The School Board has not yielded to the threats and is prepared to defend the policy in the event of a lawsuit.³ If in fact challenged, the legal battle over South Rowan’s sexuality policy could have important implications for North Carolina public schools.

Today, in America’s public high schools, and even middle schools, after school clubs are no longer limited to the debate team and chorus—students now have access to a variety of activities, including homosexual fellowship and activism. As the homosexual movement continues to meet political and social resistance, activists are increasingly adopting strategies designed to instill tolerance and acceptance of “alternative” lifestyles in America’s most impressionable—its children. Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs have been a key weapon in the arsenal of the homosexual movement for spreading its message to youth. As GSAs have risen in prominence, concerned parents and school boards in several

states have begun to fight their presence in American school systems.

What is a GSA?

Defined as “in-school, extracurricular groups that support [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] students, and those questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, and their straight friends and allies,” gay-straight alliances first emerged in public schools in 1989.⁴ Created by Winston-Salem native Kevin Jennings, now executive director of the Gay,

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Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), GSAs have become the most “visible and widely adopted” component of GLSEN’s “safe schools” initiative.⁵ With the help and support of national and state organizations such as GLSEN, Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and the Gay-Straight Alliance Network (GSAN), the movement has rapidly grown; currently there are over 3,000 GSAs in schools across the country, including over 50 in North Carolina.⁶ While GLSEN and other groups claim that the primary function of GSAs is to create safe, homophobic free school environments and to offer support to homosexual, transgender, and “questioning” students, a study of the goals and training materials of these organizations reveals the other objectives behind the well-coordinated GSA movement.

Students wishing to establish new “student” GSAs in their schools have a

plethora of start-up resources to choose from, accessed easily and at no cost from several national and local organizations. GLSEN offers a “Jump-Start” Guide for getting clubs off the ground, complete with recruitment strategies and games to play at initial interest meetings. The guide, along with other materials, can be sent to any student upon request.⁷ GSAN’s website provides students with 25 “How To” manuals offering advice about creating a “Kick A** GSA.”⁸ In North Carolina, several organizations aid and develop student GSAs. Safe Schools N.C. holds leadership summits for interested teens, and the Triangle Gay Straight Alliance Network will send trainers to local high schools to spark student interest or boost fledgling GSAs.⁹

Once formed, GSAs are encouraged not only to improve the school’s “homosexual climate,” but to push for gay-friendly curricula, participate in political activism campaigns, and develop relationships with local adult homosexual groups.¹⁰ GLSEN promotes “Teach the Teacher” workshops where GSA members train faculty on “queering the curriculum”—which is inserting homosexual issues into academic subjects such as English and math and implementing the use of “gender-friendly” language in the classroom.¹¹

Student GSAs are also urged to become politically active. GSAN provides a strategy chart for organizing GSA campaigns, outlining ways to “mobilize your constituents and allies” and “put pressure on targets to respond.”¹² GSAs across the country are recruited to hold homosexual events and “awareness days.” GLSEN touts that their annual “Day of Silence” campaign, where students are called to stand against homosexual harassment, is one of the largest “student-led” actions in American history, with over 4,000 participating schools.¹³

Alarming, community gay and lesbian organizations are also sold to GSAs as places where they can find “supportive” homosexual adults willing to mentor and offer friendship. GSA manuals suggest students attend local lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) dances for club outings.¹⁴ GLSEN advises new GSAs to chapters and invite adult members of local GLSEN and PFLAG organizations to meetings as guest speakers.¹⁵ In North Carolina, the Triangle Chapter of PFLAG is closely involved with area high schools—it frequently holds student panels and actively fundraises for GSAs in the Raleigh area.¹⁶

As materials offered by groups like GLSEN reveal, GSAs are not merely school social clubs that gather for meetings once or twice a month to offer support and encouragement to members. Rather, GSAs are tools of national organizations that train students to be well-oiled machines, prepped to advance the homosexual political and social agenda. In promoting GSAs, national homosexual advocacy groups have found a breeding ground for a new generation of activists—America’s public schools.

The Harms of GSAs

Targeting adolescents when confusion about sexuality is at its peak, GSAs promote sex and homosexuality to youth while ignoring and denying the physical and emotional risks of the homosexual lifestyle. Furthermore, GSAs encourage relationships between youth and adult homosexuals and that undermine the moral and religious teachings of parents.

A primary goal of GSAs is to assure teens that homosexuality is normal and acceptable. This “it’s ok to be gay” mentality teaches that those opposed to homosexual behaviors are either old fashioned or bigoted. At many schools, GSA members who are confused about their sexuality are offered counseling through outside organizations such as Triangle PFLAG, which teach that homosexuality is natural and simply a matter of genetics.¹⁷

Typically, GSAs are also supportive of sexual exploration. Many GSAs offer information through gay websites where they can learn about sex. Glenn High School’s GSA, in Kernersville, N.C., has several links on its website leading students to information on anal sex, emergency contraceptives and abortion. Across the Glenn High GSA site advertisements for homosexual personals run. Recently “Local Sex Photo Personals” on *Xmatch.com* were promoted.¹⁸

Conveniently, warnings about the

risks and dangers of homosexual behavior are noticeably lacking from the message GSAs extend to students. Instead, the homosexual lifestyle is celebrated while the evidence documenting its destructive consequences is ignored or denied.

Those who engage in homosexual acts are at higher risks for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV and AIDS, anal cancer, substance abuse, suicide, and depression.¹⁹ Instead of being warned that homosexuality is harmful to their physical and emotional health, students in GSAs are often told that ignorance and intolerance are to blame for the increased STD, depression and suicide rates in homosexuals. Groups like GLSEN claim that GSAs are needed to teach teens about “safe” sex, and to provide social outlets and support networks to combat the depression associated with adolescent homosexuality. However, numerous studies have shown that programs promoting safe sex have done nothing to decrease STD infection among teens and international research indicates that the promotion of homosexuality fails to help depression or suicide problems in homosexuals.²⁰ Findings show that in countries where homosexuality is widely accepted, increased depression and suicide rates among homosexuals are equal if not greater to U.S. rates.²¹

In addition to the skewed messages about homosexuality GSAs present, the relationships encouraged between GSAs and adult homosexual community organizations can severely harm students. Once GSAs become involved with local gay organizations, they have access to conferences, seminars, social events, and even dating services that gay community centers offer. These events are beyond a school’s jurisdiction, so subject matters and materials covered have no content restrictions or standards. Furthermore, most gay community centers do not require students to have parental permission to participate in events, they only need to show that they are “under 22.”²² In fact, some organizations even discourage youth from telling their parents about their involvement with the group, or their sexuality. A brochure entitled “Be Yourself” from PFLAG portrays parents as homophobic and possibly dangerous. It warns students that they should not “come out” until they have a safe place to go because parents may become abusive or force them to leave home after learning about their homosexual behavior.²³

The following is a mere sampling of some of the activities student members of

GSAs have had access to through local gay community organizations:

- A “Make Your Own Sex Toy Night.”²⁴
- “Queer Colleges.” A course entitled “HIV” was listed with this description: “SEX! Yeah, we know you’re doing it... We’ll have open, honest, judgment-free conversations about sex toys, oral sex, bare-backing, mixing sex and drugs, how to keep it safe and advocate for yourself during group sex, anonymous sex, and sex on the go!”²⁵
- Time Out Youth, a gay youth organization in the Charlotte-Metro area holds overnight “lock-ins” for teens with “gender variant identities.” On its website, detailed descriptions on how to use condoms are given. In May 2006 the group hosted workshops on homosexual activism, safe sex and HIV testing.²⁶

Protecting Students from GSAs

Realizing the harmful effects these clubs have on teens, parents across the country have voiced concern and school boards and policymakers have taken action to stop the groups, but until recently their success has been limited.

Since the GSA movement began, groups like Lambda Legal and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have become skilled at evoking the federal Equal Access Act (EAA) to defend the rights of GSAs in public schools. The EAA, passed in 1984, states that schools cannot discriminate against non-curricular student groups “on basis of religious, political, philosophical, or other speech context.”²⁷ The Act, which has been used by several Christian organizations to fight religious discrimination, calls for school systems to treat all non-curricular school groups equally, or not recognize any at all. Where GSA bans have been challenged, the EAA has often been used to force school boards to permit GSAs. However, as GSAs have become more prevalent, and parents and educators more aware of the threats they pose, some strategies have been effective in keeping GSAs out of public schools.

Banning “Sexuality” Clubs. Unlike clubs related to academics or sports, the identities of GSAs are premised upon one unifying characteristic: sexuality. Federal courts have ruled that even though “the EAA prohibits discrimination on the basis of content ... if schools treated all clubs the same with respect to the issue in question, the regulation of content might be permissible.”²⁸ This interpretation has encouraged school administrators to adopt “no sexuality-based clubs” policies, where all students are prohibited from forming organizations

that relate to any sexual topic — heterosexuality, homosexuality, polygamy, bestiality, prostitution, pornography, etc.

While successful in shutting out GSAs from school campuses, this approach is not ideal because it prevents the formation of clubs that support and promote healthy and responsible sexual decision-making. In the last decade, abstinence clubs, which encourage students to postpone sexual relationships until marriage, have been surfacing in schools. Several Christian student clubs also have members take abstinence pledges. A ban against sexuality clubs could silence the healthy message these groups extend to teens.

Parental Consent Laws. Another tactic in the fight against GSAs is enacting parental consent regulations. These provisions give parents the ability to prevent their children from becoming involved with dangerous or harmful organizations like GSAs. In most proposed parental consent policies, parents must sign written consent forms granting their children permission to participate in after school groups. Not surprisingly, GSA advocates lobby hard to have the laws blocked when they are raised in state legislatures or promoted as policy by local school boards. Activists claim that requiring written parental permission would discourage homosexual students with “oppressive” or “intolerant” parents from seeking support in GSAs. These arguments reveal the true feelings of GSA proponents—that parents do not know what is best for their children and that GSAs and other homosexual organizations are better able to offer youth support and instruction.

However, like bans on sexuality clubs, parental consent laws have their drawbacks. GSAs can still be formed in schools with these policies, which means that the opportunity for their harmful messages and activities to reach students still exists. Even if the consent requirements severely hamper GSA membership, it only takes a few students to establish a club, solicit help from organizations like GLSEN and begin lobbying school administrations for curriculum changes and activities that affect the entire school.

GSA Bans and EAA Exceptions. The best option in protecting students from the harms of GSAs are explicit bans of the organizations. Although some federal courts, like those in Utah and Kentucky, have ruled that GSAs fall under the blanket of protection of the EAA, two EAA exceptions have become important in defending bans against GSAs.

When the EAA was proposed in Congress, legislators were concerned that the Act could be used to establish student organizations like GSAs and would limit the ability of educators to apply appropriate discretion when recognizing after school groups that may endanger students or the educational process. To remedy these problems, two exceptions to the EAA were added. The Maintaining Order and Discipline and Well-being-of-the-Students exceptions state that “nothing [in the EAA] should be construed to limit the authority of the school, its agents or employees, to maintain order and discipline on school premises, to protect the well-being of students and faculty, and to assure that attendance at meetings is voluntary.”²⁹

Under these exceptions strong arguments can be made against allowing students to form GSAs. In states like North Carolina, with laws against sodomy and indecent liberties with minors, the Maintaining Order and Discipline exception is applicable because GSAs condone and even promote the acts criminalized in state statutes. Clearly, it would be extremely hard for schools to maintain order if clubs promoting the contravention of state law were allowed to meet on campus. Just as school administrators would be justified in denying recognition to a student marijuana club because it would encourage students to break the law, schools in states with sodomy statutes should be entitled to ban GSAs because of their connection to unlawful activity.

In addition, the U.S. Supreme Court has said that through the Maintaining Order and Discipline exception, “the [EAA] does not limit a school’s authority to expressly prohibit meetings that would ‘materially and substantially interfere with the orderly conduct of educational activities within the school.’”³⁰ GSA meetings certainly have the potential to interfere with educational activities. The messages sent by GSAs stand in stark opposition with N.C. law requiring abstinence-until-marriage education in public schools. Advice students receive through their involvement with GSAs concerning sex methods, “safer sex” options, and contraception directly opposes an abstinence curriculum and disrupts the educational process by sending conflicting messages to students. The tension and controversy GSAs often create in schools also distracts students from learning as attention is diverted from academics to the political and social turmoil over the GSA in the school and community.

The Well-being-of-the-Students exception of the EAA also provides a solid basis for denying GSAs a place in public schools. The EAA was not created to interfere with what the Supreme Court has recognized as an important duty of the public school system—providing for the well being of children.³¹

As a guardian of children’s well-being, schools have an interest in protecting students from the physical, mental, and emotional harms of increased sexual activity. Through their promotion of homosexuality and so-called “safe sex,” GSAs expose students to lifestyles that put them at higher risk for HIV and other STDs, anal cancer, depression and suicide. Prohibiting GSAs protects children from the dangerous—and possibly deadly—messages they convey to adolescents. Therefore, banning organizations that promote risky behaviors and expose students to obscene sexual material is responsible policymaking.

In light of these exceptions, bans on GSAs make sense, especially in states where sodomy or indecent liberties with minors laws or in schools where abstinence-only education policies are in place. However, advocates of GSAs, like the ACLU, are quick to challenge bans in court, on the basis that they violate the EAA. Until recently, lawyers defending GSAs have been successful in convincing courts to interpret the EAA in a way that labels bans of GSAs unlawful, but the legal tide may be turning. Recently, a federal court ruled that the Lubbock Independent School District was within its rights under the EAA when it adopted a policy prohibiting sexuality clubs. The ban was instituted after students at Lubbock High applied to form a GSA. The School District based its argument defending the ban on two premises. First, that the Maintaining Order and Discipline exception to the EAA was applicable due to the District’s abstinence-only education policy and Texas Penal Codes outlawing certain forms of homosexual activity and sexual relations among minors. Second, the District maintained that under the Well-being-of-the-Students provision of the EAA, they were entitled to ban sexuality-based groups like the Lubbock High GSA because their promotion of homosexuality and “safe sex” put public school students at mental, physical, and emotional risk. The court agreed with the District, stating, “[T]his case has nothing to do with a denial of rights to students because of their sexual viewpoints. It is instead an assertion of a school’s right not

to surrender control of the public school system to students and erode a community's standard of what subject matter is considered obscene and inappropriate. At some point, a line must be drawn that considers the proper subject matter allowed in the schools of this country. The effects of exposing minors to sexual material before they are mature enough to understand its consequences and far-reaching psychological ramifications compels a school district to step in and draw such a line. This case is simply about a school district's ability to control sexual subject matter on its campus."³²

The court noted that the District's abstinence-only education policy was essential to the legality of the ban, and that excluding GSAs may not be appropriate under the EAA in school systems without an abstinence policy. The fact that Texas had strong laws in place against the activities promoted by GSAs also heavily influenced the court's decision.

Like the Lubbock School District, North Carolina has also has a state-wide abstinence-until-marriage education policy.³³ In order for school administrators to have a firm basis for banning GSAs, the maintenance of this policy is crucial because it clearly sets a standard that keeps the promotion of sex before marriage out of the school. North Carolina's laws against sodomy and crimes against nature, as well as statutes criminalizing indecent liberties with minors, also give strong support to policymakers wishing to implement regulations prohibiting GSAs. Without these statutes the argument that GSAs promote and encourage minors to participate in illegal behavior is lost.

Conclusion

As the homosexual movement has found, students are a captive audience, easily able to absorb the messages of the homosexual agenda. GSAs are a key component of this socialization process, but parents, educators and legislators are not powerless against their assaults on North Carolina students.

To stop the influence of GSAs, parents must be informed and vocal, ready to approach school officials about developing

policies prohibiting the clubs. Educators must also be willing to take a stand against the coordinated efforts of the GSA movement. Contrary to the claims of the ACLU, the EAA does not absolutely guarantee the rights of GSAs in public schools. Explicit bans or policies banning sexuality clubs or requiring parental consent are effective and can withstand legal challenges if adopted appropriately. Local education policies, and better yet, statewide legislation banning GSAs, would give all North Carolina students protection against the threats they pose.

While claiming to be harmless clubs that offer support to struggling youth and fight harassment, GSAs promote a message of sex and homosexuality that puts public school students at mental, emotional, and physical risk while undermining parental moral and religious teachings. North Carolinians need to be aware of the dangers of GSAs and prepared to develop policies and laws that prevent GSAs from endangering children.

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