



Education Department Resource

How to Start a Gay -Straight Alliance

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This document consists of the following information for students and teachers who are interested in establishing gay-straight alliances at their school:

1. [OVERVIEW OF GAY/STRAIGHT ALLIANCES AND OTHER SUPPORT GROUPS](#)
2. [TEN STEPS TO STARTING A GAY/STRAIGHT ALLIANCE AT YOUR SCHOOL](#)
3. [TOP TEN IDEAS FOR AWESOME MEETINGS](#)
4. [EXAMPLES OF GAY/STRAIGHT ALLIANCE ACTIVITIES](#)
5. [ABOUT BECOMING A FACULTY ADVISOR](#)

OVERVIEW OF GAY/STRAIGHT ALLIANCES AND OTHER SUPPORT GROUPS

School-based support groups provide students with a place to meet and talk about issues relating to sexual orientation. These groups can help to change the climate of a school and make it safer for all students. There are also numerous community-based groups that reach out to young people. This section takes a comprehensive look at different types of support groups in Massachusetts for students as well as for teachers, parents, and community members.

GAY/STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

Gay/Straight Alliances are the most popular model for school-based support groups for students in Massachusetts. These groups are student-run and have a limited number of faculty advisors who help facilitate the group, offer resources and support, and mediate discussions. Some groups meet more often than others: Barnstable High School's group meets once a month.

Watertown High School's group meets once a week. The sizes of groups also vary widely from school to school from a few members to over fifty. It doesn't matter how many people go to meetings; the work Gay/Straight Alliances do fighting prejudice and discrimination can impact on the lives of everyone in the student body.

The groups are designed to meet the needs of students who are interested in addressing issues related to sexual orientation and anti-gay prejudice and to address the concerns of lesbian and gay students and their friends. They provide a safe and informal place where students can:

- * Talk about their feelings and experiences regarding homosexuality;
- * Learn about homophobia and how it affects everyone;
- * Educate each other and their school community about issues relating to

sexual orientation (including planning a Day of Awareness for the school community); and

* Have fun going to movies and plays, hosting dances, going on picnics, attending political rallies and marches, hosting speakers, writers, artists, and musicians, etc.

Gay/Straight Alliances help to reduce anti-gay violence, harassment and discrimination by educating the school community about homophobia and by encouraging a greater degree of understanding from students and school personnel. The groups also give gay, lesbian, bisexual, questioning, and heterosexual students a safe place to discuss their feelings and fears related to sexual orientation.

A brief sampling of high school campuses reveals a variety of names for these groups. Some use "Gay/Straight Alliance" in their title-- for example, Belmont High School Gay/Straight Alliance--while others choose more distinctive terms like SPECTRUM at Concord-Carlisle Regional High School and Project 10 East at Cambridge Rindge and Latin. Some unique names at private schools include Northfield Mount Herman School Homo-Bi-Hetero Society, GASP! (Gay and Straight People) at Milton Academy, and LeSGaB (Lesbian, Straight, Gay, and Bisexual) at Noble and Greenough School.

Many groups suggest drawing up a list of rules that might include:

* Meetings and discussions are confidential--names of group members and anything said at meetings are to remain within the confines of that space;

* Students, teachers, and staff participate as equal members;

* Members are in no way obligated to declare or define their sexual orientation, nor are any assumptions to be made regarding members sexual orientation.

Groups tend to change their agendas for each week depending on the needs of the participants. Most try to strike a balance between the political work of raising consciousness and reducing homophobia at the school, and dealing with the more personal or emotional issues of the members and offering the members support.

Rachel Mazor, a member of Brookline High School's Gay/Straight Alliance sees progress as a result of her group. "There has been a change in the general atmosphere of the school. There is an enormous awareness of what homophobia is and that there are homosexual and bisexual students." She said that since the creation of the Gay/Straight Alliance teachers have attended workshops to manage their own homophobia and that of their students, and are learning how to help students who are struggling with issues of sexual orientation. "People are now willing to interrupt homophobic jokes and slurs. People now include sexual orientation when talking about diversity."

OTHER SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT GROUPS

There are other models for support groups beside Gay/Straight Alliances. Listed below are some of the more popular models for groups that offer support to students, teachers and school staff, families, and community members.

STUDENT AND FACULTY GAY/STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

Some schools have set up alliances that are open to all adults and students. This model hasn't been as effective as the student-run, faculty advised model. Students complain that faculty members spend too much time talking about their own issues and dominate all discussions. Over time, fewer and fewer students attend the meetings. Faculty who want to join a group might consider forming their own Parallel Faculty/Staff Support and Study Group.

PARALLEL FACULTY/STAFF SUPPORT AND STUDY GROUPS

These groups have sprung up in a number of high schools. They are in addition to student-based support groups. Student liaisons are invited to attend these groups and to offer their input or bring up some of the issues that the student group has been dealing with.

Peter Atlas, a teacher at Concord-Carlisle High School, said that his school has formed a committee on Gay and Lesbian Student Safety. The committee has two faculty sub-groups in addition to the Gay/Straight Alliance. One sub-group deals with issues of Curriculum and Support by addressing ways that teachers can integrate gay and lesbian issues into the curriculum and offering faculty training, gathering resources. The second sub-group deals with Outreach to the Community by looking at ways to solicit resources and help from the community and to address concerns of the community and parents.

SUPPORT GROUPS FOR GAY, LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL STUDENTS

Emily Hollander, a student at Newton South, said "I think there should be a group for only gay, lesbian and bisexual students so they can feel less alone and more comfortable with themselves while they are in or out of the closet at school." Some schools have formed these groups. One student said that her school has a group for gay/lesbian/bisexual/questioning/transge

nder students that meets in the home economics room. She said that's a "good place because there's a microwave in it and it's fairly out of the way." Some students also advised against publicizing the group. "It should be by word of mouth," one student said. "Otherwise people will be snooping around." Of course, this presents the problem that students who are extremely closeted may not learn about the group. There may be no easy or perfect solution. Some schools may be safe enough for students to be "out" and openly questioning their sexual orientation. In other schools, they would be in danger. Each school must make its own decision about whether or not to publicize the group.

HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS OR DIVERSITY GROUPS

Patrick Tortora, a guidance counselor at Cape Cod Tech, said that "Because we felt our school was not ready for a Gay/Straight Alliance, the group was advertised as a Human Rights Support Group. We have discussed instances of discrimination and harassment in school, dealt with family issues, and talked about job discrimination." Norwood High School has an "Alliance Against Discrimination" that has 20-40 student members. Schools that are particularly hostile to addressing gay and lesbian student safety may want to establish Human Rights or Discrimination Groups. These groups can look at the commonalities among various forms of oppression including racism, sexism, ageism, classicism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia. After educating their school community, some of the students may be interested in forming a Gay/Straight Alliance.

ALUMNI GROUPS

These groups are designed for school alumni interested in issues affecting gay and lesbian students at their Alma Maters. Boston Latin's Alumni helped students form their Gay/Straight Alliance. Some alums have returned to their schools to offer

presentations about their experiences dealing with anti-gay harassment or discrimination.

COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORT GROUPS

COMMUNITY STUDY GROUPS

Patricia Boland, a teacher at Mount Everett Regional School, said that "in our district at this time, I feel that it would be difficult for students who are gay or lesbian to come forward, to be in a school-oriented group. They may, however, feel safe enough for a community group." Community study groups are usually open to all interested students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members.

Pat Griffin, a teacher at UMass Amherst, has been involved with a community study group in the Amherst area. She said the group has focused on ways to implement the Board of Education's Recommendations on the Support and Safety of Gay and Lesbian Students in the junior and high school. The group began when a team of teachers and an administrator from the high school went to the Safe Schools Program Workshop in their area. The team was very excited and inspired to organize a parent-teacher-administrator-student group in their school to see what they could do to make their school safer. They couldn't get the students involved, however, and so have operated all year without any student involvement. They meet every other week at the high school and publicize their meetings in the local newspaper and the PTO newspaper. They've distributed surveys and resource guides with readings about issues effecting gay and lesbian students.

GAY AND LESBIAN PARENT GROUP

A number of communities have groups for gay and lesbian parents. Some have invited speakers from the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students to make presentations about the Board of

Education's Recommendations. Some have invited faculty advisors or student liaisons from high school Gay/Straight Alliances to update their groups on the work that is going on in schools and to brainstorm ways that they can get together to make the schools safer for gay and lesbian students and students with gay and lesbian parents.

PARENTS, FAMILIES, AND FRIENDS OF LESBIANS AND GAYS (PFLAG)

The PFLAG mission is "to promote the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons, their families, and friends through: Support, to cope with an adverse society; Education, to enlighten an ill-informed public; and Advocacy, to end discrimination and to secure equal civil rights. Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays provides opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation, and acts to create a society that is healthy, and respectful of human diversity." There are 350 PFLAG chapters across the United States and Canada, and eleven other countries in the world.

In Massachusetts, PFLAG Chapters routinely receive calls from young people. Some are requesting information, others want support and advice about "coming out." Parents, friends and family members of young gays and lesbians also call to learn more about issues related to sexual orientation and how to help these young people. Jean Genasci, the parent of a gay son, and the Northeast Regional Director for PFLAG, said, "In the last nine months, I recorded a total of 590 incoming calls to our home seeking information, support, education, and/or advocacy." The educational portions of PFLAG meetings often focus on the concerns of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, and action plans are developed. Currently, PFLAG is working with the Safe Schools Program to outreach to parents, families and school, and to the general community, to facilitate better understanding of the needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and their families.

COMMUNITY BASED, YOUTH-RUN, ADULT-ADVISED SUPPORT GROUPS FOR GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER YOUTH (A.G.L.Y.'S)

Alliances of Gay and Lesbian Youth hold meetings for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth 22 years and younger. There are AGLY groups in 11 different areas of Massachusetts so far, and more groups are developing all the time. The AGLY groups sponsor meetings, drop-ins, and services for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth. All AGLY's are different. Some groups are large, some are small. Some address the special needs of rural youth, others focus on urban populations. But all have the same basic objectives:

- 1) To provide a safe place for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth to get together and socialize with other young people.
- 2) To address the isolation and invisibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth.
- 3) To provide educational services. AGLY's educate lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth about health issues, gay and lesbian history and culture. They help students with their educational and professional goals and provide services to get young people back in school or keep them in school.
- 4) To provide Role-Modeling. The group introduces members to positive role models--adults who are successful and out at their jobs, people with families--to help young people realize that lesbian,

gay, bisexual and transgender people can be valuable, important members of society.

- 5) To empower young people.

Marilyn Cairnes, the advisor of NAGLY (North Shore Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth) said, "the services we provide are quite different from the in-school services provided in that our organizations are solely gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender kids. Therefore it is a very, very safe place for kids to identify themselves. It may, perhaps, be a long time before all kids in school feel comfortable identifying themselves [as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender] in a school-based Gay/Straight Alliance...For the most part schools that have alliances still have kids in those alliances who are not out to the members of the alliance or to their school. And that's probably going to continue for long time... They look at [AGLY's] as completely removed from the school setting. We provide different kinds of support. [In AGLY's] you can be as gay as you want to and deal with some issues that you maybe wouldn't talk about with anyone else and [in GSA's] you can feel comfortable in your school setting, you can interact with other kids at your school, and educate other people in your school setting. Both groups are important."

TEN EASY STEPS TO STARTING A GAY/STRAIGHT ALLIANCE IN YOUR SCHOOL

Here's a step-by-step plan for starting a Gay/Straight Alliance in your school:

STEP ONE: FOLLOW GUIDELINES

Establish a Gay/Straight Alliance in the same way as you would establish any other group or club at your school. In your Student Handbook, there should be a section detailing the procedure for forming a club or group at your school. Follow those

guidelines. In some schools, this may mean that you have to get written permission from an administrator. In other schools, this may mean that you simply have to put up fliers announcing the first meeting and find a faculty member to act as your group advisor.

STEP TWO: FIND A FACULTY ADVISOR

Some Gay/Straight Alliances have advisors who are teachers, others have faculty advisors who are guidance counselors, nurses or librarians. Just like student members of a group, the faculty advisors don't have to be "out" to be part of the group and many existing groups have straight allies as advisors. How do you pick a faculty advisor? Ask a teacher or staff member whom you think would be receptive.

YOU CAN ENCOURAGE THEM TO JOIN YOUR GROUP BY DOING THE FOLLOWING:

- * Explain to them what issues the group might address and why you think the group would be an important addition to your school.

- * Offer them a copy of the MA Governor's Commission Report on Gay and Lesbian Youth, this Resource Guide, phone numbers and names of faculty advisors at other schools, and the phone number for the Department of Education Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students is (617) 388-3300.

STEP THREE: INFORM ADMINISTRATION OF YOUR PLANS

It is important to immediately inform the administration about your plans to establish

a Gay/Straight Alliance. Having an administrator on your side can be very useful, but is not imperative. They can help you to arrange Days of Awareness, speakers for School Assemblies, teacher trainings, etc. They can work as liaisons to the community and school board. Some administrators may be uncomfortable with the formation of this group and you can help them to understand why you want to form a Gay/Straight Alliance by doing the following:

- * Offer them a copy of the Governor's Commission Report on Gay and Lesbian Youth.

- * Encourage them to speak with other administrators who work at schools that have formed Gay/Straight Alliances.

- * Ask if they would like to speak with a representative from the Massachusetts Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students.

- * Encourage them to speak with PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) members from your town or community.

It is common for administrators to be initially reticent and anxious about the formation of a Gay/Straight Alliance, but it is important to try to educate them. IF THEY REFUSE TO ALLOW YOUR GROUP TO FORM, AND HAVE ALLOWED OTHER SIMILAR CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS TO FORM, THEY ARE BREAKING THE LAW.

STEP FOUR: INFORM GUIDANCE COUNSELORS AND SOCIAL WORKERS ABOUT GROUP

They may know students who would be interested in attending meetings that you don't know. They may be able to encourage

students to attend the group who are dealing with these issues, whether they are questioning their own sexuality, know someone who is gay or lesbian, or are interested in issues affecting gays and lesbians. It can be useful to invite social workers and guidance counselors to come to meetings to help facilitate discussions about difficult issues like "talking to your parents about homosexuality," "coming out to friends and family," "being with a friend or relative who is gay." The meetings may also bring up issues that students will want to discuss in greater detail with a supportive adult.

STEP FIVE: PICK A MEETING PLACE

If possible, find a classroom or spot in your school that is off the beaten track. At first, students may feel a little nervous or uncomfortable about attending a meeting. They may feel worried that others will harass them if they join the group or make assumptions about their sexual orientation. It is important to acknowledge that homophobia is a problem in many schools and that unfortunately being gay or being perceived to be gay or even being a supportive straight ally can put someone at risk for harassment. Try to find a meeting spot that gives members a sense of security and privacy. Some groups meet in rooms that require anyone who's interested in what's happening inside to walk into the room. This makes it impossible for students to hang around outside, spying in on the proceedings. Some groups have to meet off-campus because the fears of homophobic retribution are so great.

Nellie Zupancic, from Newtonville, said that her group meets at lunch time. "Its a good time because most people are around and free then." She also added, "Its a good idea to make it as clear as possible that straight people are also welcome at meetings to reduce the assumptions that are made."

STEP SIX: ADVERTISE

Advertising the formation of the group is one of the first, important steps you can take to fighting homophobia in your school. For some students, seeing the words Gay or Lesbian on a poster can be the first time they feel that there are other people like them in their world. Some of these students may be questioning their own sexual orientation or someone close to them may be gay. These students may never even attend a meeting, but seeing the posters may give them a great deal of comfort knowing that are other people in their school addressing these issues, or that there are other people who feel the same way as they do.

The posters can also spark campus-wide discussions. Traditionally, there has been a great deal of silence around issues of sexual orientation. Fear, ignorance, misinformation can make discussing homosexuality a frightening, even taboo experience. Putting up posters can be the springboard to beginning conversations. The posters may give people a reason to bring up their own feelings, questions, or thoughts about homosexuality. Of course, not all these feelings will be positive or supportive. However, breaking the silence is often the first-step a school takes in educating people about these issues and addressing the myths and the questions people have about homosexuality. The more people talk and the more education your group does, the more likely you will be able to dispel some of the myths and assumptions people carry with them about gays and lesbians.

Don't be discouraged if the posters are defaced or torn down. Almost all groups have had this experience. Keep putting them back up. The longer you persist, the less often they will be defaced. Josh Bennett-Johnson, a student in the Concord-Carlisle alliance known, Spectrum, said that he was "in the lunch room and a guy started taking down one of our posters. We said 'Don't do that. Leave it there.' And he did." Pauline Pease, another student from Spectrum said, "At first the posters were shredded and torn

down. But now I haven't seen any ripped down and every time I walk by this one poster I put up months ago, I'm amazed it's still there." Noah Rubin, a student from Concord Academy, said that they put up a poster that said "One in Ten People are Gay" and someone came along and scribbled anonymously, "That means 90% of us are normal." The group made an announcement saying that "We cannot even deal with people that don't have the guts to sign their name. No more homophobic graffiti like that has been encountered since."

What to include in your posters:

- * Meeting time and location,
- * Describe what the group does, what meetings are like, * Highlight that Everyone is Welcome!
- * Keep the posters positive.

Donna Georges, from Amesbury High School recommends using "language that is encouraging and supportive."

Brookline High School's Gay/Straight Alliance recommends putting up posters in as many places as possible so if they get torn down, there are still some up. Also, go back and replace the ones that disappear. You might also want to put some posters in a safe place. Boston-Latin used grant money from the Safe Schools Program to buy a glass case that couldn't be broken into. They put posters and announcements about the group in the case. (Please see Gay-Straight Alliance Activities for more poster ideas.)

STEP SEVEN: GET SNACKS

Providing food at your meeting can be a great idea. Food gives people something to do with their hands. It is a good icebreaker. It gives them something they can share with each other. It can give people an excuse to come to meetings: "I was hungry so I just

thought I'd stop by and get a handful of chips..."

STEP EIGHT: HOLD YOUR MEETING!

Now that you have a faculty advisor, food, a meeting spot, posters advertising your group, you're ready to actually hold the meeting. Some groups begin with a discussion about why they feel having such a group is important. You may want to play group building exercises or see a movie. (Please see page... for Top 10 Suggestions for Awesome Meetings for additional ideas.)

STEP NINE: ESTABLISH GROUND RULES Some ground rules that other groups have established include:

- * No one will make any assumptions about members' sexual orientations.
- * Confidentiality will be maintained. It may be hard or impossible to insure that people don't talk about things brought up in the group, but names or identities should never be revealed.
- * You must be respectful of each other, but you don't have to be politically correct all the time. Respect each other and realize that everyone is learning about the issue. It's OK to say something that may sound homophobic. Learn why it is problematic.
- * Faculty members participate on an equal basis with students. Faculty may help encourage discussion or participation, but they are not there to teach or

lead the group. They are there as participants.

STEP TEN: PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

You may want to write out an outline of goals that you would like to work towards for the future. A group in Worcester made a list of Assessment Plans and Action Plans. The former included various ways to assess the climate of their school and determine what work needed to be accomplished in the future. The latter was a list of goals for their future which included going to Pride March and to a movie. (See Gay/Straight Alliances: Out and About for more action plan ideas on page...) The Best Meeting We Ever Had...

TOP TEN IDEAS FOR AWESOME MEETINGS

This Top Ten list was compiled after surveying groups from all across Massachusetts. The following are some of the best suggestions:

1) "THINGS I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW BUT WAS AFRAID TO ASK..."

Newton South has a Question and Answer Day. Students anonymously write down questions on any subject they want and then spend the rest of meetings discussing the questions and coming up with answers.

2) BRING-A-FRIEND DAY

Concord-Carlisle hosts a Bring-A-Friend Day when every member is supposed to bring someone new to their meeting. They said it changed a lot of people's minds about the group and destroyed some of their stereotypes about homosexuality.

3) "NO ADULTS ALLOWED" (OR ONLY ONE)

Some groups have complained that their advisors are too domineering, and having this sort of meeting could be a good change

of pace. Tell the adults that only one of them is invited to this special meeting and that they aren't supposed to talk unless absolutely necessary.

4) "WHAT WOULD THE WORLD BE LIKE IF 10% OF PEOPLE WERE STRAIGHT AND 90% WERE GAY?"

Imagine that instead of living in a heterosexist society, you lived in a homosexual society. What would it be like if parents wanted their children to grow up gay? What would it be like if you had to come out as straight?

5) "HOW CAN THE GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE WORK WITH OTHER SCHOOL CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS?"

Newton South is planning a meeting with other groups to discuss how they can all work together and educate each other to make their school better for everyone.

6) COMING OUT

Some groups have found that coming out discussions are very helpful and important. Plan a meeting where people will talk about how they think people would react, what might happen, how to establish support networks, etc.

7) GAMES

Brookline High School's Gay-Straight Alliance plays a game called Common Ground. The students and faculty advisor stand in a circle. One person begins by saying, "I've got a younger sister," or some other statement that is true for them. Everyone for whom this is also true, steps into the center of the circle. Everyone who doesn't have a younger sister, stays on the outside. You can always lie and choose not to step into the circle. The game often brings up personal and important issues that students may not want to discuss in a more formal setting. Sally Rubin, a Newton student, recommends a game her group

calls the "Culture Walk." She said, "There are one or two mediators and they begin by asking a group of people, for example, the women, to move to one side of the room. The guys then ask them questions they've always wanted to know and the women give them answers. Then the women get to tell the guys what they want them to know about them. This game gradually becomes more personal. You don't have to talk or walk."

8) THE THINGS YOU'LL LEARN

Some groups plan meetings where one student researches a topic related to gay and lesbian life, culture, history, oppression, etc. and then reports to the rest of the group what they've discovered. Topics don't have to be dry and boring. They could include: Rock Stars Come Out, The Stonewall Riots, Bisexuality: The Conflict within the Movement, What the Heck is Transgender Anyhow?, etc. Other groups pick current events from the newspaper, such as Gays in the Military and discuss how they feel about these issues.

9) WORKING FOR CHANGE

Most groups have spent at least some meeting time working to institute change in their schools or communities. Some have written editorials for their school papers describing the work of their group, their plans for the future, what they'd like to see change in their school, how to combat anti-gay prejudice, etc. Other groups have detailed instances of homophobia on campus including the defacing of GSA posters, anti-gay slurs or remarks they've heard, etc. and then distributed them to students, teachers, administrators and school board members. Groups have written editorials for their school newspapers, PTO newsletters, and community papers about topics like "Homophobia Hurts Everybody," and "Why I'm a Straight Ally." Groups have also spent their meeting time planning political action strategies. Brookline High's GSA made posters to carry at rallies for the

Anti-Discrimination Law, sent letters to their state representatives, and distributed petitions to the student body.

10) YOU'RE INVITED!

Groups have invited other alliances from neighboring schools to come and join them at their meetings. Newton North holds an annual GSA Conference which is attended by numerous groups from around the state. Boston Latin will be holding a social for GSA's in their area. Other groups have invited speakers to come and talk with them. Winchester High School, for example, invited Michael Smith from the gay and lesbian radio show 1 in 10. Newton North attended a special talk by a history and social sciences teacher on "Gays in Popular Culture" and invited Bill Johnson from the Boston Police Hate Crimes Division to address the school.

OUT AND ABOUT: GAY/STRAIGHT ALLIANCE ACTIVITIES

Gay/Straight Alliances have done everything from going to picnics to civil rights marches. Here is a list of some of the activities groups have enjoyed:

BRING-A-FRIEND DAY

Many groups report that they wish they could get more students to come to their meetings. Bring-A-Friend Day is one way to do just that. On an appointed day, group members bring at least one friend to the meeting. Some members might choose to bring someone whom they think is supportive, but for whatever reason, hasn't gone to any meetings. Others might pick someone they think needs to learn about homophobia or heterosexism. Still others might just drag along their best friend. Spectrum members said that at their Bring-A-Friend Day some students "came out" during the meeting. They talked about homophobia and heterosexism and it helped change a lot of people's minds. And who knows? Maybe after going to one meeting,

some of the friends might decide to attend more regularly.

MOVIES, MOVIES, MOVIES

Duxbury students said that showing movies was one of their best activities and Newton South has held Movie Nights. Norwood High School went to see Schindler's List and discussed how lesbians and gays were victimized in the Holocaust and the connections between anti-Semitism, racism, and homophobia. You might decide to check out a documentary about Massachusetts students who worked for the Anti-Discrimination Law or maybe you'll decide to go down to your local video store and pick up one of the increasing number of commercial films with gay and lesbian themes.

GO TAKE A HIKE

Ralph C. Mahar Regional High School went on an outdoor hiking adventure trip. Outward Bound offers a special program on Thompson Island to assist schools to become safer for gay and lesbian students. You don't have to do something structured! All sorts of out door events can be a wonderful way to strengthen friendships and give your group a chance to get outside of the school and talk freely. Brookline High School's Gay/Straight Alliance held a picnic where they played ultimate Frisbee. Sometimes it's important for a group to just get together and have fun.

GAY, LESBIAN AND BI ALUMNI GO BACK TO SCHOOL

Alumni can be wonderful allies. They can serve as a bridges between the school and the community. Many have access to helpful and exciting resources. Your school's alumni may be able to help you out with everything from vocal and financial support to free theater tickets. Some groups have invited gay or lesbian alumni to return to their Alma-Maters to talk about the experiences they had being a lesbian or gay student.

These presentations are informally known as the "Going Back to School Program." They have the distance to talk freely about the obstacles they encountered and can be useful allies in getting support for your work.

How do you find and contact alumni? Your group can put a notice in the town paper, the local community gay paper, or in your school's alumni paper stating that your group would like to speak with interested, supportive alumni. You might want to describe what your group does, why it's important, and list a contact person readers can call or write for more information.

PARENTS NIGHT

Concord-Carlisle's group has held two Parents Nights. These evenings give parents an opportunity to learn about what activities Spectrum has been doing and what they're planning for the future. At first, Spectrum members were a little nervous. They were worried that antagonistic community members would show up, but instead, lots of supportive parents attended. The parents offered all sorts of resources to the group and decided to establish support groups in the community.

OUTREACH TO THE COMMUNITY

Gay-Straight Alliances are sometimes surprised by the support they receive from their communities. At a community meeting in Marblehead, students from the high school said they were interested in forming a Gay-Straight Alliance. The meeting became uncharacteristically animated as community members volunteered help, asked what they could do to support the group, and shouted out numerous suggestions. Another Gay-Straight Alliance was thrilled when they got a surprise call from an ice cream store owner who wanted to show his support by giving the group free sundaes!

There are a number of ways a group can reach out to the community. In Dover Sherborne, there was a community meeting featuring a diversity panel. Included in the group of speakers was a gay man who explained how homophobia and heterosexism hurts everyone. Some groups may feel it is important to address some of the questions or concerns raised by community members. Brookline High School asked and received help from the Brookline Adult Community Education Program to organize an informational meeting. And Middleborough High School's superintendent moderated a panel including a student, a teacher, a member of the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, and a representative from the Safe Schools Program.

TEACH THE TEACHERS DAY

Consider sponsoring an after-school training for teachers in your school about issues facing gay and lesbian students, the things you would like them to know. Put together a panel of students who want to talk about their own experiences or things they have witnessed in school. Invite a speaker from the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students to talk about the Board of Education's Recommendations and perhaps pick a video for the teachers to watch.

MARCHING WITH PRIDE

Many schools have attended civil rights and pride marches as well as the annual From All Walks Of Life: AIDS Walk. Brookline High School attended the March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights.

Pauline Pease, a student at Concord-Carlisle said, "Pride was a wonderful sense of community. People were loud and happy about who they were. It was also really sad, though. There was a Die-In where everyone dies on the pavement in memory of AIDS." And Linda Shapiro, the Newton North Advisor, echoed these sentiments. She said,

"I'd never been to Gay Pride before. There were incredible crowds on the sidewalk. People yelling at us, 'Newton North, Class of '84' or 'Class of '72' People kept coming up and saying why wasn't [the Alliance] there when I was in school?"

FIND THE COMMON LINKS

Sponsor a Day of Diversity when other school groups interested in civil rights issues get together and talk about the problems they've worked on and the issues they address. Discuss the commonalities between various forms of oppression. And look at ways that oppressions overlap. For example, how homophobia and racism impact on the life of an African-American gay man. Or look at how people of color suffer from the same sort of erasure and invisibility--being left out of textbooks, etc.--as gays and lesbians and how stereotyping circumscribes the lives of people of color and homosexuals. Or you might discuss how sexism and homophobia can work together to keep women out of powerful positions. For example, look at how strong, independent-minded women are labeled "dykes" or "man-haters." Or how lesbian baiting keeps women from advancing in the armed forces. Building coalitions among various school groups can be a great way to meet new people, explore ideas, and increase your base of support.

HEY, HOW ABOUT A PLAY?

Plays are a great activity for Gay/Straight Alliances. Recently, "Angels in America," two blockbuster plays written by a gay man about AIDS won several Tony Awards and are certain to make gay and lesbian theater even more visible than ever before. In Boston, there is a gay and lesbian theater group known as the Triangle Theater Company. Some theaters offer discounts to groups and others may be willing to offer cheaper seats to students.

OUTREACH TO MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Ellen Burchett, a freshman at Newton South, summed up a number of students' feelings when she said, "My school didn't have a Gay-Straight Support Group and they really needed it." Research has found that homophobic slurs are the second most commonly used insults uttered by elementary school children.

One of the members of the Newton North Gay-Straight Alliance said, "It's important to go to the middle schools and teach sixth graders that when they say 'fag' it's offensive and wrong." Members of the Newton North group went back to their middle school and talked with the administration about the homophobia they had encountered there. They told the administration that they felt it was important to do something to change the climate of that school. In June, three members of the alliance went to the middle school and talked to three different eighth grade classes. The eighth graders had lots of questions. One little boy ran up to them in the school cafeteria, stared at their pink triangle buttons, asked if they were gay, and then ran off. The group members were exuberant, however, knowing that they had helped to break the silence and fear surrounding issues of homophobia at their Alma Mater.

AND THIS AWARD GOES TO...

Who doesn't love to win an award? The Cambridge Lavender Alliance has given an annual award to the senior who has done the most for the advancement and well-being of gay and lesbian students in their schools. These sorts of awards can inspire students to work hard on these issues and can also generate publicity for your group. Your alliance could offer a yearly prize or you could try to get a community group, store, restaurant, or company to offer a prize at the end of the year.

SAVVY SURVEYS

A number of Gay-Straight Alliances have sent out surveys to assess the level of tolerance their school has for gay and lesbian students and to better target the work that needs to be done. Some have surveyed students, teachers and school staff, and parents about issues relating to gay and lesbian students and homophobia. SPECTRUM gave out a survey to 849 students "to measure some effects of homophobia in the school" and published the results in the school newspaper. They found, among many other startling facts, that 36% of the school reported that verbal harassment based on sexual orientation occurred at the high school on a daily basis. 400 students at Lincoln-Sudbury High School were surveyed. 34% of them said that their friends would be uncomfortable if they found out "someone they knew was gay, lesbian, or bisexual." Surveys can be a helpful determinant in figuring out what sorts of educational activities to plan and what sorts of posters might help to make people re-think their assumptions. Consider issuing a survey at the beginning of the year and then one at the end of the year to see how much progress you've made!

DIVERSITY PANELS

A number of schools, like Marblehead High School, have hosted Diversity Panels which give spokespeople representing racial, religious, and sexual orientation diversity a chance to talk about their experiences and changes they'd like to see in the future. Students from Watertown High School's Gay-Straight Alliance spoke at the "Day of Respect" all-school assembly. This can be a good way to work with other human rights groups to create change in your school and to create alliances and friendships with other students.

SOCIALIZE

"Gays for Patsy" hosted a two-stepping dance for Boston Area gay-straight alliances. Boston-Latin has plans to host a social for area groups. Getting together with other

alliances and hosting a dance can be a great way to make new friends and have fun. You might also want to host a dance for your school. Many students have gone to their proms in same-sex couples.

One such student was Jessica Byers, a student leader of Cambridge Rindge and Latin's GSA, Project 10 East. Before her prom, she was anxious about the response of others in her high school. "I didn't have a girlfriend at the time," Jessica said, "So I asked my good friend Josie Gold (co-founder of the Gay/Straight Alliance at Belmont High School) who also asked me to her prom. On the day of the prom, the young women dressed in their finest party dresses, exchanged corsages, and entered the hall like all the other couples. Aside from one rude remark made by a male who had apparently come intoxicated, and by some rather uncomfortable and prolonged glances from some individuals, both proms were quite remarkable in that they were not at all remarkable. The young women danced, drank punch, stood hand-in-hand to have their pictures taken, laughed and chatted with one another, with other students, and with staff chaperons. Jessica reflected, "I'm glad we did it for a lot of the closeted people at both schools. I think it was important for everyone to see that we could do it, and it wasn't a big deal." (Excerpted from "Gay/Straight Alliances: Transforming Pain to Pride" by Warren Blumenfeld printed in the High School Journal Volume 77, Nos. 1 & 2)

FIELD TRIPS

Cape Cod Technical High School's group went to a local community college program on homophobia. Watertown's Gay-Straight Alliance went to a Red Sox Game. And Barnstable High School's Gay/Straight Alliance went to a "Youth Day" at Cape Cod Community College and to a Safe Schools Program Regional Workshop. GSA's from Boston Latin, Newton South, Concord-Carlisle, Duxbury, and Winchester High

School attended a GSA Conference hosted by the Newton North High School group.

Students from several schools across the state went to the State House to rally for the Anti-Discrimination Bill. There were many students like Sarah Longberg-Lew, a Brookline High School student, and Mark DeLellis, from Belmont High, who spent every Monday for weeks standing on the State House steps holding placards and signs with slogans like "Gays Make up 30% of Youth Suicides."

Students have also attended and made presentations at a variety of conferences held across the state including the Gay and Lesbian Student Rights Conference which was held at Northeastern University on March 19, 1994. Students also spoke at the Equity for Gay and Lesbian Students Conference: Progress and Promise in Our Schools held at Lesley College on May 20 and 21, 1994 for school superintendents, administrators, teachers, parents and students. They have participated in numerous Safe Schools Program Regional Workshops held on Fridays and Saturdays in various towns and cities in Massachusetts.

HOSTING A DAY OF AWARENESS

A number of alliances have hosted Days of Awareness. Susanna Kittredge, from Newton South, said that they passed out pink triangle stickers on their BGLAD Day (Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian Awareness Day) and tons of people wore them in support. On the next pages are the agendas for Gay Awareness Days put together by Newton North, Newton South, Brookline, and Concord-Carlisle's Gay/Straight Alliances. Norwood High School's Day of Awareness focused on "Respecting Yourself and Others." Donna Georges, an administrator at Amesbury High School, recommends a Question-and-Answer Panel "For youth and caring adults," so that people can find the answers to their questions about gay and lesbian issues. Lincoln-Sudbury High School

had a Gay Day on Valentine's Day. They had a student panel with kids from the GSA and students from FRAGLY (Framingham Area Gay and Lesbian Youth Group).

SAMPLE AGENDAS FROM GAY AWARENESS DAYS

The following are examples of the sessions from the Gay Awareness Days hosted by Newton South in 1992 and 1993. Use their ideas as a springboard for your own Day of Awareness.

Students from B.A.G.L.Y. (Boston Area Gay and Lesbian Youth) discuss how they came to terms with their sexual orientation and what it is like to be gay in high school.

Panel of students from TRISKELION, an alliance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and straight students from Brandeis University discuss issues faced by college students and changes in attitude that occur when one make the transition from high school to college.

Homophobia 101. Newton South history teacher, Bob Parlin, will deliver a presentation on the basic issues surrounding homosexuality and homophobia.

"What can high schools do to combat homophobia?" Members of Newton South's Gay/Straight Alliance lead an open discussion.

Arlene Isaacson, Co-Chair of the Massachusetts Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus talks about the gay and lesbian civil rights movement.

"Gay Rights and the Law." Katherine Triantafillou, Cambridge City Counsellor, speaks about current legal issues.

"Gay Youth" Film and discussion.

"The Depiction of Lesbians and Gay Men in the News and Entertainment Media." WBZ-

TV Newsperson and openly gay man, Randy Price, talks about positive and negative images of gay men and lesbians in the media.

"The Common Roots of Oppression: What are the Connections Between Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia?" A diverse panel of civil rights activists talk about the links between oppressions.

"Openly Gay in High School." A panel of young lesbians and gay men share their personal experiences.

"Hate Crimes." William Johnson, Deputy Superintendent of the Boston Police Department, explains what hate crimes are and how they are dealt with by the police.

"Transgender Issues." A panel of transgender individuals talks about issues relating to transvestites and transsexuals.

SO, YOU WANT TO BE THE FACULTY ADVISOR...

Good intentions aren't enough to be a successful faculty advisor to a student support group. You must be informed about the issues affecting gay and lesbian students and come to grips with any feelings you might have of discomfort or anxiety about dealing with the group. Before the first meeting, here are some things you might want to consider:

ASK YOURSELF SOME QUESTIONS:

AM I HOMOPHOBIC?

Its impossible to grow up in this society and not internalize certain homophobic assumptions. As Janis Sommers, an administrator at Provincetown High School said, "Homophobia is everywhere, in everyone. Even those of us who think it's wrong. Educate yourselves." You don't have to be an expert on gay and lesbian history and culture, but you do have to be willing to educate yourself and to assess your

limitations realistically before deciding to advise the group. Here are some questions you may want to ask yourself before you make that decision:

- * Do I have lesbian, gay, bisexual friends?
- * How comfortable am I talking about homosexuality? About sexuality in general?
- * How do I respond to "fag" or "dyke" jokes?
- * What was I taught about homosexuality? What do I believe?
- * What would I do if I knew that my student was gay or lesbian?
- * How would I feel if I found out one of my parents was gay? My best friend? My colleague?

WHAT AM I ANXIOUS ABOUT?

Most faculty advisors report that they were initially anxious about backlash from the school or community. Ellen Abdow, co-faculty advisor at Brookline High School, says that she's found that "People's fears are almost always worse than what they actually encounter."

WHAT IF NO ONE COMES TO THE MEETING?

The silence that has surrounded these issues may make it seem as though there is no one at your school interested in problems facing gay and lesbian students. You may not know any "out" gay students. But the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 6% of sexually active students had same-sex relationships. By advertising a

GSA, putting up posters with the words "gay and lesbian," you will break the silence and will probably be surprised by the sudden outpouring of emotion and opinion. Often, students just need an icebreaker to begin the discussion. Further, if your posters state that "Everyone is Welcome!" in huge, bold letters, a number of students interested in everything from getting free food to gay civil rights may show up. You'll probably be surprised by the response. Beth Graham, a teacher and administrator at Watertown High School says, "If the group is generated by students it will fly!"

WHAT IF PEOPLE THINK I'M GAY?

One faculty advisor suggested that if someone asks if you are gay and you're actually straight, ask them back, "If I were gay, how would that affect our relationship or the way you feel about me?" It can become a good way to talk about homophobia and homophobic assumptions that we all carry around with us.

Many groups have straight faculty advisors and for some students, having at least one straight advisor is very important. They can point to that person and say, "See, she's straight and she's interested in these issues." Further, a straight advisor can role model how to be a good ally. Similarly, having an "out" advisor can also be very helpful to students. Finding out that someone you respect is gay or lesbian can make people re-think their prejudices. For many students, an out faculty advisor may be the first adult they've ever known who is gay. This is not to say that your group has to have an "out" advisor, only that it helps.

WHAT IF PEOPLE FIND OUT I'M GAY?

Coming out is a personal and individual decision. But staying in the closet as a faculty advisor may compromise your ability to deal honestly with your Gay-Straight Alliance. Someone who has less anxiety surrounding the issue may do a

better job. Many groups have straight advisors. A few have "out" advisors.

It is still a frightening thing for teachers to "come out." Many justifiably fear reprisals from the administration or parents. But many teachers find that they encounter more support than they ever would have imagined. Bob Parlin, an "out" teacher at Newton South said, "My students responded with thoughtfulness, compassion and respect. Many came up to me later that day to tell me how much they admired what I had done and how it had changed their way of thinking about gay people."

Peter Atlas, the advisor to SPECTRUM, came out by publishing a letter in his school's newspaper on National Coming Out Day. His motivation was twofold: First, he did it for the students. "It was an attempt to alleviate some of the fear, shame, loneliness, and despair of kids in the high school today that I also felt as a closeted teen." And second, he did it for himself and other staff members. "It takes much more energy to be closeted than it does to come out." He explained. "All of the energy I used in worrying that I would say the wrong thing is now freed up to do other things. I think I'm a much more effective teacher now on many levels." He said that after coming out, "I got tremendous support which surprised me."

If no other teacher has come out in your school, it can be especially frightening to take the first step. Just about everyone approaches the decision with anxiety and trepidation. A few teachers found that their fears were confirmed. The majority of others found a greater level of support than they had ever imagined. Only you can make the call.

WHAT WILL I DO IF A STUDENT IS IN TROUBLE?

It is important to know whom you will turn to if a student in the group is in trouble. Inform guidance counselors and social

workers about the group and the issues that might come up. Give them information and resources such as the Governor's Commission Report and this Resource Guide that they can use to learn more about the concerns of gay and lesbian students.

A LITTLE HOMEWORK

To help yourself prepare to start a group, you might want to find an existing group, similar to the one you're interested in establishing, and attend some meetings. Pick the brain of the advisors, see what being an adult advisor entails, determine what ground rules the group has established, the role of the adult(s), what seems to work, and what doesn't seem to work.

DEFINING YOUR ROLE

Many schools report that it is important to have students lead the GSA's. At Brookline High School, the group is run democratically. The faculty advisors participate on equal footing with group members. They see their roles as being there to facilitate discussion when necessary, to establish boundaries and ground rules, to mediate disagreements, to keep an eye on anyone suspicious hanging around the meeting room, to help set and keep the group moving on their agenda, and to provide support and resources.

Existing GSA's have found that it is important to restrict the number of adults participating in the group. Students at some schools have complained that the faculty members dominate discussions and activities.

Some Alliances form spin-off groups designed for students dealing with their own issues of sexual orientation. It may be a good idea to ask a person trained in counseling students to lead this sort of group. The students may be dealing with problems that you don't feel qualified to handle.

WHEN A STUDENT COMES OUT

It is important to not make assumptions about students' sexual orientation. Sometimes there is peer pressure for students to be as "out" as the most "out" member of a support group. Make it clear that it is OK for students to be at whatever place they are and that they should take things at their own speed. A faculty advisor can help a young person think through the coming out process by encouraging them to ask themselves these questions:

- * Why do I want to tell other people?
- * What am I likely to gain? What am I likely to lose?
- * What can I do to move the disadvantages to the advantages side?
- * If I am faced with the disadvantages, what can I do?
- * If I do tell, what will the reaction be? What will I do then? Am I ready?

It is important to remember to ask yourself: Where will students get support during the summer once school is out? A possible answer is through their community AGLY groups. Also, they can look to supportive church groups, counselors, friends, relatives, etc.

Al Ferreira, the coordinator of Project 10 East points out that it's important to be sensitive to a student's cultural and familial background when discussing issues of coming out with them. He said he talked with a student "who lived in a three-generation Vietnamese family who said that if he came out his grandfather would forbid all family members from ever mentioning his name again. It would be as if he had never been born."

BE INCLUSIVE

Most groups are dominated by straight-identified students and it is frequently tempting for students to make statements such as, "I'm straight, but..." They may be feeling that others, both in the group and outside the group, are making assumptions about their orientation because they have decided to join the GSA. It is a threatening and frightening thing to be gay or lesbian, or even to be perceived to be gay or lesbian. Although it is understandable that they would want to reassert their heterosexuality, for gay, lesbian, bisexual and questioning students the GSA may be the only place they can go and feel comfortable. Therefore, it can be a difficult line to tread between making heterosexual students feel comfortable, and insuring that the gay, lesbian, bisexual and questioning students feel safe and fully supported. Finally, it can be hard for students of gay and lesbian parents to feel safe opening up to other students because to have homosexual parents is still very taboo in our society. It is important to remember that some students may be attending the meeting who go home to two moms or visit two dads on the weekends.

BUILD A SUPPORT NETWORK FOR FACULTY CONSIDERED WITH GAY AND LESBIAN STUDENTS' ISSUES

Most educators want to create support networks from the ranks of sympathetic colleagues and people in the community. In Massachusetts and some other states, school-based and community support groups have formed for lesbian, bisexual, and gay educators and their straight allies.

Attempt to form supportive alliances with other faculty and staff members. Alliances among gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and supportive heterosexuals can help to reduce the isolation that you might feel addressing these issues that have been traditionally cloaked in silence and shame. You may wish to be organizing informally over lunch as a

support group. Or you can organize a more formal faculty "Gay/Straight Alliance" or

"Human Rights Committee" to address all forms of diversity and oppression.