

## The GSA Controversy: Choose Your Own Equitable Adventure

**Setting:** *In a middle school located in a diverse suburban area, the student population reflects a mix of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The school has built a strong reputation for its focus on academic achievement and community involvement, with numerous programs encouraging students to excel in academics and participate in extracurricular activities. The school is viewed as a hub of opportunity for students to prepare for success in high school and beyond. Despite this focus on academic excellence and community engagement, the school has had limited discussions about LGBTQ+ issues. Conversations around creating an inclusive and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students have not been a priority, even though such students are protected by Title IX of the Civil Rights Act, which guarantees students' rights to a safe and nondiscriminatory environment based on sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation. As a result, LGBTQ+ students feel invisible, misunderstood, and unsupported.*

**Scenario:** Several students at the middle school, who identify as LGBTQ+ or allies, want to start a Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA). They believe the GSA would provide a safe space for students to discuss issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity, combat bullying, and promote understanding and inclusivity among all students. When the students propose the GSA to the principal, the principal expresses concern about how parents and other students might react. The principal delays the approval of the GSA, citing the need to "gauge the community's opinion." Meanwhile, other non-curricular clubs, such as a chess club and a book club, are approved without hesitation.

A week later, during a school assembly, the principal announces the formation of several new student clubs, but the GSA is not mentioned. The students who proposed the GSA feel ignored and marginalized, openly voicing these concerns. Some students begin to experience increased bullying and derogatory comments from peers regarding their sexual orientation. Teachers notice the hostility but are unsure how to address it, as there has been little training or discussion around LGBTQ+ belonging and equitable treatment at the school. You, a trusted teacher, are tapped for support from the LGBTQ+ students and allies for guidance on how to proceed.

## **First, a note: What is the difference between intent and impact?**

One's **intent** is typically driven by **goals that inform an action**. **Impact** is the resulting **effect of the action**. Sometimes, our goal-based actions are in misalignment with the effect of those actions. In these cases, it is important to consider how your actions were received, rather than focusing on what you *meant* to occur; resistance to [critical self-reflection](#) may reflect that the motives of your intent were self-serving, rather than for the benefit of others.

**You express sympathy but remind the students that the principal is in charge, and therefore the decision is final, encouraging them to just meet after school, off school grounds.**

## **Intent:**

- You want to convey that the principal has all students' best interests in mind, thus if the decision was not made to approve a GSA, then it has to be for a good, sound reason.

## **Impact:**

- Feeling dismissed, the overall school climate becomes tense, with a noticeable divide between students and staff who support the GSA and those who oppose it. The GSA is blocked, leading to increased feelings of alienation and marginalization among LGBTQ+ students. The lack of support from the principal further entrenches inequities and contributes to a toxic school environment (Kosciw et al., 2021).

## **Critical Reflection toward Becoming an Authentic Ally**

*What role should teachers play in advocating for marginalized students?*



**You encourage the group to organize and keep trying to get their concerns heard and taken seriously.**

## **Intent:**

- You are inspiring the students to strengthen their self-efficacy in advocating for themselves, as they are likely to encounter LGBTQ+ related difficulties for the rest of their lives and need to know how to handle it.

## **Impact:**

- The students who proposed the GSA feel unsupported and disheartened by both you and the principal. Especially at middle-school age, it would strengthen their development and likelihood of being taken seriously if a teacher were to be overtly supportive (Kosciw et al., 2021; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Some of the students withdraw from school activities and experience a decline in academic performance due to the stress and anxiety of feeling unsafe at school.

## **Critical Reflection toward Becoming an Authentic Ally**

*How can schools ensure that all students feel safe, in support of their sexual orientation/gender expression?*



You are frustrated by the principal's lack of support. You help the students organize to approach the school board. You contact the building principal to remind them about Title IX protections, which interprets "sex" to include gender identity and sexual orientation, protecting LGBTQ+ students from discrimination, harassment, and exclusion based on these characteristics. You provide the MAP Center's *Equity by Design* brief [Using Title IX and Other Policies to Support and Affirm LGBTQIA+ Students](#) as a point of reference. Additionally, you begin incorporating discussions about respect, diversity, and inclusion into your classroom lessons.

## Intent:

- You understand being accepted as an ally means taking actionable steps, even if that means going against the status quo. You want to be as supportive to the students as possible, as this goes far beyond a club; it's about equity and endurance.

## Impact:

- The students are empowered by your support and initiative. The school board decides to support the GSA, and the school implements training for staff on LGBTQ+ issues. The GSA is established, and over time, it helps improve the school climate and reduces bullying.

An orange arrow pointing to the right, containing the text 'Now what?' in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

**Now what?**

# Actions Steps to Becoming an Authentic Ally

- Familiarize yourself with LGBTQ+ terminology, identities, and the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. This includes understanding the spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations.
- Continuously educate yourself on LGBTQ+ topics through books, articles, workshops, and online resources.
- Include LGBTQ+ topics in your curriculum where appropriate. This could be through literature, history, social studies, and other subjects.
- Ensure that LGBTQ+ individuals are represented in diverse and non-stereotypical ways in classroom materials.
- Set clear expectations for respectful behavior and language in your classroom. Address any instances of sex or gender-based harassment immediately.
- Avoid making assumptions about students' gender identities or sexual orientations. Use inclusive language, such as "parents/caregivers/families," and "partner" instead of "boyfriend" or "girlfriend."
- There are certain states that have passed laws regarding students' requested pronouns (Pendharkar, 2023); ensure that you are well informed on those laws, and respond accordingly.

# Action Steps to Becoming an Authentic Ally (cont.)

- If your school has a GSA, [support it](#) by encouraging student participation and attending meetings if appropriate.
- Work within your school or district to advocate for [policies that protect LGBTQ+ students](#), such as anti-bullying policies that explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Make sure students have access to LGBTQ+ -friendly resources, including counseling services, literature, and external support organizations.
- Participate in [professional development opportunities](#) focused on LGBTQ+ issues and inclusive teaching practices.
- Partner with local or national LGBTQ+ organizations to bring additional resources and perspectives into your classroom and school.
- Display symbols of support, such as Pride flags or Safe Space stickers, to signal to students that you are committed to their wellbeing and rights to exist openly as who they are.
- [Actively challenge your own biases](#) and encourage colleagues to do the same. Be open to feedback from students and peers on how you can improve.

## Meet the Author

This issue of *Equity Express* was written by Robin G. Jackson, with contributions from: Kathleen King Thorius and Seena M. Skelton

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