

Creating Safe and Supportive Environments in Chicago Public Schools Through Genders and Sexualities Alliances

NORA BENOMAR,¹ DERRICK LITTLE,² JOSE DOMINGUEZ MAGDALENO,² KRISTEN BELCHER,¹ JULIA LIU,¹ BOOKER MARSHALL,² ELIZABETH JARPE-RATNER¹

What are GSAs?

Genders and Sexualities Alliances (GSAs) are student-led organizations that provide a safe and supportive space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) students and their allies. These school-based groups meet regularly to discuss LGBTQ+ issues, offer social support, and plan advocacy and awareness-raising events. Research has consistently shown that GSAs have a positive impact on the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students in schools.¹ Students who participate in GSAs report feeling more supported, less isolated, and more connected to their school community.² Additionally, GSAs have been linked to lower levels of suicide attempts, substance abuse, and other risk-taking behaviors among LGBTQ+ students.^{2,3}

What is Chicago Public Schools Doing to Support GSAs?

The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system has long invested in strategies that support LGBTQ+ students. In its 5-year vision, CPS declared that each school will have its own GSA.⁴ CPS’s Office of Student Health and Wellness (OSHW) has been working for several years on a comprehensive approach to support LGBTQ+ students. These changes stem, in part, from a cooperative agreement between CPS and the Division of Adolescent and School Health at the Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention, which provides funding to implement prevention strategies, including sexual health promotion and reducing risky behaviors among students, especially those deemed at higher risk such as LGBTQ+ students. Funded strategies focused on building “safe and supportive environments for LGBTQ+ students” by supporting the creation of GSAs, providing support for GSA sponsors (staff members who facilitate GSAs in schools), and providing professional development and technical assistance to staff related to supporting LGBTQ+ students.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

1. Health Policy and Administration, School of Public Health, University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, IL
2. Chicago Public Schools, Office of Student Health and Wellness, Chicago, Illinois

How are GSAs Supported and Sustained In CPS?

CPS’s OSHW and the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) Policy, Practice, and Prevention Research Center (P3RC) have partnered to evaluate CPS OSHW’s GSA efforts through data collection and quality improvement. UIC P3RC serves as a university partner evaluator by collecting qualitative data through focus groups, interviews, surveys, and more. All data collection protocols were reviewed by the UIC Institutional Review Board. Additionally, all strategies were informed and reviewed by a group of community-based stakeholders. To better understand how progress is being made on achieving implementation of GSAs in schools, the qualitative evaluation explored the following questions:

- What are the experiences of GSA sponsors and students in CPS K-8 and high school GSAs?
- How are GSA sponsors and students initiating GSAs in schools? How are they sustaining GSAs in schools?
- How is CPS supporting GSAs across the district?

How did we Conduct the Evaluation?

In the spring of 2022, OSHW’s GSA newsletter included a call to recruit GSA sponsors to participate in the evaluation. GSA sponsors were given the option to participate in a virtual interview and/or offer their students the opportunity to participate in a focus group. A total of 20 GSA sponsors and 30 students from 6 schools participated in the virtual interviews and focus groups, respectively. The virtual interviews and focus groups were conducted via Google Meet, digitally recorded, and transcribed for data analysis. The GSA sponsor interview guide included questions about their experiences getting started as a GSA sponsor and the strategies they used to initiate and sustain their GSAs, while the student focus group guide focused on GSA activities, successes, challenges, and overall experiences. Per district guidance, all data was collected virtually due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

TABLE 1 GSA Sponsor Interview Participant Characteristics, n=20 participants

Role in School	Number	Percent
Counselors	7	35
Social Workers	4	20
Teachers	7	35
Other roles	2	10

School Type	Number	Percent
Elementary schools (K-8)	11	55
High schools (9-12)	9	45

TABLE 2 GSA Student Focus Group Participant Characteristics, n=30 participants

Racial/ethnic identity	Number	Percent
African American/Black	3	10
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	3
Hispanic/Latinx	8	27
White/ European-American	13	43
Multi-Racial/Ethnic	3	10
Prefer not to say	2	7

Gender identity	Number	Percent
Girl/Trans girl	9	30
Boy/Trans boy	8	27
Non-Binary/Third Gender	9	30
Prefer not to say	4	13

What are the Experiences of Students and Sponsors in GSAs in CPS?

The focus groups and interview participants in this study shared the following insights in on the role that GSAs play in their schools:

- GSA participants and sponsors shared that GSAs in CPS provide a valuable opportunity for students and sponsors to create safe spaces in schools where LGBTQ+ students can navigate their identity and sexuality.
- Through participating in GSAs, students in this study reported feeling a deeper connection to their school, sponsors, and peers, as well as experiencing increased educational support that extends beyond the confines of the group.
- Sponsors and students described how GSAs are a space for students to provide validation and affirmation for each other, in turn creating a supportive and inclusive community for all.
- Sponsors and students described how GSAs provide a holistic support system for LGBTQ+ students both inside and outside of the group.

What Did We Learn about *Initiating* GSAs in Schools?

The following are recommendations for **both** students and sponsors initiating a GSA.

- 1. Learn about sponsor and student rights.** Sponsors reported that it was crucial to learn school policies for a better understanding of both sponsor and student rights according to district policy. While sponsors reported experiencing little pushback, they emphasized that knowledge of their rights gave them the confidence to establish their clubs.
- 2. Communicate with school administration and get their support.** Sponsors noted the importance of communicating openly with administrators and obtaining their support for the club and many also shared the policy documents (see statement #1 above) with administrators during these conversations.
- 3. Share sponsor responsibility.** Several sponsors suggested that initiating a GSA was more manageable with the involvement of two or more sponsors, as this facilitated the sharing of responsibilities. The presence of multiple sponsors reduced the burden on individuals and allowed them to more easily manage logistic and scheduling challenges.

“ Depending on the support you have at your school... the good thing with that is that there's a lot of support from the district and there's certain protections from the district... you have to know your rights. ” — SPONSOR 2

1. Utilize a wide array of approaches in recruitment and ongoing membership.

Sponsors recommended employing diverse approaches, such as placing posters around the school and using school announcements, as a way to recruit and maintain student membership and engage students and staff.

2. Consider student needs in club communications.

Sponsors noted it was imperative to tailor the GSA to meet the specific needs of the students and ensure the GSA served as a safe space for all. For example, some sponsors noted that students created their own names for their club and used that language on their documentation and marketing, such as “social justice club” to appeal to the specific interests of the students in that school.

3. Let the GSA serve as a symbol of LGBTQ+ support.

Given its role as a safe space, it was essential for the GSA to serve as a visible symbol of LGBTQ+ support within the school community. Many sponsors noted that the existence of the club conveyed a clear message of support to the entire school community. Students also noted that the existence of the GSA amplified the message of LGBTQ+ acceptance, whether they were able to participate in it or not.

“ I think one thing that’s working well in supporting our LGBTQ plus students is having a GSA, whether they attend or not... I think the fact that we exist and our name is on every club list and we show up to club fairs... I think that matters. I think that staff make their support visible. ” – SPONSOR 20

What Did We Learn about Sustaining GSAs in Schools?

Additionally, five strategies are recommended for maintaining long-lasting GSAs in schools.

1. Allow space for student ownership through democratic principles.

Sponsors, including those who had sustained their GSAs for multiple years, and students noted that allowing space for student ownership through democratic principles ensures that the GSA reflects the interests and concerns of its members, fostering a sense of ownership and belonging.

2. Create opportunities for advocacy and education.

Creating opportunities for advocacy and education within the GSA empowers members to engage in meaningful activism and increase awareness within the school community. Students and sponsors proudly shared accounts of leveraging the GSA in school advocacy efforts and attributed their successes to the credibility of the GSA as a recognized student organization.

3. Foster student leadership.

Fostering student leadership enables individuals to take on roles of responsibility, allowing for more student-involvement and appreciation for the GSA. Several GSAs reported having leadership structures, including leadership positions for older students and/or elected positions, such as GSA president, vice president, etc.

4. Foster community-building among students.

Sponsors and students reported that community-building among students strengthens bonds within the GSA, creating a network of support and solidarity. By fostering community-building, GSA’s can thrive as inclusive and impactful spaces within schools.

5. Utilize trauma-informed approaches.

Sponsors acknowledged that LGBTQ+ youth are at greater risk of experiencing depression and that some students may share trauma experiences within the GSA space. Sponsors spoke about the importance of using trauma-informed approaches and how this can help create a supportive environment sensitive to the needs of all members.

“ The kids in our club, they were like, okay, well we need a community conference about pronouns... So they did that. They totally just like took the reins... they are the ones leading and making these spaces happen. ” – SPONSOR 1

“ Some people can get it and are intuitive, um, have done their own work around boundary setting... but it’s not an expectation... since teachers were not trained in that way... And it makes me particularly concerned because working with, LGBTQ+ youth and marginalized populations with lots of trauma... it certainly helps me that I have the training... not only for like the purpose of boundaries, being able to see like, oh, what you just said actually is significant in a way that goes beyond what you just said... I’m in a unique position because I’m a counselor [and I can follow-up appropriately]. ” – SPONSOR 13

What Did We Learn about Supporting GSAs Across the District?

While it is important to support GSAs within the school system, it is also crucial to ensure district-wide support. Six strategies were identified that can support districts in creating supportive and inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ students, ensuring their well-being and success throughout their educational journey.

1. Create internal CPS resources and easy-to-find links to existing external resources. Creating an internal resource hub that provides easy access to links and external resources would support GSA sponsors and connect them to valuable resources. Sponsors highlighted the importance of district-branded resources, including those that map back to state and local policies and linkages to local community-based organizations and service providers.

2. Create opportunities for district-wide community building. Additionally, organizing district-wide events and activities fosters community building, support, and networking. Multiple GSA sponsors highlighted the important role OSHW plays in offering opportunities for GSAs across the district to connect with one another.

“ So I think being able to network and go to other schools or meet virtually with other schools is a pretty powerful thing... if only to show that there are students at every school who need the same supports you do, who are also really into whatever anime you're watching and wanna nerd out about it during, after school hours, that like we can build a community across the city. I think that's a powerful message for students. ” — SPONSOR 20

“ I was a big dork and I printed out the whole GSA sponsor guidebook and, and the manual, and I made a big binder of it and kind of read through all of the details cuz I just was, I was pretty excited. I still am pretty excited about it... read about like how each unique GSA group can have a couple different ways of like functioning, focusing. ”

— SPONSOR 3

3. Offer professional development opportunities to all CPS staff members. Offering professional development opportunities for all CPS staff ensures everyone is aligned in supporting and educating all students. Interviewees affirmed the importance of a 2020 district mandate requiring all staff across the district to receive training on supporting LGBTQ+ students. They noted that this has resulted in an increased familiarity of staff members with the rights of LGBTQ+ students.

4. Ensure equitable financial resource allocation to GSAs. Some sponsors previously received school-level compensation for their time serving as a GSA sponsor and others received newly available district-level stipends. This kind of support was noted as essential to enable sponsors to prioritize and protect the time needed to properly support students.

5. Provide educational opportunities for parents and families on LGBTQ+ identities. Several sponsors and students highlighted the importance of providing educational opportunities for parents and families regarding LGBTQ+ identities and the need for increased support for families of LGBTQ+ students. These are offered by the district to all parents, but participants recommended more school-level opportunities. Participants noted that providing educational support on LGBTQ+ identities to parents and families fosters an inclusive environment and promotes respectful language across the district.

6. Create and support LGBTQ+ inclusion across curricula. Sponsors and students stressed the importance of implementing and supporting LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula, which provides a safe and affirming space beyond GSA spaces. While acknowledging the existing strong set of professional development opportunities within the district, participants emphasized the need for additional professional development opportunities for teachers to understand and address the implicit heteronormative and cisnormative biases in their teaching methods and language.

Next Steps for CPS Office of Student Health and Wellness

CPS OSHW is utilizing these qualitative findings to drive continuous improvement efforts. Findings provide valuable insights to enhance support, allocate resources, and provide targeted technical assistance for GSA sponsors throughout CPS. Deidentified data from this evaluation were shared with the GSA Leadership Committee and used to assist schools in the process of initiating GSAs and strengthening recently established GSAs. This strategic use of evaluation data helps to create an informed and responsive approach to creating GSAs, ensuring that support mechanisms align with the evolving needs of GSA sponsors and foster the growth and sustainability of GSAs across the district.

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