



PFLAG St. Paul/Minneapolis  
PO Box 19290  
Minneapolis, MN 55419  
Email: [Schools@pflagtc.org](mailto:Schools@pflagtc.org)  
Web: [www.pflagtc.org](http://www.pflagtc.org)  
Phone: 612-825-1660

## Creating Respectful Schools for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students, Families, and Staff *A Guide for Concerned Minnesotans*

In 2004, PFLAG School OUTreach worked in three suburban Twin Cities school districts to help create safe and welcoming learning environments for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, families, and staff. We sponsored community meetings that brought LGBT allies together, analyzed district strengths and weaknesses, and monitored anti-LGBT forces. Members of our grassroots networks of concerned family and community members, school staff, and student activists testified at a school board meeting and a public hearing, applied to serve on an advisory council, met with school staff and an administrator, and spoke to student groups. Our efforts helped add “sexual orientation” to the equal employment opportunity policy in one district, bolstered the efforts of student groups to address anti-LGBT slurs, and produced the *LGBT Policy Checklist for Minnesota School Districts*.

Our aim is to encourage community members everywhere to help create schools that support and affirm all. To guide you in your efforts, we’ve assembled our suggestions based on what we’ve learned. Read on!

### ***Believe that you can create change.***

Your positive attitude is your single most powerful tool. In these tense political times, it’s easy to get discouraged. We often heard people contend that their community was especially backward-looking and would be highly unlikely to take forward steps to support LGBT rights. Yet again and again, we saw change happen.

Ask yourself: Are we stopping ourselves from acting because we’re afraid we’ll encounter opposition? While certainly possible, opposition often doesn’t materialize. Leave room to be pleasantly surprised by support you receive.

*Did you know that two of only a very few school-based programs in the entire country that provide services to LGBT students, families, and staff are Out4Good in Minneapolis (612-668-5482) and Out for Equity in St. Paul (<http://outforequity.spps.org>)?*

### ***Recognize that the law is on your side.***

Minnesota is one of very few states that protect students and school staff in all public and private nonreligious schools from discrimination, including harassment, based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity. (Students and staff in religious schools are *not* protected.)

Minnesota’s strong state law gives advocates for more inclusive schools a persuasive bargaining tool. No matter what personal religious beliefs a school staff member holds, educators are required to foster a learning environment free from harassment in which every child, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, receives support to learn. If necessary, remind school staff of their legal obligations. Encourage your district to demonstrate that it actively upholds state law by updating its policies to cover sexual orientation and gender identity.

For more detailed information on legal and policy issues, download the *LGBT Policy Checklist for Minnesota School Districts* from PFLAG St. Paul/Minneapolis at [www.pflagtc.org](http://www.pflagtc.org).

*Visit [www.revisor.leg.state.mn.us/stats/363A](http://www.revisor.leg.state.mn.us/stats/363A) to read the 1993 Minnesota Human Rights Act for yourself. **Note:** The definition of “sexual orientation” in Minnesota state law includes gender identity; thus, all references in state law to sexual orientation not only cover lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, but transgender people as well.*

### **Log on.**

Some background research can give you a preliminary sense for how receptive your school district is to LGBT issues. A good district website can be a helpful source of information. Also look over printed material distributed by the district. Check to see:

- **Do district *policies* extend equal coverage to LGBT people?**
  - Does the student anti-harassment policy cover sexual orientation?
  - Does the employment application state that the district does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation?  
*Note:* Because state law defines “sexual orientation” to include gender identity, local policies that name sexual orientation also cover gender identity. However, policies that explicitly cite “gender identity/expression” obviously send a stronger message of support for transgender people.
- **Do any *programs* openly address diversity or LGBT issues?**
  - Does the guidance office offer LGBT resources or a support group?
  - Do any student clubs address diversity or LGBT concerns?
  - Do the district’s stated Values or Beliefs include a respect for differences or diversity?
- **What opportunities exist for *community involvement*?**
  - When do the superintendent and school board hold public comment sessions?  
What are their email addresses?
  - Are there opportunities to sit on district advisory boards?
  - Does the district have a weekly e-newsletter to which you can subscribe?

### **Locate a champion who works for the district.**

Assume that LGBT-friendly staff members are already working within the district to create bias-free schools. Start by calling the high school guidance office. Identify yourself as someone who supports creating a positive learning environment for all, including LGBT people. Ask to speak to the staff person who works with LGBT students.

*In every school PFLAG School OUTreach has called, we’ve been able to make contact with a staff person already concerned about or working to create more support for LGBT people.*

### **Research the district.**

Even one phone call with a knowledgeable staff person can provide a good indication of the level of LGBT-awareness and inclusion in your district. Ask:

- Does the guidance department offer a support group for LGBT or questioning students?
- Have students started a Gay/Straight Alliance student club?
- Do school staff receive training on LGBT issues? Is there a Safe Staff or Rainbow Resource program that identifies staff who are knowledgeable about LGBT issues who can act as resource people for students?
- Do school staff who are LGBT feel comfortable being “out”? Do students? Family members?
- Has the administration shown support for LGBT-friendly measures?

### **Create a network of community allies.**

Though LGBT supporters live in every school district in Minnesota, they often do not know one another. Finding them can take some legwork, but working together with a network of allies is effective, fun, and energizing. By asking LGBT-friendly groups to email their members in a school district about an upcoming community meeting, PFLAG School OUTreach was able to locate many supporters. Churches that are LGBT-friendly are another excellent source for locating supporters. Also try visiting the LGBT student group at your local college: there’s a good chance you’ll run across recent high school graduates from your district.

*Email is the most efficient and low-cost way to keep allies informed. Get the email addresses of supporters right away and start an email group.*

### ***Build on the positive efforts already underway.***

There's no need to start from scratch. Make sure to coordinate your efforts with the students and school staff who are already working hard to create an LGBT-friendly environment. Though such students and staff are often keenly aware of the opposition (they frequently can name vocal anti-LGBT community members), they tend to be disconnected from community allies. Knowing of your concern will reduce their sense of isolation and increase their motivation.

### ***Support student leaders.***

Students are often the driving force behind successful efforts to make schools more responsive to LGBT needs. Their accounts of what it's really like to walk down the halls every day and listen to anti-LGBT hate speech can be a persuasive goad to action. Assist their efforts to create opportunities to tell their stories to the wider community.

In a school, two kinds of groups may be available to students who are exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity or who have parents or friends who are LGBT: support groups conducted by guidance counselors or social workers and Gay/Straight Alliance student-initiated clubs. GSAs can have a social, support, or advocacy focus.

Although students must initiate a GSA, they can ask community members to address their group or provide resources. Helpful information on how to start a GSA is available for download through the California-based GSA Network ([www.gsanetwork.org](http://www.gsanetwork.org)), the Gay, Lesbian Straight Education Network ([www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)), and Lambda Legal ([www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org)). These websites also contain resources about how GSAs can raise awareness through an anti-slur campaign or through a school survey designed to gauge the prevalence of anti-LGBT bias.

*Students have a legal right to start a GSA.* According to the 1984 federal Equal Access Act, which applies to all secondary schools that receive federal funding, a school that lets *any* voluntary, student-initiated club meet during non-school hours is required to provide the same opportunities to all non-curricular clubs, no matter what their religious, political, or philosophical beliefs. Thus, schools that permit other extracurricular student groups, such as cheerleaders or chess (which virtually every school does), must also permit a GSA. Schools must also give GSAs the same opportunities as other extracurricular groups to publicize their activities through posters, announcements over the public address system, tables at school events, and publication in the yearbook and school newspaper. Unfortunately, GSAs can encounter unequal treatment when school personnel are unaware of a school's legal obligations.

*Only schools that prohibit all extracurricular groups can prohibit a Gay/Straight Alliance student club. Students who have questions about the legal issues involved in starting or maintaining a GSA can contact the legal desk at OutFront Minnesota. Call 612-822-0127, ext. 230 in the Twin Cities; statewide call 800-800-0350, ext. 230; or visit [www.outfront.org](http://www.outfront.org).*

### ***Coordinate with diversity and anti-bullying efforts.***

Creating schools that truly welcome all is an aim that many groups share. Schools often address diversity through desegregation plans and special education programming. Encouraging the district to explicitly include LGBT in its definition of diversity can pave the way for powerful conversations about respecting differences. Also make sure that anti-bullying conversations specifically address bias against LGBT people.

Two Minnesota organizations currently offer curriculum resources that address the full scope of diversity:

- The Families All Matter Book Project, created by aMaze ([www.amazeworks.org](http://www.amazeworks.org)), uses quality children's literature to explore a wide range of family diversity, including parents who are LGBT.
- The LGBT-parent organization, Rainbow Families ([www.rainbowfamilies.org](http://www.rainbowfamilies.org)), offers training on using two videos in the classroom: *Let's Get Real!* on bullying and *That's a Family!* on family diversity.

### ***Pitch in.***

With school resources stretched thin due to budget cuts, your volunteer hours can go a long way. To contribute:

- Help connect students and staff with community resources.
- Volunteer to speak at student gatherings or staff trainings.
- Encourage the district to assess the current state of LGBT policies, curricular inclusion, extracurricular programming, and school climate, and develop an action plan for next steps. The *GLSEN Workbook* (available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)) can be a helpful assessment tool for this process.

### **Meet with administrators and school board members.**

Convincing the top decision-makers of the need for an LGBT-friendly district is critical. Get to know them. Remember, the district administration and school board are ultimately accountable to you as a voter and taxpayer.

Here are some talking points to get you started:

- Begin with a thank you for the positive steps the district is already taking, even if the only step has been to meet with you. Acknowledge that supporting LGBT concerns can sometimes require courage.
- Strike a constructive tone. Make supporting LGBT rights a good experience.
- Introduce yourself. Are you the parent of an LGBT student? An LGBT parent? An alum? A concerned community member? Tell your story. Being a visible local supporter of LGBT concerns will make an impact.
- Review the Minnesota Human Rights Act. Make sure the school board and administration understand that they are required by law to create a safe and supportive environment for all students and staff, including those who are LGBT. Point out that districts that have ignored anti-LGBT harassment have faced hefty fines.
- If relevant, tie the need to create a supportive environment for LGBT people to the district's own belief or value statements, which sometimes address treating one another respectfully or honoring diversity.
- Offer resources. Provide literature from local LGBT groups about relevant support services.
- Request a specific action, such as updating school policies, posting inclusive policies on the website, or holding a staff training. *Keep in mind the ultimate goal is for the district itself to "own" the need to provide LGBT support services.*
- Check back. Make it clear you will hold the administration and school board accountable.

### **Cultivate healthy skepticism.**

School pride combined with a lack of exposure to the realities of LGBT life can often lead administrators, staff, and even students to downplay anti-LGBT harassment. Even LGBT students can convince themselves that a less-than-friendly environment is adequate: As one gay student told us, "I guess things are okay here. I don't get beat up in the halls."

Encourage the community to think beyond the status quo to imagine what a truly affirming school might look like.

Ask probing questions that dig below surface complacency. Possible questions include:

- Does curriculum, especially in history, literature, and sex education, openly address LGBT themes?
- Is your school prepared to welcome a transgender student?
- If a boy and a girl are dating, do they feel comfortable walking down the hall holding hands? What about if two girls are dating, or two boys? Could a same-sex couple attend prom?

*Sometimes the only person to describe a school environment as hostile or unfriendly is a student who identifies as LGBT or who has LGBT parents. Affirm that student's experience.*

### **Assume goodwill.**

School districts move slowly. Unless you receive direct evidence, don't automatically assume that homophobia or transphobia is causing the delay. Recent budget cuts to education are stretching school staff very thin. Keep a positive attitude and follow up.

**ALERT:** *If a child or teenager in Minnesota has been maltreated because of sexual orientation or gender identity issues, call the GLBT Kids toll-free information line at Family & Children's Services at 1-877-GLBT-KIDS for referrals to helpful services available statewide.*

This guide was created by Jacqueline White, School OUTreach Coordinator, PFLAG St. Paul/Minneapolis. 1/05  
PFLAG School OUTreach receives generous support from  
The Jay & Rose Phillips Family Foundation, Headwaters Foundation for Justice, and PFund.