

GSA Clubs a Positive Addition to Local High Schools

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High schools in both Martensville and Warman are supporting their students by having Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) groups. These groups support inclusiveness and diversity among students, ultimately advocating for a safer learning community. GSAs are a controversial topic for some, but at their core, these clubs promote inclusivity among students. GSAs provide a safe space for LGBTQI2S and ally students to celebrate diversity and dialogue about the struggles of identity and sexuality as a teenager.

The acronym LGBTQI2S refers to the diverse identities recognized within the community: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex and Two-Spirit. While language is consistently evolving and changing, it is important to recognize that while no one name or acronym is correct, being respectful of what individuals or groups choose to be called is essential.

Sarah Gerrard and Mark Perry, teachers and GSA advisors at Warman High School, along with Gina Bader and Kate McKinnon, teachers and GSA advisors at Martensville High School took the time to answer questions about the GSA clubs at their schools. These teachers and advocates provided comment on their school's GSA clubs regarding participation, confidentiality and advice to other students and staff members.

While GSAs are most often referred to as Gay-Straight Alliance's, language is constantly evolving. Some GSAs are now changing their names to Gender Sexuality Alliances. Warman's GSA is a Gay-Straight Alliance, advocated for by the students as they feel the name accurately represents what their group represents. Martensville's GSA is also a Gay-Straight Alliance, but is open to a name change if students feel one is necessary.

Warman High School's GSA has been around for three years, while Martensville High School's is relatively new, starting in September 2015. Participation in the GSA differs weekly for both groups, average attendance being around ten student members.

All GSA advisors feel that their high schools are receptive to the GSA groups: "It provides a safe space for students of the LGBTQI2S community and allies to congregate. In a larger sense I also think it helps school culture become more accepting of some of our students," commented Perry.

In both cases, students advocated for the creation of the GSA at their high school: "Students requested it, and the staff was enthusiastic about the idea. Since our creation this fall, we've had full support from our administration!" commented Bader and McKinnon. Gerrard commented on students from Warman High School: "I was personally approached by students who wanted to start one up and I said yes right away. I have always believed that people should be valued for who they are, not based on what their gender or sexual orientation is. I think it's important to have safe spaces in schools for students who are part of the LGBTQI2S community, and to raise awareness for our school population regarding LGBTQI2S issues" stated Gerrard.

GSA clubs in both high schools aim to support students, whether they identify as LGBTQI2S or straight. This year Martensville High School's GSA "worked

on building our sense of community inside the school. We bonded with one another through team building activities and also shared resources with one another. We have also made connection with other GSA's by attending the Breaking the Silence Conference and the first Saskatchewan GSA Summit" said Bader & McKinnon. Warman High School participated in various activities and held numerous group meetings. "We have done a variety of things. From placing positive pink sticky notes on every student's locker for pink (anti-bullying) day to creating posters such as our "Unpacking Straight Privilege" that hangs on our school GSA bulletin board. We raised the rainbow flag last year for the first time in celebration of Saskatoon's Pride week and will do so again this year. We tie-dyed t-shirts and pressed vinyl slogans onto them to wear in the parade. We also created our own buttons that promote Warman High Pride," commented Gerrard.

Staff advisors gave their opinions and advice regarding students and teachers starting their own GSA club. Bader and McKinnon provide great advice to staff and administration who are approached by students wanting to start a GSA

at their school: "Helping out with a GSA is both rewarding and fun. Seeing the kids feel comfortable about being themselves, and their excitement at some of the events we have attended together has been great! If you are starting one, touch base with other teachers involved with GSAs for advice and ideas." Gerrard added from her own personal experience at Warman High School: "I think you need to do some research and meet with other GSA advisors to get an idea of what activities you might do, what challenges may come up, and the many ways you may navigate the journey. It is essential to have administrative support, and to communicate with them regularly. The key to our success has probably been that OUTSaskatoon came and spoke to both staff and students at different times, and helped to educate many of us about LGBTQI2S issues - that was huge."

Advisors also provided encouragement to those students who identify as LGBTQI2S or an ally: "From a student perspective the advice I would offer is that by asking for a club you will be amazed at how many supportive people you will meet. Many students have lived their lives hearing negative comments and

starting a GSA will not eliminate them but will help in creating a group that can create a positive network of peers and teachers," commented Perry.

The confidentiality and safety is sometimes a concern when it comes to identity and sexuality, especially in a high school setting: "I think initially people had concerns that people may be targeted because of attending the GSA club, but I have not heard of this happening. There is certainly still a stigma that prevents some people from attending, as I think they worry people will assume something about them, but the GSA is for all people, including straight allies, and those who have attended have found that they are not asked to divulge any personal information," stated Gerrard.

Staff advisors aim to support inclusiveness in GSA groups, by "balancing between resources and asking students what they want to discuss or learn about. We hope the students know that they have a voice and that we genuinely care about their needs and wants" stated Gerrard. Martensville High School's GSA staff advisors "ask for feedback in terms of what students would like to do, and about how they feel it's

going in our GSA. They are honest and have good ideas. We try to adapt what we do based on who is currently attending and what they would like to do," commented Bader and McKinnon.

Members from both Martensville High School and Warman High School GSA clubs, as well as Prairie Spirit School Division participated in Pride 2016 by walking in the annual Pride Parade - a way to celebrate diversity and identity.



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ABOVE & BELOW: Students and staff members from MHS and WHS participated in the Pride Parade in Saskatoon this past weekend.

