

A Comprehensive Case Study of a Gay-Straight Alliance:  
Fostering Safe, Supportive Schools for  
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students

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Fostering Safe, Supportive Schools for  
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving parents, Carol and Mike. They instilled in me a deep value for education and hard work. They have accepted and affirmed who I am. They have also encouraged me along this journey. To them, I am immensely grateful. This milestone in my life is in *your* honor.

I also dedicate this dissertation to all students who are LGBT or have other diverse sexual and gender identities. I hope that in at least a small way this research gives voice to your perspectives, experiences, struggles, resilience, and joys. Furthermore, I dedicate this dissertation to the growing number of allies in schools who are working, in small or large ways, to improve the school experiences of LGBT students and foster school communities that welcome and respect all students. In some cases, these are administrators or teachers like those involved in this research; in other cases, they are the accepting, supportive peers of LGBT students. As allies, you are so important to the well-being of LGBT young people in myriad ways. Thank you.

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Moreover, interviewing students and observing meetings of the school's gay-straight alliance allowed me to contextualize and deepen my understanding of it in important ways. I am deeply grateful to those who allowed me to listen to and learn from their personal journeys and stories. I will always cherish this opportunity. To all who generously made themselves available to complete surveys or participate in interviews despite their busy schedules, thank you. Each interviewee graciously welcomed me to their school, with openness to answering my questions and sharing their perspectives. It was a privilege to learn about your school and I hope that I have adequately shared your story.

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## **Abstract**

### **A Comprehensive Case Study of a Gay-Straight Alliance: Fostering Safe, Supportive Schools for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students**

This dissertation studied a gay-straight alliance (GSA) in a midwestern, suburban high school, including the group's purpose, participants, and approaches to supporting students and engaging its larger community. This study examined not only the GSA's implementation, but also its larger school and district context including the experiences of and supports for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students in the school. This sociological case study research followed a descriptive design using multiple methods to study a structure, a GSA, its social institutions (a school and district), and individual behaviors and interactions (e.g., administrative attitudes, teacher behaviors). Furthermore, to understand how the GSA is similar and different from other student clubs intended to create a safe, supportive school environment for potentially disenfranchised students, the study included a focus on two such comparison clubs—one for students who are African American/Black and another for those with disabilities.

The primary research objective was to contribute to the field's understanding of GSAs through a detailed description of how a GSA has been implemented in its particular setting, given its school and district characteristics and influences. Moreover, with an understanding that GSAs and other student clubs exist within and interact with a larger school setting, the study examined the GSA's high school and district policies along with practices intended to create a safe, supportive learning environment. With appropriate attention to methodological and analytic rigor, the study achieved this

objective. The evidence gathered—36 in-depth interviews including six with GSA members, multiple school and two GSA meeting observations, 69 teacher surveys, 31 student surveys, artifacts, and documents—is integrated to identify findings and themes.

First, the study examined why, when, and how the GSA was implemented. Key informants identified various GSA purposes, but commonly pointed to one: providing a safe and welcoming space for all ideas and people. During the 2012–13 school year, the GSA had approximately 15 members who participated in meetings regularly. They were largely white, female students. Other students were involved in GSA activities, in particular when it participated in GLSEN’s Day of Silence. Aside from this annual event, the GSA carried out a few other activities in the school and focused on building awareness about the GSA in the school. Among staff knowledgeable of the GSA, attitudes toward it were quite favorable. However, GSA student interviewees reported mixed support for the GSA from their peers. Finally, important factors affecting the GSA’s implementation at the high school included faculty and administrative support, its visibility in the school, student leadership, recruitment and participation of members, and the quality of meetings.

Second, the study examined whether the GSA affected the experiences and perception of safety and support in the school, and if so, how. To assess this, the study looked at current conditions at the high school in three areas—physical safety, emotional safety, and student support. The findings suggested that the school was widely considered physically safe and student support from adults was also quite strong. Although some challenges were evident, including LGBT students not always feeling welcomed and respected by their peers and some staff, student-student relationships were generally

positive. The GSA's greatest benefits to students were in the areas of emotional safety, support, and empowerment.

Finally, the study synthesized school and district policies/practices intended to create safe, supportive learning environments for students. The GSA is in a school with numerous practices intended to foster a safe, supportive learning environment. These practices cluster around eight areas including, for example, behavioral expectations and procedures as well as extracurricular opportunity. Furthermore, the district has a strong anti-bullying policy and practices in five key areas that help to foster safe, supportive schools. These district practices include, for example, values and vision for school practice as well as supports to develop positive school climate.

At the core of its contribution to the literature, this study found that a GSA was still an important resource for its members despite being in a physically safe school with significant support from adults and moderately strong support from peers. The GSA helped to address a key need: providing a space for all students to express their true identity and experience emotional support from their peers, in particular for students worried about or experiencing negative family reactions to their LGBT identity. Other major themes include: (a) LGBT students and identity seemed somewhat invisible—and the GSA itself has struggled with being visible in the school; (b) strong advisors and administrative commitment to the GSA supported its implementation; (c) large school size impeded not only student connection at the high school, but also GSA implementation; (d) staff recruitment strategies have helped to develop a supportive climate for students; and (e) district influence on the school has been primarily around physical safety, with less of a role in emotional safety and student support.

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## **Glossary of Terms**

*Ally:* An individual who is not LGBT, but who sees the challenges LGBT individuals experience such as bias and discrimination as social justice issues and actively addresses them. For example, I am not transgender, but consider myself a trans ally.

*Bisexual:* Individuals who are emotionally, relationally, and (or) sexually attracted to both females and males.

*Cisgender:* An individual who identifies as their birth-assigned gender (i.e., the opposite of transgender).

*Conditions for learning:* Research-based characteristics of schools that develop students' academic, emotional, and social competencies and can foster provide positive school experiences.

*Connectedness:* See "student support."

*Cultural competence:* Inclusion of appropriate policies, principles, behaviors, and attitudes throughout a system (e.g., school district) or organization (e.g., school) to meet the needs of individuals from particular cultural backgrounds (Poirier et al., 2008).

*Emotional safety:* Conditions related to mutual respect and belonging (Osher & Kendziora, 2010).

*Gay:* Men who are emotionally, relationally, and (or) sexually attracted to the same sex/gender. "Gay" is also used as an overarching term for individuals attracted to the same sex/gender, but is also a Eurocentric term not necessarily espoused by individuals from different racial/ethnic groups. In particular, Black males may use "same gender loving" to

identify with the uniqueness of Black culture and affirm their identity (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2006).

*Gay-straight alliance (GSA)*: “A student club [for LGBT students and their allies] that provides a safe place for students to discuss issues that are important to them, to meet others with similar interests, and to get support from one another and from caring adults” (Macgillivray, 2007, p. 1). GSAs also emphasize advocacy and provide opportunities for students to address heterosexism and transprejudice.

*Gender identity*: An individual’s inner sense of being a man, woman, or another gender. Gender identity may not align with an individual’s birth-assigned gender (see “transgender”). Furthermore, some individuals do not identify within the socially constructed binary gender system (man, woman). They may use other terms to describe their identity, such as “genderqueer,” which may mean that the individual does not identify as either a man or woman.

*Gender expression*: How an individual represents their gender identity, such as behaviors and other characteristics (e.g., names, clothing) that are socially labeled as “feminine” or “masculine,” or “androgynous” (i.e., blending feminine and masculine characteristics so that gender identity is ambiguous).

*Heteronormativity*: Beliefs that heterosexual identity and sexual practices are normal and universally applicable to all individuals, or “the norm.” This assumption is often infused in systems (e.g., school districts) and institutions (e.g., schools), which marginalize non-heterosexual individuals. These beliefs (along with heterosexist behaviors) can contribute to other forms of discrimination such as racism and sexism.

*Heterosexism:* Irrational attitudes and (or) expressed bias and discrimination directed at non-heterosexual behavior and identity, including individuals who may not be, or are perceived to be, non-heterosexual. Unequal civil rights and institutionalized practices (e.g., school curriculum that excludes same-sex couples and their families) often reflect and legitimate this prejudice, which privileges heterosexual individuals and contributes to societal inequities (e.g., disparities in treatment at school or access to culturally competent social services, relative to heterosexual individuals). May also be referred to as “homophobia,” although “phobia” suggests it is a fear rather than a bias.

*Homophobia:* See “heterosexism.”

*Lesbian:* Women who are emotionally, relationally, and (or) sexually attracted to the same sex/gender. “Lesbian” is a Eurocentric term and is not necessarily espoused by individuals from different racial/ethnic groups. In particular, Black females may use “same gender loving” to identify with the uniqueness of Black culture and affirm their identity (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2006).

*In/out of the closet:* A phrase used to refer to whether an individual openly expresses their LGB sexual orientation to others. “Out” may be used when referring to someone who has “come out of the closet.” Individuals may be “out” in varying degrees (e.g., to some friends but not family, or to friends and family but not coworkers, or in some combination). One’s “outness” is often not static: it will change across time and place depending on a person’s experiences, environment, and comfort level with expressing their sexual orientation.

*Physical safety:* Conditions related to violence, fighting, bullying, crime, substance abuse, and gang presence. (Osher & Kendziora)

*Queer:* A term historically used to negatively label individuals from the LGBT community.

Some individuals who are LGB and gender variant, in particular youth and those who do see themselves as having more fluid sexual or gender identities, embrace this term and use it to describe themselves in a positive way. Some theorists estimate this social transition occurred the 1990s (although the exact timing is uncertain) and note disagreement about its definition, which is characterized as ambiguous and focusing on “mismatches between sex, gender, and desire” (Jagose, 1996, p. 3).

*Safety:* “An overall school climate in which students feel physically and emotionally safe. There is little to no violence, fighting, bullying, crime, substance abuse, or gang presence. Overall, there is a climate of mutual respect and trust among all members of the school community” (Osher & Kendziora, p. 122).

*Sex:* A person’s anatomical and genetic characteristics, typically labeled “female” or “male.” Some individuals are born with anatomical/genetic characteristics that do not fit these typical definitions, which may be referred to as “intersex.”

*Sexual orientation:* The emotional, relational, and (or) sexual desire an individual has toward others based on their sex/gender. Words used to describe these feelings (e.g., heterosexual) and desires are socially constructed.

*Sexual identity:* The labels individuals use to express their sexual orientation to others. Individuals who identify as heterosexual, but who have a different sexual orientation, are sometimes referred to as “in the closet.”

*Student support:* ‘Ensuring that children’s basic needs are met and that the significant adults in their lives work collaboratively to encourage, support, and nurture them. Students work with and receive support from teachers who are able to establish a connection with

them, personalize their experience, and engage them in the learning process" (Osher & Kendziora, p.123). Also referred to as "connectedness," or student connection to school.

*Transgender (or "trans")*: Individuals who express a gender identity different from their birth-assigned gender (see also "gender identity" and "gender expression").

*Transprejudice*: Negative attitudes (e.g., fear, hatred) and behaviors (e.g., prejudice, discrimination) directed at individuals who do not conform to social expectations for their birth-assigned gender. Individuals who are transgender, or who express themselves in ways that vary from "typical" gender expression, may experience this negative treatment.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1. Overview**

Every student deserves to participate fully and authentically in schools without worry or experience of bias, rejection, or harassment. This belief aligns closely with American values such as our historical emphasis on the right to primary and secondary education. Unfortunately, equitable educational experiences continue to challenge the U.S. on many levels, including for students who are, or are perceived to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT). Effective school policy and practice can help to ensure bias-free, welcoming school environments. Policymakers, school professionals, and researchers should continue expanding our knowledge about, and implementation of, these policies and practices so that all students experience safe, supportive schools.

Federal education policy has increased pressure on districts and school to improve student outcomes, while at the same time LGBT students disproportionately experience school-related challenges that can affect their academic success. Most notably, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), as part of the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act, has raised expectations for student achievement and increased school accountability. In particular, NCLB has made schools and districts more accountable for their results by expanding state wide testing and requiring that schools make adequate yearly progress in test scores (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b). Concomitant with NCLB, research has increasingly documented the school-related challenges that LGBT students experience. For example, experiencing unwelcoming and physically unsafe schools, with inadequate supports from school staff, can affect the likelihood of LGBT students to attend school or skip certain classes (Kim, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen,

& Palmer, 2012). If students are not attending school or are skipping class because of safety concerns, then they are missing instructional time—and even if they are in class, students may be unable to fully engage in the learning process if they are victimized in their schools. Research also provides evidence linking students' educational experiences, including the quality of their relationships with adults and peers, to their likelihood to persist in school and graduate (Center for Public Education, 2007). This raises serious concerns about the ability of policy efforts such as NCLB to impact outcomes for LGBT students in unsafe, unsupportive schools. Enhancing the school experiences of LGBT students can benefit local, state, and Federal efforts, including policy and programmatic initiatives, to improve student achievement and other school outcomes.

Given the significance of these issues, it is important to study school approaches for improving physical safety, respect, and support for LGBT students. Gay-straight alliances (GSAs), while not the only strategy, are arguably an important one. Although information about GSAs continues to grow, there are also gaps in knowledge about them. In particular, more research about how GSAs are carried out in different school and community settings is needed. Hence, to help address this gap, this research studied a GSA in a midwestern suburban high school. This study used a conceptual model integrating various perspectives. The model, which chapter 2 describes, includes key themes from various bodies of literature such as the purpose of GSAs and conditions for learning in schools.

The GSA was the research's primary focus. This dissertation examined the GSA's purposes, its participants and activities, implementation supports and challenges, and its perceived benefits for students. However, its larger school and district context were

critical focal points as well, given that the GSA exists within its school setting, which in turn is part of a larger district context. It was important to examine the interrelationship of the GSA along with its school context, and the school's district environment including conditions related to safety and support, to more fully understand the GSA. Moreover, this research included comparisons of the GSA to two other student clubs intended to similarly create a safe, supportive school environment for groups of students at risk of feeling isolated or "different" within the school.

From its beginning, this study was rooted in concerns about social justice and the rights of all students to learn and thrive in schools where they are respected, supported, and physically safe. The study makes important contributions to the literature with these concerns in mind. Most notably, it found that the GSA studied was still an important support for its members despite being in a physically safe school with significant support from adults and moderately strong support from peers. The GSA addressed an important need for its members: providing a space for all students to express their true identity and experience emotional support from their peers, in particular for students worried about or experiencing negative family reactions to their LGBT identity.

This introductory chapter provides a foundation for what follows in subsequent chapters. The next section provides a further explanation of the underlying concerns that are the basis for this study. Next, I briefly review the state of the field including prior empirical and theoretical work informing the study's conceptual model (which chapter 2 explores). After this, I describe more fully the purpose of this research including its overarching questions, followed by a review of the methods used to address these questions. Then, I summarize the study's boundaries (what it did not set out to do) and

limitations. Before concluding this chapter, I highlight the significance of the current study.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

The social context of LGBT youth is important to understanding the challenges they experience. Risks include, for example, mental health challenges such as depression as well as substance use and suicide ideation and attempts. Research has documented how these risks are attributable to family dynamics, peer relationships, and school and community environments (Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010). Of particular relevance to this dissertation are two of these social contexts: peer relationships and school environments.

Children and youth spend much of their lives in schools where the attitudes and behaviors of adults and peers shape their experiences, development, and educational outcomes. LGBT students, however, often experience outright hostile, if not unwelcoming, unsafe school environments where they may receive inadequate support. Students may be verbally or physically harassed, or even physically assaulted, because of their LGBT identity—or because of perceptions that they are LGBT. The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) provides a valuable national snapshot of school climate for LGBT students. In its recent survey of students, GLSEN found that 71% reported hearing anti-LGBT remarks often or frequently in their school. Especially concerning was that more than half of respondents (57%) reported hearing these remarks from staff (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Most of these students reported feeling distressed by these experiences. These concerns, as well as

research findings and gaps in the literature, are explored in chapter 2 and warrant increased action to address school climate issues for LGBT students.

Although there is growing knowledge about supports that help to create positive school experiences for LGBT students, the education field has much more to explore, describe, and understand. A relative dearth of knowledge about how GSAs are being carried out, for example, and their successes and challenges remains a limitation. Needed are in-depth studies of particular GSAs and school efforts to create safe, supportive conditions for LGBT students to better understand these supports and how they contribute to more positive school climate. In particular, limited research has explored implementation of LGBT-supportive policies/programs and their effects, such as GSAs. The literature also lacks research on the larger environment of GSAs and comparisons of GSAs to other club-based supports for students. We also need greater knowledge of schools where LGBT students are thriving—or at least not experiencing dire, challenging circumstances. Much can be learned from these settings and the characteristics of these schools and their education policies and practices.

### **1.3. State of the Field**

Research has increasingly focused on school climate and the needs of LGBT students, including supports that can improve their school experiences and outcomes. As the previous section describes, LGBT students may experience unsafe, unwelcoming schools. Research on LGBT populations, which were largely psychological studies of “disorder” until the 1970s, has since significantly expanded to include various education contexts, issues such as school climate, and studies with greater analytic rigor (Szalacha,

2005). Literature as well as advocacy and professional organizations have also drawn attention to GSAs as an important school-based support for LGBT students.

Other research informed this study too. This includes literature on school climate and conditions for learning—physical safety, emotional safety, and student support—that affect student outcomes and well-being. Empirical data and research on these conditions and how they are necessary for improved learning in schools is growing (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2010; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003; Learning First Alliance, 2001; Osher & Kendziora). Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of this literature, including information on education policy/program implementation that informed the study's conceptual model.

Aside from research, Federal and state policies have addressed school conditions for LGBT students. Significantly, the Federal government is increasingly addressing school safety for LGBT students. Most recently, the Student Non-Discrimination Act of 2013 was introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives on April 18, 2013 (H.R. 1652., 2013). With 163 cosponsors, the legislation would prohibit federally assisted education programs from discriminating against students on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>1</sup> The Federal role in making schools safer for LGBT students is also exemplified by the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2010b) letter sent to school districts on October 26, 2010, which noted that Title IX prohibits harassment based on LGBT status. The letter and accompanying fact sheet noted that when “harassment has occurred, a school must take prompt and

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<sup>1</sup> As of October 2013, the legislation was last acted on when it was referred to the House’s Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training on July 8, 2013. Also, the cosponsors included 162 Democrats and 1 Republican representing 36 states and the District of Columbia.

effective steps reasonably calculated to end the harassment, eliminate any hostile environment, and prevent its recurrence” regardless of whether the student experiencing the harassment makes a formal complaint (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a, p. 2). As a third example, a Federal LGBT Youth Summit hosted by the U.S. Department of Education and co-sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services convened in Washington, DC, on June 6 and 7, 2011. It brought together various stakeholders including Federal leaders and program administrators, researchers, advocates, and youth to address issues such as unsafe schools that LGBT youth are experiencing.

State-level efforts to improve LGBT students’ school experiences are increasingly evident too. Currently, 12 states<sup>2</sup> and the District of Columbia have statewide school nondiscrimination laws and policies including both sexual orientation and gender identity and one state, Wisconsin, addresses discrimination based on sexual orientation only (Human Rights Campaign, 2013). Massachusetts has been a trailblazer in supporting LGBT students in its schools. For example, back in 1993, the Massachusetts Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Students made several recommendations to improve student experiences including school policies protecting lesbian and gay students from harassment and developing school-based support groups for them (cited in Anderson, 1994). Then, in 1994 Massachusetts became the first state to sponsor a safe schools program for lesbian and gay youth organized through its state department of education (Griffin & Ouellett, 2002). Currently, the state prohibits discrimination in its schools

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<sup>2</sup> These states include California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington.

based on sexual orientation and it has a comprehensive anti-bullying policy (Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders, 2012). More recently on August 24, 2013, California became the first state to give public school students the right to participate in sex-segregated school programs and activities, including athletic teams, based on their gender identity rather than their birth-assigned gender (Assembly Bill–1266 Pupil rights, 2013). This law also prohibits schools from discriminating on the basis of gender identity and expression.

National organizations have also called attention to the significance of providing safe, supportive school environments for LGBT students. Importantly, these are not only organizations whose missions are to advocate for LGBT rights and interests. For example, the American School Counselor Association (2007), American School Health Association (2009), National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of School Nurses (2003), National Association of School Psychologists (2006), National Education Association (2006), and School Social Work Association (2009) have all issued guidance to their professional memberships about the importance of providing appropriate supports to LGBT students and recommend related strategies. In addition, 13 organizations including national education groups have issued guidance on how to effectively address legal issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity (American Association of School Administrators et al., n.d.).

Increasingly GSAs are recommended as a strategy for supporting LGBT students. For example, in a 2010 brief, the National Education Policy Center, Williams Institute (a sexual orientation law and policy think tank), and Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice included implementing GSAs and similar LGBT programs or

activities (e.g., safe zones) as a main policy recommendation for proactively improving school climate (Biegel & Kuehl). As another example, a National Education Association brief, which was written based on a two-day summit involving 25 scholars and educators, provides various recommendations including removal of institutional obstacles to creating GSAs to improve LGBT students' school experiences (Kim).

Supports for LGBT students, in particular GSAs, have led to controversy and litigation, though. The Equal Access Act (EAA) was passed in 1984 to protect the presence of religious organizations in public secondary schools and has been "expanded to include groups and issues it never intended to protect—namely clubs for gay students" (Broberg, 1999, p. 88). GSAs have benefited from the EAA because it mandates that secondary schools cannot discriminate against or deny equal access to school facilities for student groups, except for hate groups that would substantially interfere with the orderliness of a school's educational activities. To this end, legal cases have argued that GSAs are protected as part of this free speech under the EAA (Broberg). Moreover, in June 2011, U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan released a "dear colleague" letter explaining that Federal law requires school officials to allow all public secondary school student organizations (regardless of their subject matter) the same opportunities to form, to meet on school grounds, and to have access to the same resources available to other student organizations (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a). Together, the developments that this section describes exemplify this study's relevance to the state of the education field.

#### **1.4. Study Purpose and Research Questions**

In responding to the field's focus on improving school experiences for LGBT students and the need for greater understanding about GSAs in various settings, I carried out a case study of a GSA at a midwestern, suburban high school. I conducted sociological case study research with a descriptive design. Using multiple methods, this study examined a structure, a GSA; its social institutions, including its school and district; and individual behaviors and interactions (e.g., school practices related to safety and support, student experiences). Through this design I examined the GSA's past and current implementation as well as its larger school and district context. I also studied and compared it to other student organizations; in particular, to two clubs also intended to create a safe, supportive school environment for potentially disenfranchised students.

My primary research objective was to contribute to the field's knowledge about GSAs, in particular how this particular GSA was implemented in its setting including related challenges and enablers. I also aimed to understand the experiences of LGBT students involved in the GSA and in the school more broadly. I wanted to study whether and if so, how, the GSA contributed to more positive conditions for learning in the high school. Specifically, the GSA's connection to more positive experiences of emotional and physical safety as well as connection to adults and peers among LGBT students in a way that enhanced their school experiences and ability to learn and thrive. Furthermore, based on education policy/program implementation literature (e.g., Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006), I also wanted to study whether and how the district context influenced school conditions (e.g., leadership autonomy, ability to carry out LGBT-supportive practices), which in turn affected the GSA's implementation (e.g., ability to host meetings and

school-wide events) and the experiences of LGBT students in the school (e.g., the extent to which anti-LGBT language and behavior was accepted).

Moreover, with an understanding that GSAs exist with a larger setting, I sought to understand more about school and district policies as well practices intended to develop safe, supportive school environment for students generally. This included a focus on exploring how these policies and practices influenced the GSA and potentially affected the experiences of LGBT students in the school. This knowledge contributes to an understanding of the phenomenon of interest, the GSA, as well as the experiences of LGBT students and their allies participating in the GSA and in the school more broadly. Using this research design and multiple sources of evidence, this study addresses three core research questions:

1. Why, when, and how was the GSA implemented?
2. Has the GSA affected the experiences and perception of safety and support in the school and, if so, in what ways?
3. What are school and district policies/practices for creating safe, supportive learning environments for students?

A descriptive case study research design was especially helpful because it framed a focus on studying, understanding, and describing the characteristics of the GSA with depth and nuance. These are valuable characteristics of case study research (Stake, 1995; Swanson, 2010). Moreover, I explored how staff and students perceive the utility of the GSA—and the extent to which the GSA may have influenced the school experience of staff and students in the selected site. The case study also enabled me to contextualize the GSA in important ways by exploring its larger school and district environment and their

interrelationships. These benefits aligned with strengths of case study research that scholars have articulated: depth, understanding of context and process, linking causes and outcomes, and development of new hypotheses and research questions (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

A conceptual model integrating key issues from the literature served as a framework for the case study. This model incorporates what is known from the literature about the role GSAs typically have in schools. The model also integrates conditions for learning—physical safety, emotional safety (e.g., school connection and respect), and student support—as a foundation for understanding the significance of GSAs and their potential benefits. Furthermore, the model addresses how factors in the larger district and school environment may affect GSA implementation and, conversely, how GSAs may influence safety and support within their larger school settings.

### **1.5. Methodology**

With appropriate attention to methodological and analytic rigor, the study design enabled me to achieve its objective through a mixed methods approach. The evidence gathered—36 in-depth interviews including six with students involved with the GSA, multiple school and GSA observations, 69 completed teacher surveys, 31 completed student surveys, artifacts, and documents—are woven together to provide a body of evidence that address the questions I set out to address. Chapter 3 describes the methods further, including participant protections and confidentiality.

### **1.6. Boundaries and Limitations**

The study had two boundaries worth noting. Foremost, although interviewees shared perspectives about the curriculum, it was not a focus of the research. For example, I did not collect or review the curriculum or related documents. I considered this outside

the scope of this case study. Second, while perspectives about the larger community are incorporated into the findings and are important to the GSA's larger context, the community itself was not a focus in the research questions and data collection instruments. Also, I did not interview community stakeholders such as city council members or representatives of community-based organizations except for an LGBT youth organization in another city. While these would have been valuable areas to explore as part of a larger study, they are outside the scope of the current one.

Additionally, this study had several limitations. Foremost, both interviewees and survey respondents may have shared socially desirable responses to questions they were asked. A case study approach and the use of multiple methods, which this study used, is one of the best strategies for addressing social desirability. Nonetheless, the potential that respondents masked more negative attitudes toward the GSA and LGBT identity is worth noting. Additionally, recruiting GSA students for interviews and the student survey was challenging and did not yield the level of participation I hoped to obtain. I was unable to involve parents of GSA students as well, which would have provided a valuable perspective.

Other challenges included continuing my journey in addressing my internalized stigma when discussing "gay" issues. Also, my efforts to remain a passive participant observer of the GSA meetings, while necessary to minimize my influence on the meetings, still limited the data I was able to collect. Finally, I began my research in the school in September 2012, at the beginning of the school year. Although all interviewees had been working at the school for multiple years, in some cases this may have limited the quality of information respondents shared.

Moreover, the study design, like any research, had inherent constraints. Given that only a single case was studied, the findings are not generalizable to other schools and GSAs. Generalization was never the purpose of this research, but is a limitation of the findings nonetheless. Also, six randomly selected teachers as well as several teachers who were advisors of student clubs, including the GSA, participated in interviews, but their perspectives may not have represented those of others in the school given its size. Despite these challenges and limitations, the richness of data collected and depth of related findings make an important contribution to the literature as well as educational practice.

### **1.7. Study Significance**

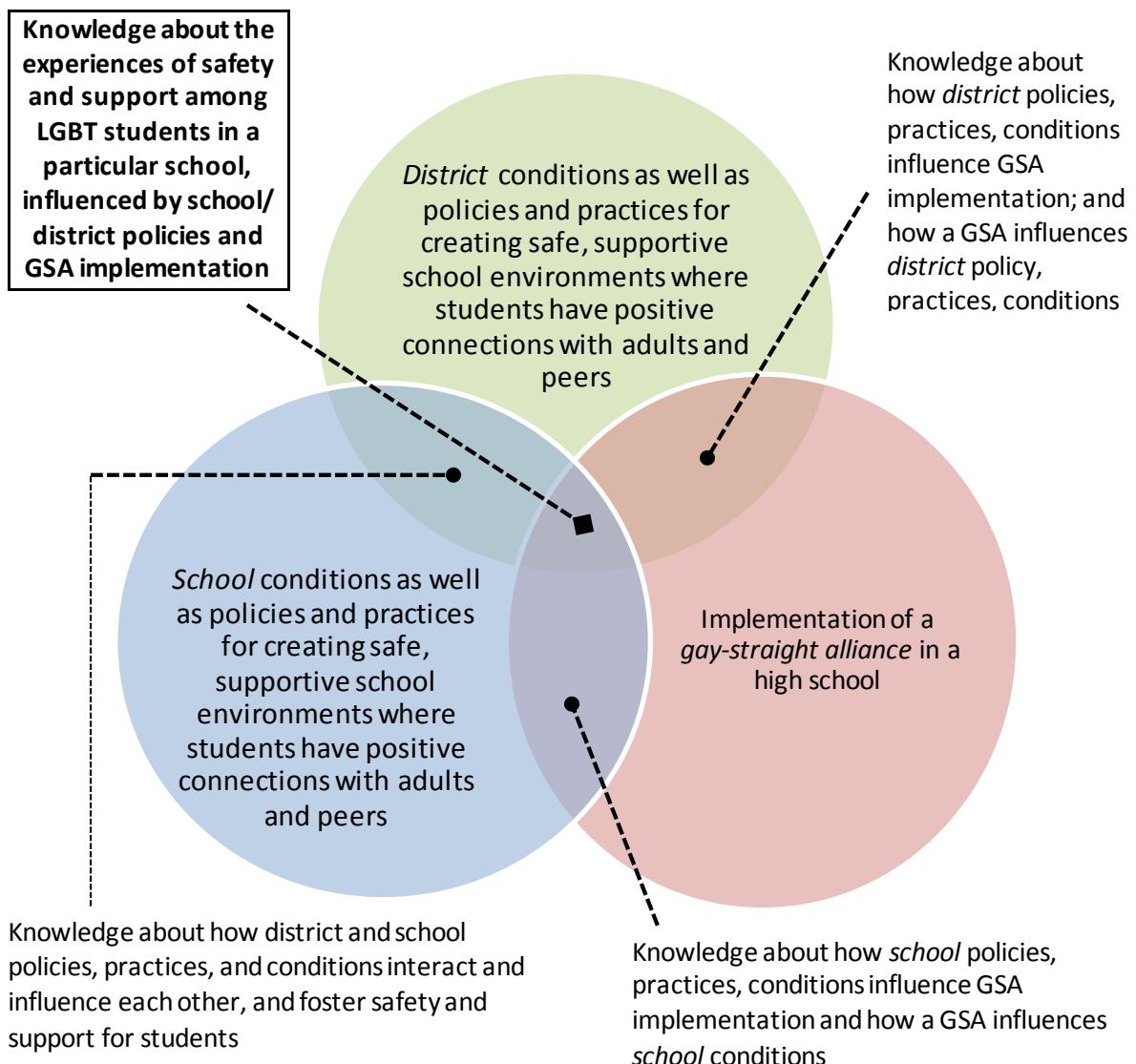
This study contributes to our knowledge of GSAs and school practice. Students' school experiences have important relationships with their perceptions of school, likelihood to attend, academic achievement, educational aspirations, and emotional well-being. To inform education theory, research, practice, and policy, this study contributes to our understanding of how a high school GSA has been implemented, its perceived effects on the experiences of students and school climate, its larger school and district context and their influences on the GSA and the experiences of LGBT students. Importantly, the study contributes to our knowledge of a GSA's implementation and school practices intended to create safe, supportive learning environment for students. Safe, supportive school environments that appropriately acknowledge the identities of LGBT students (i.e., culturally competent schools) are important to realizing positive outcomes for LGBT students, even in schools where LGBT students experience

acceptance and physically safety. The study findings also contribute to the extensive literature on education policy/program implementation and practice.

Figure 1 illustrates how these issues intersect to generate new knowledge about a GSA. For example, studying school conditions and GSA implementation generated knowledge about how school policies, practices, and conditions influenced GSA implementation and how a GSA influenced conditions in its school. Importantly, studying school and district conditions, policies, and practices as well as GSA implementation generated new knowledge about the experiences of safety and support among LGBT students in the high school.

This study makes several important contributions to the literature including to our knowledge of GSAs and school practice. Foremost, the study found that a GSA was still an important resource for its members despite being in a physically safe school with significant support from adults and moderately strong support from peers. The GSA helped to fill a need of its members: providing a space for all students to express their true identity and experience emotional support from their peers, in particular for students worried about or experiencing negative family reactions to their LGBT identity. Other core themes are evident in the findings as well. First, LGBT students and identity seemed somewhat invisible—and the GSA itself has struggled with being visible in the school. Second, student clubs benefit from strong advisors and administrative support for the groups. Third, large school size is a barrier to not only student connection at Extracurricular High, but also to GSA implementation. Fourth, staff recruitment strategies are important to the school's efforts to provide a supportive climate for students. Finally, district influence on the school was primarily around physical safety,

with less of a role in emotional safety and student support. The study's findings can help to guide district- and school-level policy and practice for creating safe, supportive conditions for students—and the function of GSAs in this endeavor.



**Figure 1.** Intersection of multiple perspectives to produce new knowledge.

## 1.8. Dissertation Organization

This document is organized into five chapters with appendices of supplementary information; a glossary preceding this chapter defines important terms. In the next chapter,

I review previous research and the conceptual model that framed this study. In chapter 3, I describe the study's design and methodology, including the purpose of the research, methods for collecting evidence to answer the research questions, and strategies for enhancing analytic rigor and trustworthiness. Then, in chapter 4, I synthesize findings from an analysis of data collected. These findings are organized in three subsections that align with the study's core questions. Finally, in chapter 5, I discuss my interpretation of the findings, identifying salient themes that emerged from an analysis of the data. In this final chapter I also share my reflections about the study's implications for policy, practice, research, and theory. The appendices provide supplementary materials including interview and observation protocols (Appendices A and B, respectively), survey instruments (Appendix C), in-depth descriptions of two GSA meeting observations (Appendix D), and aggregated data from the teacher and student surveys (Appendices E and F, respectively).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter synthesizes the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical literature that guided the current study. This literature directly informed the study's research questions and methods (see chapter 3). This chapter begins with a discussion of school climate literature and the link between physical safety and student connectedness in schools with student outcomes. Next, the expanding focus on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students in school climate literature is reviewed, including a number of concerns about disparities these students experience relative to school safety and support. A brief discussion of LGBT youth resilience follows, and then literature on GSAs as well as education policy and program implementation is summarized. The chapter concludes with a conceptual model that integrates these various bodies of thought. Specifically, the model uses conditions for learning as a foundation for understanding the relevance of GSAs and their potential benefits for LGBT students. The model also addresses how factors in a GSA's larger district and school environment may affect the group's implementation and, conversely, how the GSA may influence safety and support within their larger school settings.

### **2.2. School Climate and Conditions for Learning**

School climate generally includes conditions that affect how school staff, students, and parents/caregivers experience various aspects of the school community (Center for Social and Emotional Education). In its research summary, the Center for Social and Emotional Education (now the National School Climate Center) notes that researchers commonly point to four components of school climate: emotional and

physical safety; positive relationships with adults and peers as well as school connectedness; a teaching and learning environment that emphasizes social-emotional and civic learning; and the physical school environment.

Researchers and practitioners have increasingly studied and addressed these constructs in recent years. Notably, the body of empirical data and research on these conditions and how they are necessary for improved learning in schools is growing (Center for Social and Emotional Education; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; Learning First Alliance; Osher & Kendziora; Osher et al., 2008b). Professional organizations have also drawn attention to issues of school climate and conditions for learning.

For example, the Learning First Alliance has stated that based on strong research findings and its experience, a supportive learning community is one of the core elements in creating a safe learning environment for all students. This alliance is a partnership of 14 prominent U.S. education associations, such as the National Education Association and the National School Board Association, which works to ensure safe, supportive learning environments for all students. They have argued that this includes respectful relationships among and between students and school staff (as well as parents), opportunities for student participation and collaboration, and a physically safe school building. “The objective of creating a supportive learning community ought to be that everyone involved—staff, parents, and especially students—feels a strong sense of belonging in school, being concerned about one another’s welfare, making significant contributions, having opportunities for ongoing learning and growth, and holding important goals and values in common with others” (Learning First Alliance, p. 3).

Research has documented the effects of safety and support on student outcomes.

For example, unsafe school environments, including student harassment and bullying, can lead to a range of challenges that affect development of children and youth into healthy, successful adults. These issues may include:

- Negative academic outcomes (e.g., lower achievement, postsecondary aspirations, and levels of school attendance and completion),
- Mental health concerns (e.g., increased anxiety, decreased self-esteem, increased depression), and
- Self-harm and suicidal thinking (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010a).

Furthermore, research shows that student connection and a sense of belonging to their schools, as well as respectful, supportive relationships are important to student well-being and success in school (e.g., Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel, 1997). “Substantial theoretical and empirical evidence supports the existence of basic human psychological needs for autonomy, belonging, competence, and physical security” (Learning First Alliance, 2009, p. 4). For example, using a large dataset from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, researchers found that students who had stronger, higher-quality relationships with teachers and their peers were more likely to have greater academic motivation and achievement levels, more positive attitudes toward school, and more positive behavior—and were less likely to engage in unhealthy behavior (Resnick et al., 1997). Students do not experience learning conditions similarly, in particular if they experience bias and harassment. This is true for students who are not heterosexual and who express their gender in ways that differ from the expectations of peers and adults.

Given this, three constructs, referred to as “conditions for learning” in classrooms and schools, informed this study and its conceptual model, which section 2.7 describes. These include physical safety, such as an orderly environment free of violence and weapons. A second condition for learning, emotional safety, includes being treated respectfully and with dignity, feeling accepted and a sense of belonging, and experiencing school environments free from bias, discrimination, harassment, and intimidation (Bluestein, 2001; Osher & Kendziora). The third condition, student support, consists of meaningful connection to caring adults. This study focuses on these three constructs because “a safe and supportive learning environment fills students’ basic psychological needs for belonging, autonomy, influence, competence, and physical security” (Osher & Kendziora, p. 122). Students feel supported and connected to their schools when they believe that adults and peers care about their learning and well-being (Center for Social and Emotional Education). “Safe, caring, participatory and responsive school climates tend to foster a greater attachment to school and provide the optimal foundation for social, emotional and academic learning” (Center for Social and Emotional Education, p. 3).

Extracurricular clubs such as GSAs can foster positive connecting and student belonging to their schools. Research has found, for example, that high school student participation in school clubs and organized sports is positively associated with academic achievement, psychosocial adjustment such as resilience and a sense of self-worth, and school belonging (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006a, 2006b). Other research has also found that positive effects of extracurricular involvement on educational achievement, engagement, and aspirations (Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lyndsay, 1999; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

The research and literature on conditions for learning provide an important rationale for respectful, supportive school experiences for LGBT students. Hence, this study examined whether the GSA, one type of extracurricular club, was an important resource for students by fostering physical and emotional safety, and positive connection with adults and peers. Although not a major focus, the study also looked at whether key informants thought the GSA contributed to improved school experiences for students and their ability to learn and thrive.

Moreover, these conditions for learning constructs have been increasingly applied in school districts and schools. Organizations such as the American Institutes for Research (AIR) are examining and advising districts and schools on efforts to enhance conditions for learning both in U.S. school districts and internationally. For example, since 2008 AIR has assessed the conditions for learning in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and has used its Conditions for Learning Survey to assess student perspectives on climate on four measures, including safety and student support (Osher et al., 2008a). AIR has administered this survey in several other school districts (e.g., Syracuse City School District), yielding data that district and school administrators are using to create more positive school environments for students. Related research also shows that safety is positively correlated with student achievement at the high school level (Osher & Kendziora). As the next section explores, a growing literature cites safety and support as challenges that LGBT students experience. Bullying, peer rejection, stigma, and social exclusion, for example, all negatively affect experiences of safety and support in schools for LGBT students.

### **2.3. School Climate and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students**

School climate, whether positive or negative, is a significant issue affecting the lives of LGBT students. Significantly, LGBT students experience unique stresses and challenges in their school experiences compared to their peers (Hunter & Schaecher, 1987; Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc). They may experience verbal or physical harassment, or even physical assault, because of their LGBT identity—or because of perceptions that they are LGBT. Heterosexist behavior is a significant source of safety-related concerns in schools (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). GLSEN provides a valuable national snapshot of school climate for LGBT students. In its recent survey of 8,584 students aged 13 to 20, GLSEN (2012) found that 71% reported hearing anti-LGBT remarks often or frequently in their school. Especially concerning was that more than half of respondents (57%) reported hearing these remarks from staff. Most of these students reported feeling distressed by these experiences. Of those students who were harassed/assaulted, 60% did not report it in particular because they believed their school would take little or no action, or their situation would worsen. Unfortunately, that was the experience of the one in three students who reported incidents.

Student victimization is likely an indicator of social marginalization, which may further affect student experiences of school climate and attitudes toward school. GLSEN's analyses of its survey data show that students who experienced higher levels of victimization in school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression also had higher rates of negative outcomes. This included higher student absenteeism, lower postsecondary educational aspirations, lower levels of academic achievement, lower levels of belonging to their school, higher levels of depression and anxiety, and lower self-esteem

(Kosciw et al., 2012). Specifically, students with *higher* self-reported levels of victimization compared with students with *lower* levels of victimization because of their sexual orientation were:

- Almost three times as likely to have missed school in the past month (58% versus 20%);
- Twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue postsecondary education (11% versus 5%);
- More likely to have lower grade point averages (2.9 versus 3.2);
- Approximately half as likely to have a positive sense of belonging to their school (25% versus 61%);
- Less likely to report positive self-esteem (57% versus 36%); and
- Almost twice as likely to demonstrate higher levels of depression (68% versus 38%; Kosciw et al., 2012).

GLSEN researchers have also found that community characteristics (fewer college-educated adults and higher district poverty) contributed to a significant proportion of victimization in schools based on youths' sexual orientation (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009).<sup>3</sup> As the researchers note, "schools exist within the context of a larger community, and the overall climate of a school is therefore influenced by and potentially reflects the attitudes, beliefs, and overall climate of this larger community" (p. 984).

Another GLSEN study examined the school experiences of LGBT students from principals' perspectives. A nationally representative survey of 1,580 K-12 public school

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, LGBT youth in schools with higher levels of student poverty were less likely to hear antigay remarks, which the researchers partly attribute to sociocultural differences.

principals yielded many important findings (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2008). In particular, the survey results showed that 15% of principals (34% at the secondary level) reported their schools implemented student organizations such as GSAs to reduce bullying/harassment and 21% (41% at the secondary level) carried out activities designed to create a safe environment for LGBT students. In addition, 45% reported that allowing clubs at schools where LGBT and heterosexual students come together to promote tolerance would be at least helpful for creating safe environments for LGBT students and students with LGBT parents; 67% felt this way relative to anti-bullying/harassment and anti-discrimination policies that explicitly protect LGBT students. Of the 458 principals whose schools were engaged in activities to create safer schools for LGBT students, approximately half identified barriers to these efforts including lack of time of school personnel (22%), lack of financial resources (21%), objections by parents (20%), and objections by other community members (16%) (GLSEN & Harris Interactive).

A growing body of research including these GLSEN data inform our understanding of the school experiences of LGBT students. For example, a survey of 7,559 adolescents aged 14 to 22 found significant differences in reports of bullying victimization based on sexual orientation (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010). Among male respondents, 26% of heterosexual respondents reported being bullying victims compared to 35% of mostly heterosexual,<sup>4</sup> 36% of bisexual, and 44% of gay respondents. Among female respondents, 16% of heterosexual females reported

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<sup>4</sup> The survey adapted its sexual orientation question from the Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey. The question asked respondents to select one of six responses that reflected their feelings of attraction, including completely heterosexual, mostly heterosexual, bisexual, mostly homosexual, completely homosexual, and unsure.

being bully victims compared to 25% of mostly heterosexual, 26% of bisexual, and 40% of lesbian respondents (Berlan et al.).<sup>5</sup>

Research demonstrates that heterosexism, heteronormativity, and transprejudice are ongoing challenges in schools, contributing to unsafe, unsupportive school environments and negative outcomes. Heterosexism continues to contribute to victimization among LGBT youth (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009). As noted by Russell, “there is clear scientific consensus that LGBTQ<sup>6</sup> youth are, indeed, a vulnerable group” and that “research from multiple disciplines and perspectives, based on multiple methods, and from samples across the world, continues to show that LGBTQ youth are a group that is at high risk for preventable negative outcomes” (2010a, p. 4). Other research including an assessment of more than 13,000 students in a county school system found that compared to their peers who identify themselves as heterosexual, LGBT youth reported higher rates of both psychological (e.g., suicidal ideation) and education-related risk such as greater unexcused absences, greater victimization, and lower rates of school belonging (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). In examining victimization, Robinson and Espelage examined cyber bullying as well bullying on the basis of perceived sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and how students looked. For example, in reviewing the findings for school belonging, they note that “we should be keenly concerned with the difference between LGBTQ- and straight-identified students” (p. 323).

Reported incidents of physical and verbal assault of students due to LGBT issues abound, for students of all ages. LGBT stigma/bias, including in schools, may begin at

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<sup>5</sup> The researchers note that the study is limited by small sample sizes of LGB respondents and a non-representative sample.

<sup>6</sup> In this citation, the “Q” in the LGTBQ acronym Russell uses refers to queer/questioning youth.

young ages. For example, one troubling story of kindergarteners physically and verbally assaulting two peers because they were pretending to be a lesbian couple during play time is shared in a fairly recent *School Psychology Review* article (Henning-Stout, James, & Macintosh, 2000). Meeting the needs of LGBT students and addressing the inequities they experience relative to social acceptance, support, and safety are my passion—and this study's foundation, focusing on the high school level.

Research has found that more inclusive policies and programs positively affect the experiences of LGBT students in high schools by making them feel more supported and welcomed (Chesir-Teran & Hughes). The growing body of research on LGBT youth in schools shows that particular policies, programs, and practice promote the safety and well-being of these youth including:

- School non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies that mention actual and perceived sexual orientation as well as gender identity and expression;
- Teacher training on how to intervene when students are harassed;
- A supportive school environment with information and resources, and an LGBT-inclusive curriculum; and
- Availability of school-based support groups or clubs such as GSAs (Russell, 2010b).

For example, students in schools with LGBT-inclusive policies and available GSAs have reported feeling safer in their schools (GLSEN, 2010). Research on the Massachusetts safe schools program for lesbian and gay students found that inclusive policies were associated with more positive assessments of school climate (Szalacha, 2003).

Some limitations in this research are worth noting. These studies lack experimental or quasi-experimental research designs, so generalizability of the findings is statistically limited. The studies point to correlations between a given characteristic(s), such as a nondiscrimination policy and more positive school climate. For example, some studies show that the presence of a GSA is associated with school safety and that LGBT students in schools with GSAs felt safer and more connected to their schools (GLSEN, 2007; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Szalacha, 2003). Arguably, schools with LGBT-inclusive policies or with GSAs could (and likely are to) be systematically different than those schools without them, and this difference could explain some of these findings.

Despite these limitations including only correlational findings, growing evidence of a positive association between particular policies, programs, and practices with more favorable assessments of school climate (safety in particular) buttresses arguments that the relationship is not merely correlational. Additionally, the most recent GLSEN survey, although a self-selected sample, includes a large number of respondents. A rich body of qualitative literature on the experiences of LGBT students continues to grow, providing valuable insight and nuance that quantitative studies can (and often) miss. As just discussed, GSAs, the core of this study, are one school-based support that researchers and practitioners suggest can help enhance experiences of safety and support for LGBT students.

This literature and research warrants increased action to address school climate issues for LGBT students. In particular, more research is needed to explore implementation of LGBT-supportive policies/programs and their effects, such as GSAs.

We also need greater knowledge of and attention on schools where LGBT students are thriving—or at least not experiencing dire, challenging circumstances. Much can be learned from these settings.

#### **2.4. Other Challenges Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth Experience**

Beyond concerns about school climate and bullying, LGBT students may experience other challenges that negatively affect their well-being and further make GSAs an important intervention and support in schools. A landmark Institute of Medicine (IOM) report (2011) reviewed research on the health of LGBT individuals, including youth. Although this research is limited, the IOM report found that experiences of stigma and discrimination largely influence disparities in mental and physical health among LGBT youth compared to heterosexual and non-gender-variant youth. These experiences include high rates of physical and emotional bias and violence; rejection by families and peers; and inadequate supports in schools and communities because of their sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Other concerns affecting LGBT youth include substance use, suicide and self-harm, and homelessness.

For example, a study using data from the Oregon Health Teens Survey from 2006 to 2008, which 31,852 public school 11<sup>th</sup> graders completed, examined the association between the social environment for LGB youth and attempted suicide after controlling for individual predictors of suicide attempts such as depressive symptoms and peer victimization (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). As part of its index of five characteristics of the social environment, the researcher included the proportion of schools with (a) GSAs, (b) anti-bullying policies protecting LGBT students, and (c) antidiscrimination policies including sexual orientation. The study found that 4.4% of students self-identified as

LGB and concluded that although LGB identity was a strong predictor of suicide attempts in the past 12 months, LGB youth in negative social environments were more likely to attempt suicide in the previous year (Hatzenbuehler).<sup>7</sup>

Overrepresentation of LGBT youth among homeless youth populations is another serious concern. Estimates suggest that approximately 20% to 40% of all homeless youth are LGBT (Ray, 2006). A Massachusetts study using 2005 and 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Study data based on a representative sample of public school students in grades 9 to 12 (n=6,317) found that 25% of lesbian/gay, 15% of bisexual, and 3% of heterosexual students were homeless (Corliss, Goodenow, Nichols, & Austin, 2011). Homelessness can disrupt the lives of students in profound, including their ability to attend school and engage in the learning process even when present in school.

## **2.5. An Evolving Focus on Affirmation, Resilience, and Protective Factors**

The preceding review of challenges should not imply that all LGBT youth are victimized or experience these issues, but these concerns provide a rationale for the current study. The numerous challenges discussed are intended to frame the importance of continuing to study and expand the literature on the experiences of LGBT youth across various disciplines, including education. This expansion should include broadening our knowledge and examples of contexts where LGBT students are thriving. Unfortunately, some individuals may still question why the experiences of LGBT students are a concern—and point to sexual orientation, for example, being a “private” matter that is “no business” of schools and educators. The previously discussed challenges serve as an

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<sup>7</sup> The study found that 19.6% of lesbian and gay self-identified youth, 22% of self-identified bisexual youth, and 4.2% of heterosexual youth reported suicide attempts in the past 12 months. The interaction between LGBT identity and social environment characteristics were not statistically significant, although variation was evident in the results.

unfortunate reminder of the importance of studying the experiences of LGBT students and expanding our understanding of what is working well in supporting them as well as what further progress is needed.

Scholars have begun to shift the discourse on LGBT youth from focusing on risks and deficits to focusing on their resilience, strengths, and factors that protect them from risks associated with challenges they experience. Resilience consists of the factors and characteristics that influence or predict healthy development (Russell, 2005). Literature on LGBT young people is increasingly focusing on their resilience and self-advocacy, including how they develop positive strategies for coping with challenges they experience, lead efforts to self-advocate, and serve as role models and supports for each other (Fisher, 2013; Holmes & Cahill, 2005; Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002). Another study on the resilience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth found that victimization was associated with psychological distress and social support from peers and families helped to decrease this distress (Mustanksi, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011).<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, the literature is also addressing protective factors among LGBT youth, such as family and school connectedness (IOM, 2011; Russell, 2005). Some have called for this new emphasis because a focus on risks and deficits continues to stigmatize LGBT youth and does not reflect how many of them experience healthy development (Lazear & Gamache, 2012; Russell, 2010a; Savin-Williams, 2001, 2006).

GSAs are one way that LGBT students and their schools can proactively create affirming environments for LGBT identity and expression. GSAs can potentially also

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<sup>8</sup> This study also found that approaches are needed to address youth victimization because social support “did not significantly dampen the negative effects of victimization” (p. 204).

develop resilience among LGBT youth. While on the one hand GSAs (and other “safe zones” in schools) can be sources of refuge from unsafe, unsupportive school environments, GSAs may also serve important functions even in schools where LGBT youth experience affirmation of their sexual/gender identity. This study explores a GSA, which the next section describes in depth, from both perspectives.

## **2.6. Gay-Straight Alliances**

As previously noted, LGBT students may feel disconnected from adults because of biased language that they experience (e.g., heterosexist remarks or behaviors) or because of the behavior of adults and peers, which may suggest to LGBT students that they are not welcomed, respected, or cared about. Schools may proactively support LGBT students, or reactively try to protect them from harassment, in various ways. Successful approaches have included safe spaces and safe zones (places, such as classrooms, where students are safe to talk about their sexual/gender identities), GSAs, and educational media addressing LGBT concerns (Biegel). GSAs emphasize advocacy and are a framework for influencing the decisions of policymakers (Roemerman, 2011).

More specifically, a GSA is student-led club that includes all students regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. A GSA is intended to provide a safe place for students to access resources and information, connect with supportive peers and a caring adult(s), develop a positive sense of self, and address heterosexism and transprejudice to make their schools and community safer by building awareness of LGBT-related concerns (Gay-Straight Alliance Network, n.d.; GLSEN, 2012b; Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2005; Herdt, Russell, Sweat, & Marzullo, 2007; Holmes & Cahill, 2003; Micelli, 2005; Sears, 2005). Some GSAs may also serve a counseling role in

instances when the GSA advisor is a school counselor who provides students with individual counseling and psychological support to address stressors they are experiencing (Griffin et al.).<sup>9</sup> GSAs are often the only place in schools where students can safely discuss their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, and by being able to talk about this, they develop self-esteem and social skills (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012).

First emerging in 1988, GSAs evolved from the efforts of a visionary high school teacher. This teacher, Kevin Jennings, later went on to found and direct the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) before later becoming Assistant Deputy Secretary for the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools at the U.S. Department of Education. In her insightful book describing the history of GSAs, Melinda Miceli frames the evolution of GSAs as a movement that has advanced gay rights (but is distinct from the gay rights movement) because “it seeks to reverse the influence of educational institutions from institutions that help to instill prejudice and condone the discrimination, harassment, and abuse of gay people into institutions that instill ideas of tolerance and respect for social diversity” (p. 9).

GSAs have been implemented in middle and high schools to create inclusive school policies, among other goals. Scholars have noted that GSAs are a widely adopted, visible strategy for addressing the needs of LGBT students (Griffin & Ouellett). GLSEN maintains a database that currently includes more than 4,000 registered GSAs, which are one of the fastest-growing student clubs in the U.S. (GLSEN, 2012a). GSAs are located

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<sup>9</sup> In their study of 22 high school GSAs in Massachusetts, the researchers found that two of these GSAs provided a counseling role, meeting under a different name because the school climate was too hostile for an openly LGBT student club (Griffin et al.).

in every state as well as in the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, and on military bases (GLSEN, 2012a). California alone has more than 900 registered GSAs (GSA Network, 2013).

GSAs can be a protective factor for LGBT youth by helping them feel safe and connected, access resources, and understand how to have a voice and influence policy and school practice (Roemerman, 2011). GSAs and similar student clubs for LGBT students are also an important strategy for positively connecting students with adults and peers (Hansen, 2008; Meyer, 2010; Munoz-Plaza et al.; Poirier, 2012; Valenti, 2010). Advocates have argued that GSAs should be considered as part of larger district strategies to foster safe schools for students (Gay-Straight Alliance Network; GLSEN, 2007; Roemerman).

Research on GSAs is limited compared to other areas of study in school climate research, but growing (Doppler, 2000). In its research brief on GSAs, GLSEN identified several major findings from the literature including an association between safer, more supportive, and more positive school environments and GSAs (2007). Research shows that GSAs enhance student self-esteem including pride in their LGBT identity, and foster their resiliency and coping skills for dealing with heterosexism (Draughn, Elkins, & Roy, 2002; Lee, 2002). One quantitative study used logistic regression and linear regression analysis to predict high school implementation of GSAs based on school and state characteristics (Fetner & Kush, 2008). Using the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data for the 2001–02 school year and GSA registries from organizations such as GLSEN, the researchers found that social and political contexts mattered. Specifically, GSAs were more likely to be present in more urban areas, schools

with more students, schools with smaller percentages of students eligible for free lunch, states prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, and states with organizations created to support GSA implementation (Fetner & Kush).

GSA research is largely qualitative. One such study of a high school GSA found that students participating in the GSA felt safer, became more comfortable with their LGB<sup>10</sup> identities, had a sense of belonging in their school and better relationships with school staff, felt empowered and more able to contribute positively to society, and believed that because of the GSA they were harassed less and their academic performance improved (Lee). Another study involving 15 high school GSA student leaders in California schools explored how they experienced empowerment, finding that the clubs led to personal (e.g., feeling good about oneself), relational (e.g., being a member of a group), and strategic (having and using knowledge for social change and justice) empowerment (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009).

Peer-reviewed research has found that LGBT students in schools with GSAs are more likely to report that adults in their school support LGBT students and are more likely to know a supportive adult in their school than students in schools without GSAs (Szalacha, 2003; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). A study of 14 GSA advisors and their roles (the first such study, according to the author), found that their roles included being a caring adult and role model for students and serving as a resource and liaison to the school for LGBT issues (Valenti). Numerous other dissertations have also focused on GSAs in various ways, including issues related to their implementation and benefits for students and school climate.

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<sup>10</sup> This study did not include transgender students, so the acronym is presented accordingly.

A recent dissertation that studied three public high school GSAs and another diversity club in a southwest U.S. metropolitan area examined how these clubs affected participating students' lives and experiences in school (Shores, 2007). Using data from administrator and GSA interviews, as well as surveys of 34 students, the researcher found that a majority of participants reported several benefits from attending a GSA or other club that promoted acceptance such as greater acceptance, confidence, and feelings of belonging in their schools (Shores). For example, 97% of surveyed students indicated that these clubs had a positive effect on their lives (although 15% reported some negative effects); 21% agreed that their academics improved, and 47% thought their family life/family communication improved because of club attendance (Shores). The interviews found that GSA advisors experienced school administrator and teacher resistance to the GSAs in various forms, but that from the advisors' perspectives, students valued the GSAs because they provided safe spaces and helped students feel more accepted.

A second dissertation used case studies of four public high school GSAs, including interviews of student GSA leaders and staff advisors as well as GSA observations, to examine GSA implementation in those settings (Talone, 2006). That researcher concluded that four factors affected GSA implementation. This included inadequate student participation, due to issues such as lack of student commitment, student fear, or parent opposition. Other factors included GSA advisor leadership; available resources (time for meetings, funding, help from administration/teachers); and interference by the school community, such as removal of GSA signs from school spaces and intimidation of GSA members (Talone).

Another primarily survey-based dissertation studied the functions and structures of GSAs in Massachusetts (Doppler). As part of the study design the researcher used a survey of 162 advisors of GSAs active in Massachusetts public schools during the 1998–99 school year. With a 56% response rate, she found that GSAs reportedly diminished experiences of several forms of isolation: emotional (sense of aloneness), social (lack of positive relationships with other LGBT students), and cognitive (stereotypes and lack of accurate information about LGBT identity). For example, more than half of the GSAs often addressed myths and stereotypes of LGBT people.

In addition to fostering positive connections with adults and peers, Doppler concluded that GSAs supported adolescent development (i.e., their self-understanding and sense of identity). According to GSA advisors, students involved in GSAs often “participated in activities such as gay pride marches which may serve as a rite of passage for the lesbian and gay community, [which] GSAs normalize … for lesbian and gay students” (Doppler, p. 154). As Doppler explained, developmental psychologist Erik Erikson argued that rites of passage, such as those the GSA students participated in, are important to identity development. Doppler also found four factors that facilitated implementation: enthusiastic, able, committed, and politically aware students; support from school administration, teachers, and the community; regularly occurring meetings (i.e., consistency); and perseverance despite resistance or other challenges to GSA implementation.

The aforementioned GLSEN survey also found that having a GSA in schools correlated with more positive experiences for LGBT students (e.g., less victimization because of sexual orientation and gender expression, a greater sense of belonging to the

school community). This growing body of research warrants increased action to address school climate issues for LGBT students and the unique function GSAs can serve to create safe, supportive learning environments. A larger research base is needed to inform educational policy at the national, state, and local levels. In particular, the field needs to know more about whether and how GSAs benefit LGBT students in different settings, how these supports are implemented in often unwelcoming school climates, and the extent to which they help to foster safe, supportive school environments for LGBT students. To better understand LGBT youth, experts in the field have identified GSAs as an area needing research, such as how GSA models are adapted in different settings including geographic areas and how community-based LGBT groups are supporting GSAs (e.g., Cianciotto & Cahill).

We also need to know more about how district and school context (e.g., policy, attitudes, capacity) influence implementation of GSAs and conditions for learning for LGBT students. District and school context are important to creating safe schools. The Making Schools Safe Project, for example, concluded that “the unique contexts of individual schools determined how, when, and what changes were implemented” (Griffin & Oullett, p. 5). The attitudes toward GSAs among school staff, such as administrators and teachers, can influence GSA implementation, and research on this has shown fairly positive, but still mixed perspectives. In a survey of 1,011 secondary school teachers, 53 percent believed that school clubs to promote tolerance such as GSAs would help create safer schools for LGBT students; interestingly, however, 26 percent responded that these clubs would not help develop safer environments (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005).

Despite progress in research about GSAs, the education field has much more to explore, describe, and understand regarding their role. Schools as institutions perpetuate historical oppression for many groups, including LGBT youth. Schools reinforce gender norms and assumptions that we all engage in opposite-sex relationships and identify with our birth-assigned sex. This study's questions and analyses help explore how heteronormativity, if not blatant anti-LGBT bias, contribute to the need for and implementation of LGBT-affirming policies, programs, and practices, including GSAs.

Although a GSA is the focus of this study, this is not to suggest that GSAs are the *only* solution to creating safe, supportive school environments for LGBT students. As others have rightfully argued, systemic change is needed to address the school-related needs of LGBT students in the longer term (Griffin et al.; Griffin & Ouellett). To sustain the positive effects of GSAs on school climate, an iterative planning process is needed to effectively enhance policies, programs, and practices at the organizational level (Griffin et al.). This is important given that GSAs are led by students, who will eventually graduate (or leave) their schools, as well as GSA advisors who are not permanent members of the school community. Using data from a pilot study of eight Massachusetts high schools as part of the University of Massachusetts and Institute for Gay and Lesbian Strategic Studies (IGLSS) Making Schools Safe Project, researchers identified several strategies for developing long-term positive change for LGBT students in schools: supportive statewide policies and programs, active support of administrators (e.g., principals) and other adults (e.g., counselors), student involvement in the change process, and participation of LGBT community organizations (Griffin & Ouellett). This more comprehensive approach is consistent with a culturally competent set of strategies for

addressing the needs of LGBT students (Poirier et al.). GSAs, therefore, are one tool within a larger strategy for creating safe, supportive learning conditions for LGBT students.

## **2.7. Implementation of Education Policy and Practice**

Research and literature on the implementation of education policy and practice provides a theoretical basis for understanding some of these factors affecting GSA implementation. This study included a focus on policies and practice that influenced safety and support in the high school. The interaction of policy, people, and places makes policy implementation a “highly contingent and situated process” and shapes its outcomes (Honig, p. 19; Hill & Hupe, 2002). For example, policy interacts with “street-level bureaucrats,” individuals at the local level who are responsible for implementing it by using their ideals to interpret policy, translating it into practice, and delivering services (Lipsky, 1980). Given this and based on the body of education policy implementation literature (e.g., Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez), the dissertation includes a focus on the larger district context and whether, and if so, how it influenced the school. The influences could include the extent to which school leadership have autonomy in certain areas, such as physical safety and LGBT-supportive practices.

Capacity is another important theme in the education policy and practice implementation literature. Effective implementation requires that organizations such as districts and schools have the appropriate and necessary administrative structure, personnel, and financial resources (Goggin, Bowman, Lester, O’Toole, 1990). Implementation experts theorize that, all else equal, policy implementation will occur more smoothly when organizations consist of more competent, professional bureaucratic

actors including “skillful and committed program management” (Goggin et al., p. 130). Importantly, this capacity and commitment, such as attitudes toward LGBT identity, can affect students’ experiences along with GSA implementation.

Significantly, the larger school context outside of the GSA itself is an important influence on these and other student clubs. Hence, the dissertation also needed to study the GSA’s school context including actors (e.g., administrators) and practices to foster a safe, supportive school. This focus on the school context helped to understand whether, and if so, how they affected the GSA’s implementation, such as creating the group and hosting meetings and events in the school. This helped to also examine issues affecting the experiences of LGBT students in the school, such as the extent to which anti-LGBT language and behavior were addressed. Given this, the dissertation examined how these school-level factors influenced how policies would be carried out, and would impede or facilitate implementation of policies and expected practices.

Moreover, local capacity, including knowledge and individual preferences (i.e., will), are important factors influencing responses to policy (McLaughlin, 1987). The willingness of school administrators, teachers, and other school staff to implement safe, supportive in their schools affects their decisions about whether and how to do this, and for which students. Their attitudes, beliefs, incentives, motivation, and preferences influence how they carry out policies and practices. Implementation research has found that other factors important to carrying out policies and practices include a school’s political context (Odden, 1991). Such influences could include attitudes toward GSAs and LGBT issues as well.

This dissertation took into account factors affecting program/policy implementation as well as district and school policies/practices for creating a safe, supportive learning environment for students. Together, this literature along with the aforementioned school climate and GSA literature informed the framing of questions on the study's data collection instruments as well as study's conceptual model. The next section reviews this model, explaining its components and its foundation for this research.

## **2.8. An Integrated Conceptual Model**

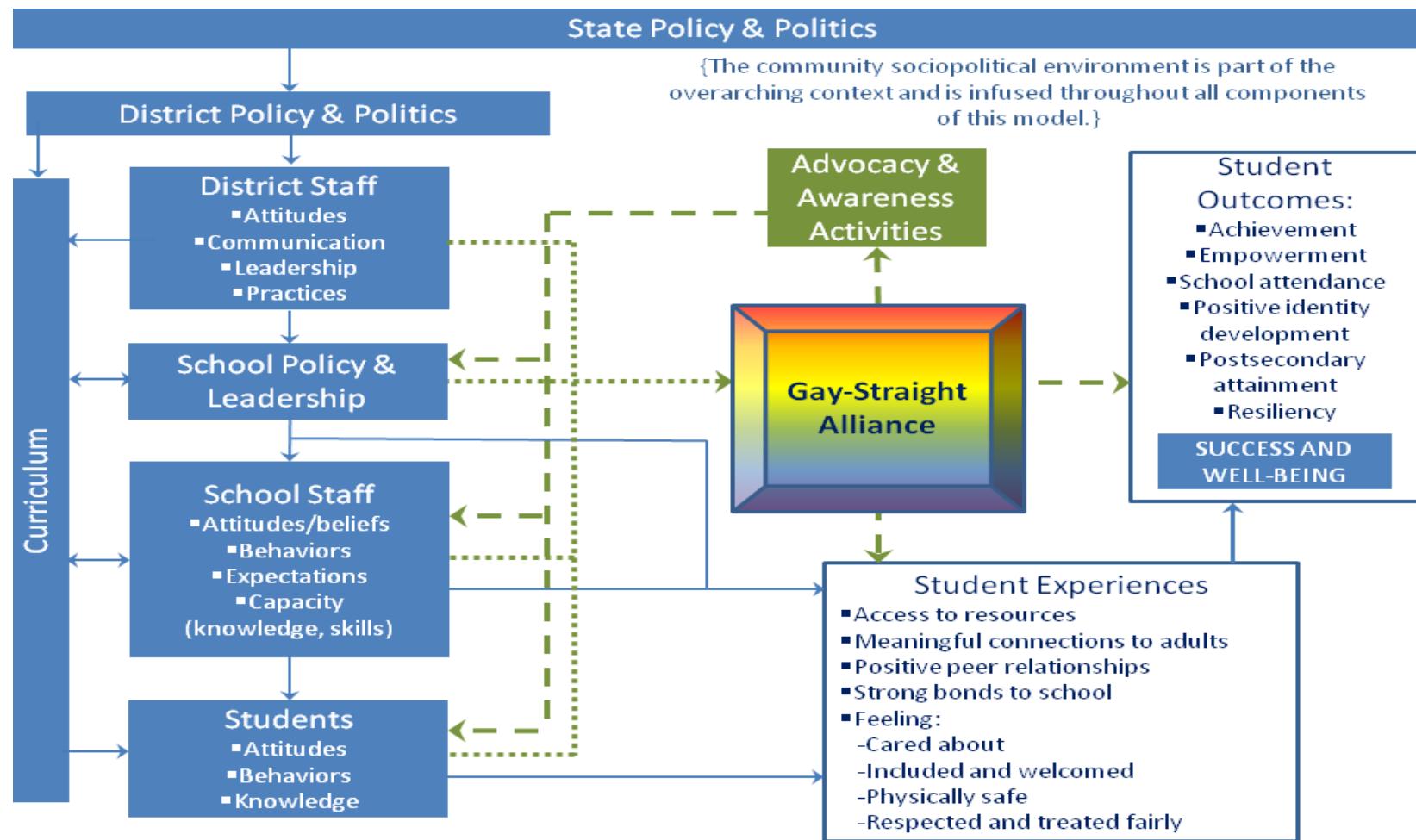
As previously described, the primary objective of this research was to contribute to the field's understanding of how a GSA was implemented in its particular setting, including related challenges and enablers, and the overall experiences of LGBT students. Conditions for learning provided a lens for examining why negative school experiences are detrimental to the academic success and healthy development of LGBT students and why LGBT-inclusive/supportive policies and practices, including GSAs, are important for these students. With an understanding that GSAs do not exist independent from their larger community setting, I sought to understand more about school and district policies as well practices intended to create safe, supportive school environment for students generally and LGBT students in particular. I studied, building from related literature, whether these influence the GSA and, of course, student experiences and outcomes. Figure 2 presents a conceptual model integrating components of these various bodies of literature. This model, which guided the study, is explained further here.

Foremost, based on the aforementioned education policy/program implementation literature, the study examined the GSA's larger district, community, and even state

context to understand their influence on the school's context. The model expects that the larger community where schools and districts are located would influence all aspects of the model, from district policy to school practice, the availability of the GSA, and student outcomes. The model also shows how state policy influences district policy, which then trickles down into school policy and practice.

Second, the model links the school's curriculum, influenced by state and district policy, to teacher practice and the content students learned. However, as the model illustrates, school leadership and teachers interact with school curricula and can shape how it is delivered. For example, teacher knowledge of and attitudes toward LGBT issues can influence whether they integrate fiction and nonfiction literature and other curricular materials that give visibility to LGBT identity and issues. These materials could include literature from recommended reading lists (e.g., Edmonton Public Schools & Edmonton Public Library, 2011) and recommended curricula and lesson plans (e.g., GLSEN, 2013).

As the model also illustrates, GSAs are interventions that can contribute to more positive conditions in the high school and outcomes. Specifically, GSAs can foster a greater sense of emotional and physical safety in schools as well as positive connection to adults and peers among LGBT students. This can enhance students' school experiences and ability to learn and thrive, leading to more positive outcomes such as achievement and well-being. The model shows how the study examined whether a GSA benefited a school community in three ways (as shown by the thick dashed lines): (a) by being available for students, it provided an opportunity for students to have more positive experiences through its ongoing GSA meetings and relationships developed among participating students; (b) by directly influencing participating students' sense of



**Figure 2.** A conceptual model of the GSA and its larger sociopolitical environment

*Notes.* Arrows show the direction of relationships displayed. The solid blue lines show the school-related factors contributing to positive student experiences and outcomes. The green dotted lines show factors influencing the GSA. The green dashed lines show how the GSA influences school practice and student outcomes.

empowerment and positive identity; and (c) by raising awareness about LGBT-related concerns in the larger school environment (e.g., through GSA events/activities).

These advocacy and awareness activities, the model assumes, then influence the larger school context, including leadership and policy, school staff including their attitudes and behaviors, and GSA students' peers. This diffusion of the GSA's influence, through its activities and advocacy efforts, then become part of the larger set of influences affecting the day-to-day experiences of students. However, the model also shows how a GSA could be influenced by its school and district environment. These influences are shown by the shorter dashed lines in the figure. Such factors include, for example, district/school leadership willingness to let the GSA exist (despite being protected by the Equal Access Act), the attitudes and behaviors of school staff that may positively reinforce and support GSA efforts—or stifle them, and the actions of students including their willingness to be involved in GSA activities as allies and general receptivity to the GSA in the school. The model anticipates that school leadership and certainly school staff (e.g., an advisor would be required for the group) affect GSA implementation, including its ability to host meetings and school-wide events. These also can influence the experiences of LGBT students in schools, such as the extent to which anti-LGBT language and behavior are addressed and how they are handled.

Together, these various factors are the study's conceptual foundation. They inform the research questions, design, analyses, and discussion. Moreover, to understand the extent to which other student clubs served a similar purpose as this school's GSA, the study integrated data on staff and student perspectives on two other clubs.

## **2.9. Conclusion**

This chapter summarizes the literature and conceptual framing of the study. This literatures comes from several fields of thought, including research on school climate and conditions for learning such as physical safety (e.g., an orderly environment free of violence and weapons), emotional safety (e.g., feeling respected and a sense of belonging), and student support (e.g., meaningful connection to adults). Research has documented that LGBT students experience school-related challenges in these three areas. Exploring school-based supports that can enhance these conditions is therefore important to enhancing LGBT student success and well-being. These supports include GSAs, student-led clubs that typically address four areas including provision of resources and information, connection to supportive peers and adults, development of a positive self-identity, and advocacy to address bias and build awareness about LGBT-related issues. Importantly, this chapter concludes with a conceptual model that integrates these various bodies of thought and is the foundation for this study. The methods described in the next chapter build on this model, connecting research questions to specific aspects of the model and including various data sources to provide a breadth of perspective to answer them.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design**

### **3.1. Introduction**

This dissertation adds to the literature by studying a GSA in a midwestern high school. As this chapter explains further, a case study of the GSA examined all aspects of the club, including its school and district context and how the GSA compared to other student organizations. The study is organized around three core questions: (a) why, when, and how the GSA was implemented; (b) perceived benefits of the GSA, including whether it fostered safety and support in the school where it was located; and (c) school and district policies and practices intended to create a safe and supportive environment. To answer these questions, the study used multiple methods including surveys of teachers and students, semi-structured interviews of various stakeholders, observations, collection of relevant documents (e.g., related to the GSA as well as school/district policy and practice), and photographs of relevant physical artifacts. This chapter reviews additional information about the study including its boundaries (what it did not address), selection of the high school and comparison student organizations, participant recruitment, and human subject protections. The chapter also includes a subjectivity statement describing my personal experiences and perspectives, and how they informed the study. The chapter ends with a synthesis of the strategies applied to analyze data.

### **3.2. Research Purpose and Approach**

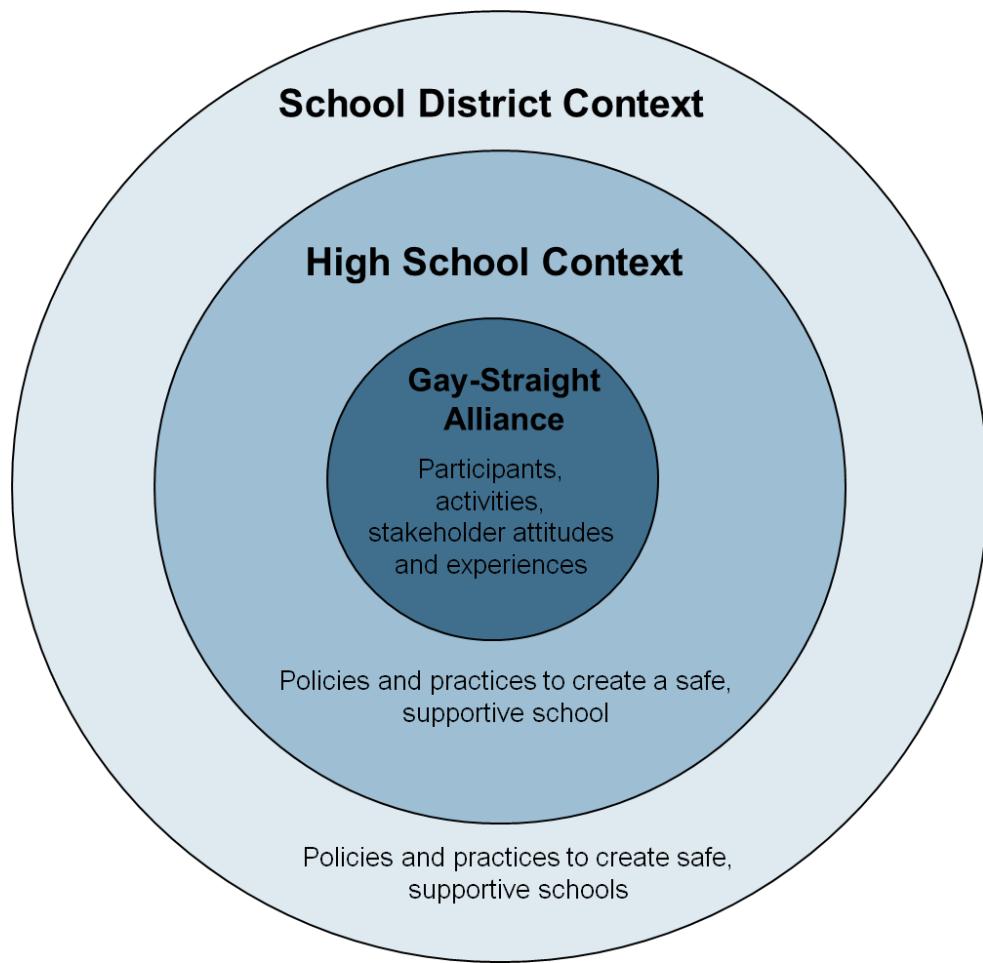
As noted in chapter 2, this dissertation aimed to build on prior themes in the literature, including the purpose and benefits of GSAs. I expected that the GSA and its activities provided opportunities for students to develop positive peer and adult relationships, feel connected to and welcomed within their school, and feel emotionally

and physically safe. Studying the extent to which the GSA affected these conditions for learning in the selected site adds to the literature about the utility and importance of these opportunities for students. Using this as its conceptual framing, the dissertation consisted of a case study of a GSA within the context of its school and school district environment.

The overall study approach focused on discrete, but interrelated subjects—and treats each of these with similar depth and nuance. These include the school context and district contexts for the GSA. The GSA case study is the focal point of the study and was intended to examine in depth and document the implementation and perceived benefits of a GSA. A focus on the larger school and district was intended to include perspectives on the GSA's larger environment and their policies and practices intended to create safe, supportive conditions amidst heteronormative school environments for LGBT students. The study also partly focused on the extent to which the GSA influenced the larger school environment.

Education policy implementation literature informed the study approach. Education policy scholars have noted that schools are multidimensional, inherently complex contexts because classrooms are nested in schools that are nested in districts, which are further influenced by state characteristics including policy (Honig, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). As they have noted, the district context (e.g., politics, capacity) is important to understanding what happens in schools. Figure 3 displays the "nestedness" of the GSA. At each level, policies and actors/stakeholders influence the larger context including the availability of programs or student organizations such as GSAs, practices, and conditions. Importantly, buy-in (political will) influences what, when, and how policies/practices are carried out (McLaughlin, 1987). As chapter 2

explored, GSAs may be affected by attitudes of school leaders and staff. Hence, the data collection and analyses focused on the policies, practices, and actors involved in the GSA's school and school district. This included collecting data to capture district-level influences on GSA implementation and school conditions and practices—as well as school-level influences on GSA implementation and its larger social setting.



**Figure 3.** The “nestedness” of the GSA.

I conducted a case study of the GSA to examine all aspects of it, including its school and district context and how it compared to other student organizations. I applied a descriptive design that aimed to fully describe a phenomenon of interest, a school's GSA, within its context. My goal was to fully understand the GSA from an insider's (or

“emic”) perspective through “intensive analyses and descriptions” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 10). Case study research is not only a data collection technique; it is a mode of inquiry that (a) addresses technically complex situations with many more variables than data points; (b) needs multiple sources of evidence, with triangulation of data to validate findings; and (c) applies extant theoretical propositions to inform approaches to data collection and analysis (Yin, 2009). This dissertation can best be characterized as sociological case study research, as described by Hancock and Algozzine, because of its focus on a structure (i.e., GSA), its social institutions (school and district), and individual behaviors and interactions (e.g., school practices addressing safety and support).

A case study research design was appropriate and beneficial for several important reasons. Foremost, it enabled an in-depth study of the GSA in its natural context, through “richly descriptive” research “grounded in varied sources of information” (Hancock & Algozzine, p. 16). Other strengths of a case study research design included understanding the case’s context and processes, linking causes and outcomes, and developing new hypotheses and research questions (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Case studies are also generalizable to a theoretical proposition(s), which was partly the thrust of this research: I anticipated that the GSA contributed to positive conditions in the high school including emotional safety, physical safety, and student support—and sought to understand this within the context of the selected school and its GSA.

Together, the research questions and analyses weaved and explored different threads of a common issue: the history, function, and implementation of a GSA and school conditions for LGBT students. The case study research design allowed an in-depth

description of GSA implementation from various perspectives, including students, which helped to address limitations of prior studies on GSAs (Doppler). The school and district context questions helped to understand the environment where the GSA was implemented and to explore LGBT-supportive policies and practices at the school and district levels. Importantly, including key informant perspectives on other student organizations—through staff interviews, teacher surveys, and student surveys—enabled cross-group comparisons.

Notably, the research design lent itself to exploring nuance and meaning through its qualitative methods. These facilitated exploring issues and knowledge that quantitative methods could not assess easily, if at all, given limited extant data on LGBT students and the difficulty of quantifying the issues this dissertation studied. Furthermore, LGBT issues are difficult to study empirically because of limited data and the newness of the literature examining LGBT issues in education.

**3.2.1. Research questions.** I organized the research around three core questions, building from the literature examined and conceptual model described in chapter 2. These questions included: (a) why, when, and how the GSA was implemented; (b) perceived benefits of the GSA, including whether it fostered safety and support in the school where it was located; and (c) school and district policies and practices intended to create a safe and supportive environment. Each research question is now explained further, including secondary questions such as comparisons to other student organizations including those intended to create a safe, supportive school environment for different groups of students.

The first core question and its secondary questions explored important characteristics of a high school GSA including its purpose, history, participants, and

activities. In addition, the questions addressed implementation of the GSA including its sustainability, benefits/challenges, and comparisons to two other student organizations including those intended to create a safe, supportive learning environment. Table 1 displays the first research question set.

*Table 1. Research Question Set One*

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Why, when, and how was the GSA implemented?

- What is the GSA's purpose? To what extent was the GSA created to affirm student identity (e.g., LGBT) and expression in the school, versus to address safety and other concerns of students?
  - Who participates in the GSA?
  - What supports/activities does the GSA offer? Are GSA students involved in school/political activism, and if so, what does this entail? For example, addressing school inclusion and safe schools policies.
  - What are key informants' attitudes toward the GSA? Do school staff and students tend to view the GSA as one of many social opportunities for students, or as a necessary, targeted source of support and safety for LGBT students?
  - What has been necessary to implement and sustain the GSA?
    - What conditions have supported or hindered its implementation? School district policy/support? School leadership support? Student interest/involvement?
  - What are similarities and differences between the GSA and two other student clubs intended to support potentially vulnerable students?
- 

The second core question addressed the extent to which, and in what ways, the GSA has fostered safe, supportive conditions for its students. Specifically, the question set addresses how the GSA has affected the experiences and perceptions of school safety and support from the perspectives of staff and students. Table 2 lists related secondary questions, which begin with a focus on the larger conditions related to emotional and physical safety and support in the school and district including the experiences of LGBT students. I again compare the GSA to the two other selected clubs for comparative purposes.

*Table 2. Research Question Set Two*

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Has the GSA affected the experiences and perception of safety and support in the school and, if so, in what ways?

- What are conditions related to physical and emotional safety and student support in the school and district?
  - What are the experiences of LGBT students relative to safety and support? What are key informants' attitudes toward LGBT students generally?
  - To what extent do participating students report feeling more physically safe due to participation in the GSA? Emotionally safe (e.g., welcomed, respected)? Supported?
  - What are similarities and differences between the GSA and two other clubs intended to support potentially vulnerable students?
- 

The third core question focused on the GSA's larger environment. The core question—what are school and district policies and practices for creating safe, supportive learning environments for students—and related secondary questions explored how the school and its school district have approached issues related to school safety and support, including how LGBT students fit into these efforts either explicitly (e.g., by being mentioned) or implicitly. The questions facilitated documentation of relevant policies and practices and how and why they were implemented (to the extent this information was available). Table 3 displays the secondary questions that were explored as part of question three.

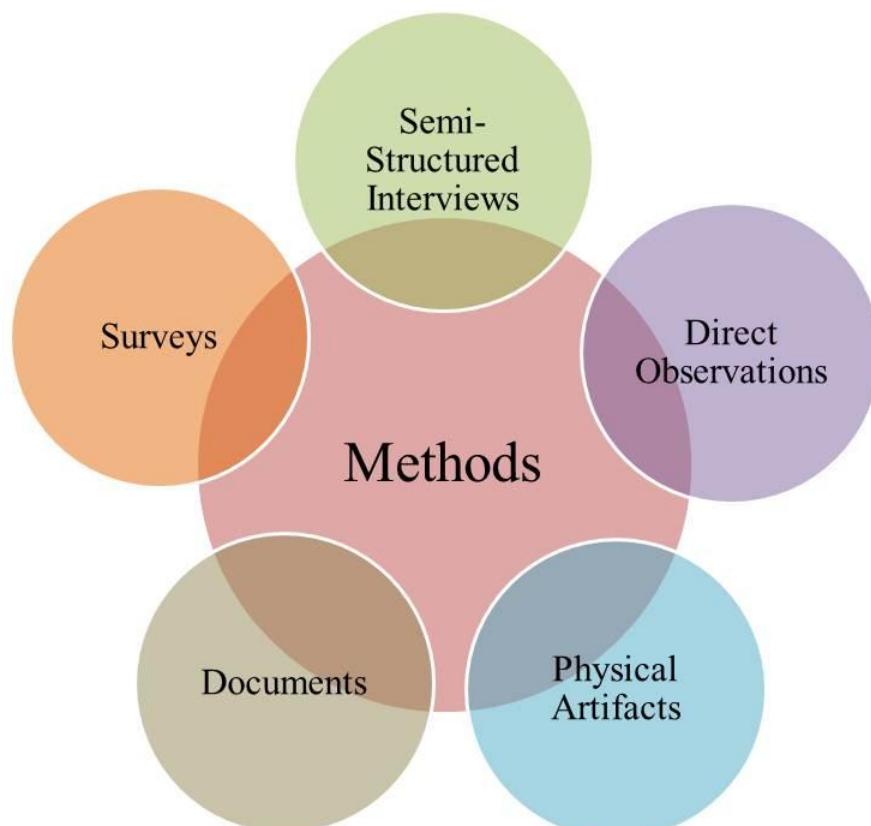
*Table 3. Research Question Set Three*

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What are the school and district policies/practices for creating safe, supportive learning environments for students?

- When, why, and how were the policies and practices implemented? Who influenced implementation?
  - Are student organizations considered part of these strategies, and if so, how? How about the GSA?
  - What are the school/district LGBT-affirming policies and practices?
  - What are key informants' attitudes toward these efforts?
  - To what extent do stakeholders think district policy, practice, and central office leadership attitudes and actions influence school practice? In what ways? How about as it relates to LGBT students?
-

**3.2.2. Methods.** Importantly, the questions guided data collection and analysis to understand the school environment and larger school/district environment of the GSA by examining whether and, if so, how school and district school policy, practice, attitudes, and capacity influenced safe, supportive school conditions and GSA implementation. As Figure 4 displays, the study applied multiple methods to answer the research questions. These methods consisted of (a) surveys of teachers and students, (b) semi-structured interviews of various stakeholders, (c) observations, (d) collection of relevant documents (e.g., related to the GSA as well as school/district policy and practice), and (e) collection (including photographs) of relevant physical artifacts.



**Figure 4.** Dissertation methods.

Multiple data sources, which Table 4 summarizes, provided evidence to answer each core research question. Interview protocols included questions that aligned with the study's research questions. Appendix A provides a matrix summarizing questions asked across district and school staff interview protocols as well as a copy of the GSA student interview protocol. I also collected observational data from common spaces inside and surrounding the school and two GSA meetings lasting approximately 75 minutes each (see Appendix B for a copy of the observation protocols). The research questions also guided development of items on the survey instruments (see Appendices C and D for the teacher and student surveys, respectively) to collect similar types of information from students and district/school staff. Lastly, I obtained relevant documents from school leadership (e.g., code of conduct, list of student clubs) and the school district website. Section 3.5 describes the methods and participants in greater detail.

*Table 4. Sources of Evidence, by Research Question*

Core Research Question	Sources of Evidence			
	Artifacts & Documents	Observations	Semi-Structured Interviews	Surveys
1. When, why, how implemented	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Perceptions of safety and support		✓	✓	✓
3. Policies and practices	✓	✓	✓	

### 3.3. Study Boundaries

The study had two boundaries worth noting. Foremost, although interviewees shared perspectives about the curriculum, it was not a focus of the research. For example, I did not collect or review the curriculum or related documents. I considered this outside

the scope of this case study. Second, while perspectives about the larger community are incorporated into the findings and are important to the GSA's larger context, the community itself was not a focus in the research questions and data collection instruments. Also, I did not interview community stakeholders such as city council members or representatives of community-based organizations except for an LGBT youth organization in another city. While these would have been valuable areas to explore as part of a larger study, they are outside the scope of the current one.

### **3.4. Site Selection and Description**

To select a site, I reached out to several school districts in the suburban Virginia area outside of Washington, DC. After having my research request declined by one school district and delayed by another, I seized an opportunity that emerged to study a school outside of the DC area. During Summer 2012, a school administrator contacted me about a publication I had recently co-edited. This serendipitous outreach led to my request to conduct my research in the administrator's school. After providing more information to the school's leadership team, I was fortunate to be approved to conduct my research at their school—as well as warmly welcomed in doing so.

I guaranteed the site that I would protect its identity. To do so, in the dissertation I use pseudonyms for the names of the district, "New Suburb School District," and the school, "Extracurricular High." These were selected to reflect the relative newness of the suburban community and the school's significant focus on providing extracurricular opportunities to students, respectively. These names are relevant to the context: the district was located in a somewhat new suburb and the school had a major focus on developing students through extracurricular opportunities such as clubs and sports.

Citations for references about the site are also excluded to protect its identity, with footnotes explaining this. Publicly available data that are included are also rounded or presented in a way that would not easily allow someone to identify the site through a review of these data. In a few cases, school or district documents are briefly quoted. To ensure this would not reveal the site's identity, I used Google to search the Internet for "hits" matching the quoted text. I reviewed the first 50 hits to ensure the site was not mentioned. If it was, I did not include the quote or modified it until the quote met this criterion for inclusion. Also, because of the uniqueness of the school's name for its GSA, in this dissertation I use "GSA" to refer to it.

The site selected was a high school in a suburban midwestern school district. The district was high performing, receiving its state's highest academic rating annually for almost a decade. During the 2012–13 school year, district enrollment was approximately 15,000 students including slightly less than 1 in 10 students who were English language learners. The school district was primarily farm land as recent as 1980 and then the population and land development "kind of exploded starting in the 1980s" (Teacher1). Interviewees commonly noted that the community tended to be a socially conservative, wealthy area (this is discussed further in Chapter 4). For example, administrator1 shared that until recently "there wasn't a lot of diversity" in the district, but "now there are more than 30 languages and dialects spoken ... kids that live in Section 8 housing ... kids that live in million dollar homes," so "the district has become a lot more diverse." The city and school district cut across several counties. The city's median household income exceeded \$100,000 in 2012, more than twice the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The socio-economic privilege of students and the school district emerged during

observations. For example, in the library one day I overheard a student talking about driving his dad's new Porsche. The school building itself was also in good physical repair and spacious; even the head custodian had an office.

The district and community were located in a state that was one of the many that passed a state constitutional amendment defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman between 2000 and 2008. Voting results on this ballot measure and recent presidential elections served as one measure of social attitudes in the region. In both the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, approximately 60% of voters in one of these counties voted for Obama; county-level voting results indicate that a small majority supported the ballot measure banning same-sex marriage. In the other county in which the school district was located, a majority of voters supported McCain in 2008 and a majority voted for Romney in 2012.<sup>11</sup> A similar proportion supported the ballot measure. Voting data for nearby counties within close proximity to the school district suggested even more socially conservative attitudes. While imperfect measures, these data provided evidence supporting interviewee perceptions of the community's conservative social leaning.

Within the district, one high school participated in this research. Like the district overall, the school was high performing with all core academic classes taught by a highly qualified teachers. The high school enrolled approximately 1,900 students during the 2011–12 school year including approximately 1 in 10 who were economically disadvantaged and 1 in 10 with disabilities. Most students were White, non-Hispanic; 2 in 10 students were from other racial/ethnic groups, in particular Asian or Pacific Islander

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<sup>11</sup> Specific election results are not included to protect the district's identity.

and non-Hispanic Black. During this same school year, its four-year graduation rate, attendance rate, and in most cases the percentage of students who were at least proficient on subject-area state tests exceeded 95%.<sup>12</sup> The high school met the two selection criteria: (a) it provided a variety of clubs for its students and (b) it had an active GSA for at least two years, with the 2012–13 school year being its most active year according to key informants. The next section describes the student organization included for comparison to the GSA.

### **3.5. Student Organization Selection**

I reviewed the long list of available student organizations at the high school and selected the GSA and three others to study. After talking with a school administrator about the purpose of the various clubs, I selected the additional three student organizations that I expected would most likely serve to enhance student experiences of safety and support in the school. I focus on two of these clubs in the findings because for the third club, which focused on cultural diversity, only two students completed the survey and unfortunately these were lost in the mail. I was able to interview the club's advisor, though, and include this information as part of the larger set of findings on the GSA's school context. The two clubs I included are described further in Chapter 4 and consist of one focused on creating a smaller community and offering supports/activities for African American/Black students and a second on connecting students with special educational needs to peers in the building. To protect the identity of the school, I refer to these as the “African American Students Club” (AASC) and the “Students with

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<sup>12</sup> To protect the identities of the district and school, I include descriptive information about the site without providing data that is too specific (e.g., exact student racial/ethnic demographics).

Disabilities Club” (SDC), respectively. This is particularly necessary since one of the clubs includes the school’s name in it. Following is a brief description of the GSA given the study’s focus on this student club.

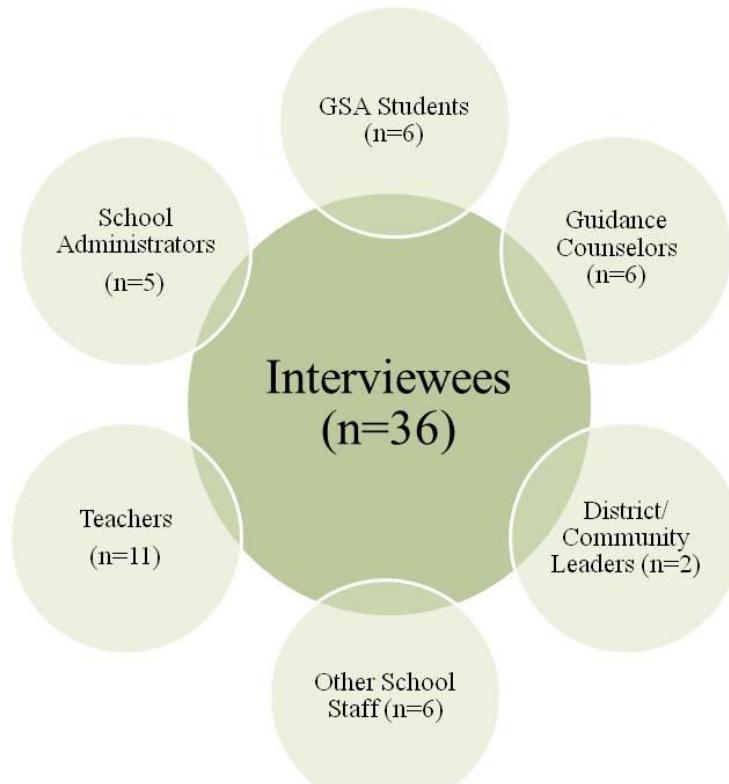
The GSA was established at the high school during the 2009–10 school year. Its core purpose was largely to provide an emotionally safe place where all students would be welcomed and respected. The GSA began with only a few student members during its first year, expanding its membership to 15 regular participants during the 2012–13 school year. While LGBT students were clearly an important focus of the GSA’s efforts, the group prioritized reducing all forms of bullying in the school. The GSA held several events in the school as part of its outreach efforts. Extracurricular High was the only one of the district’s high schools with an active GSA. The GSA, along with the two comparison clubs, is further described in chapter 4.

### **3.6. Methods and Participants**

Case study methods necessitate multiple data sources to identify patterns and themes across respondents and data sources (Yin, 2009). Hence, my research integrated various participants and incorporated multiple methods to answer the research questions, within the real-life context of the GSA, its school, and its school district. These included: (a) surveys of teachers and students, (b) semi-structured interviews of various stakeholders, (c) school and GSA observations, (d) collection of relevant documents, and (e) collection of relevant physical artifacts. In applying these multiple methods, I involved several types of informants. These included school staff such as administrators; those involved in provided direct support services to students (e.g., guidance counselors); and staff overseeing attendance, athletics, food services, and safety and security. It also

included teachers including advisors of the GSA and other selected clubs. All of these individuals provided valuable data based on their roles and history within the school—and were able to talk about school climate from various perspectives, albeit sometimes without a clear sense of the experiences of LGBT students. Students also shared their perspectives and experiences through surveys and interviews. Several district/community leaders also participated in interviews and shared these additional perspectives. The following paragraphs describe these methods and, where applicable, participants in detail.

**3.6.1. Semi-structured interviews.** As an important method for collecting qualitative data, I conducted semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders to obtain additional evidence to answer the research questions. Interviewees included stakeholders such as school staff with a keen, historical understanding of the high school and students participating in the GSA provided valuable perspectives. Figure 5 displays



*Figure 5.* Interviewees, by type.<sup>61</sup>

interviewees by type. Overall, I carried out 36 in-depth interviews with stakeholders. Interviewees included stakeholders selected because of their school roles—principal, assistant principals, guidance counselors and a social worker, school security staff, an attendance officer, a cafeteria worker, advisors of the GSA and other student organizations—as well as a stratified random sample of teachers.

For the random selection of teachers, I followed the sample process previously described for the teacher survey, but instead of selecting the teachers with the first eight teachers, I instead selected the first teacher in eight academic areas—business, health/physical education, language arts, math, performing arts, science, social studies, and world languages—to ensure breadth of perspective. This was important because, as expected, some teachers were clustered in areas of the school based on subject area or grade level (e.g., the school’s freshmen academy was in one wing of the building). This allowed collection of a more diverse set of teachers’ school experiences based on their experiences in different locations in the school. Six randomly selected teachers participated in interviews, including five of the initial eight and a sixth that was selected as a replacement for a teacher that declined. Also, two of the other eight who were not interviewed due to scheduling challenges completed the teacher survey (described in section 3.5.3).

It was important to talk with students as well because, as research demonstrates, adult and student perspectives on school safety are sometimes incongruous, with students having greater concerns (Center for Social and Emotional Education). I initially hoped to talk with the same students on several occasions to establish a trusting relationship, explore various issues in depth, and follow up as I analyzed my various data sources and

developed tentative theories and answers to my research questions. This was not feasible due to student availability when I was on site in the school, though. I was able to interview five students currently involved in the school's GSA in person, as well as a recently graduated student by Skype. The five current students included a sophomore, two juniors, and two seniors; of these, four appeared female identified and one male identified (based on my gender assumptions). The students had varied histories in the district: at the time of the interviews, two students had been in the district for two years, whereas one had attended school in the district for high school only and two for their entire educational experience.

I attempted to recruit parents/caregivers for interviews too, but was unsuccessful. Through the GSA advisors, I asked students involved in the GSA to nominate their parents for interviews. To minimize risk to students, I set forth with a plan to not approach parents about potential involvement in an interview unless students were comfortable with their parents being asked to participate. For these interviews I planned to focus on parents' attitudes toward the GSAs, including the extent to which they valued these activities and believed they had a positive effect(s) on their child. Unfortunately, despite multiple follow-up requests from one of the GSA advisors to the students, no students nominated parents/caregivers to participate in these interviews. Although a secondary source, I was able to obtain information through the perspectives of students based on interviews and GSA meeting observations.

I also interviewed two key informants outside of the school. They included a district administrator from New Suburb School District and a leader from a local LGBT youth organization. This organization, located in a nearby urban area, focuses on

providing a place that is not only safe, but that will also help LGBT and questioning youth and allies to find social supports and supports in developing assets in their lives that will lead them to thrive, support them through crisis, and provide them education and information they need. The organization offers various programming ranging from social to arts, volunteer opportunities, multiple types of support groups, and meetings with young people to foster a youth-led organization. According to the organization, on average approximately 23 youth visit its youth center at least once monthly.

I used semi-structured protocols (see Appendix A) to provide a consistent framework for questioning across respondent types. This approach provided opportunities to probe with follow-up questions and more deeply discuss participant comments and nuances, while still enabling me to gather similar types of data and identify themes across interviewees. Although I rarely needed to follow up with interviewees, I was able to reach out to them by phone and email if I wanted to solicit clarifications as needed. For example, I conducted a follow-up interview with one of the GSA advisors.

To illustrate key points in participants' own words, quotes from interviewees are woven throughout the findings in chapter 4. In most cases, these quotes are labeled and numbered by participant type (e.g., Administrator1 or Teacher2). Each participant type is numbered separately. In a few instances, the interviewee type/number is omitted to further protect their identity because of potentially sensitive comments. Also, participant numbers are omitted where quotes could easily identify interviewees and, by numbering quotations, a reader familiar with the school would be able to associate other quotes in the dissertation with these individuals.

**3.6.2. School and gay-straight alliance observations.** During eight school visits spread across three different months during the year—September 2012, November 2012, and May 2013—I directly observed common spaces throughout the school to further immerse myself in the setting and understand the GSA’s larger context. I observed school spaces including the building entrances, front office, guidance counseling suite, hallways (including during student transitions between classes), library, and the cafeteria for approximately 12 hours total. I recorded observations, such as student-student and student-adult interactions and my general impressions, using the observation protocol in Appendix B. The library ended up being a valuable place in the school to observe student interactions and conversations, since students were allowed to quietly talk in the library and typically 30 to 40 students were in the library during most periods. Some students focused on school work individually at tables or computers, whereas others were clustered in groups at tables and almost always engaged in conversation—not doing school work. The protocol organized my observations around the constructs that were core to the research: (a) the experiences and representation of LGBT students in the school, including visibility and availability of LGBT-affirming resources and supports; (b) physical safety; (c) emotional safety, such as students feeling respected by their peers; and (d) supports for students, such as positive adult-student relationships.

I also directly observed two GSA meetings that each lasted approximately 75 minutes at the school. One of these meetings occurred in November 2012 and the other in May 2013. As a passive participant observer, these observations provided valuable insights on the GSA participants, activities, and benefits to students and school climate. I did not document student identities as part of the GSA or other observations—only data

describing the meeting spaces, staff/student interactions, GSA activities, and other de-identified information relevant to the research questions. For both observations, I sat in the back of the classroom during GSA meetings. I used a separate protocol for the GSA meeting observations (see Appendix C). The protocol included sections to document the number and types of meeting participants, the GSA meeting room; how the GSA was facilitated; and GSA session content including activities, their duration, and the related roles of the GSA advisors and students. The protocol also included a section to record observed successes or challenges during the meetings—what seemed to go well or not. This information allowed me to document how the GSA was implemented as well as factors supporting or hindering it. I completed the protocol during and after the observations. The school and GSA observations added additional data to inform the findings reported in chapter 4.

The first observed GSA meeting involved 16 students and the second observed meeting had 13 students attending. Based on my gender assumptions, the first meeting had 14 students were female and 2 were male; the second meeting had 11 female students, 1 male, and another who was unsure about their gender identity based on comments made during the meeting (but appeared to present as a female). Students were largely White, with a couple at each meeting of Asian background. No African American/Black students were present. Both meetings had three adults present: the two co-advisors and, at the first meeting, a teacher, and at the second meeting a guest from the community.

**3.6.3. Teacher and student surveys.** To triangulate evidence, I developed two survey instruments. One was a web-based survey for teachers and a second was a paper-

based survey for students involved in the GSA and two other student organizations. The surveys helped to obtain teacher and student perspectives from a larger sample would have been feasible from interviews alone.

The teacher survey (see Appendix C) was organized into five sections. It began with demographic questions (e.g., gender, years teaching in school) followed by statements about policies/programs and practices in the school district (section two) and then about policies/programs, practices, and conditions in the school (section three) with which they were asked to rate their agreement. The questions were developed based on the literature and conceptual model discussed in chapter 2, focusing on safety and support and related efforts. Respondents were then asked about the extent of their familiarity with the school's GSA. If they indicated they were at least a little knowledgeable of the GSA, the fourth section of the teacher survey asked for respondents' level of agreement with statements about the school's GSA. If they responded that they were "not at all" knowledgeable, the survey skipped to a section that provided a definition<sup>13</sup> of a typical GSA's purpose (based on the related literature) and then asked for their agreement with statements about GSAs generally. Both versions of section four asked questions that reflected literature on the purpose and benefits of GSAs, clustered around five areas: general opinions (e.g., if it is important to have in the school), physical safety, student belonging and connection, student empowerment, and student well-being. Finally, the last section of the teacher survey asked respondents to identify a student club/organization they were most familiar with and how much they agreed with statements about this

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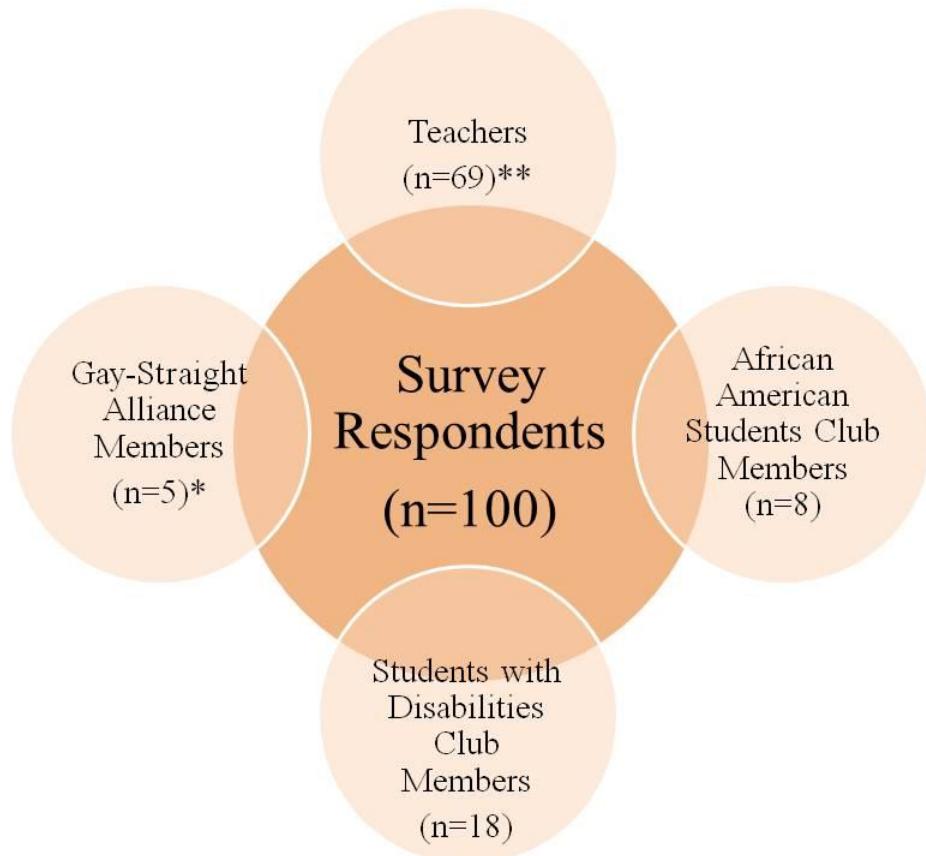
<sup>13</sup> The following was the definition provided: "A GSA is a student organization that is intended to provide a safe, supportive environment for LGBT students. GSAs provide opportunities for LGBT students to meet with each other and a caring adult, as well as non-LGBT students who support them (i.e., "allies"). GSAs are supposed to provide a welcoming space for students regardless of their sexual orientation or gender expression."

club/organization. These questions paralleled questions about the GSA to facilitate comparisons.

The student survey (see Appendix D) included three sections and mirrored parts of the teacher survey. The demographics section included a question about student race/ethnicity (the teacher survey did not since the teaching staff was largely White so that respondents would be less worried about being identified). The student survey also included more open-ended questions, including in the demographics section about their favorite clubs in the school and why these were their favorite. The student survey did not include a section about district policies/programs and practice. The student survey's second section asked students to indicate their agreement with statements about Extracurricular High—mirroring those items on the teacher survey—and included items about the experiences of LGBT students in the school. This section also included an open-ended question asking students to describe what the school does to make students feel cared about and supported. Section three asked them to rate their agreement to statements about their particular club (i.e., GSA, AASC, or SDC). These questions mirrored the questions asked of teachers about the GSA and the club they had the most knowledge about. It also included open-ended questions asking about how they became involved in the club and the most important opportunities it provided. The survey concluded with a question about additional comments students wanted to share about their school or student organizations.

Figure 6 displays a summary of each respondent type and the number of completed surveys. This included 69 teacher surveys, 7 of which were partly completed (i.e., sections of the survey were not completed). The remainder of the surveys ( $n=31$ )

were completed by students in the GSA or the two comparison clubs. These surveys were fully completed with a minor exception: one GSA respondent did not answer two questions about their GSA.



**Figure 6.** Survey respondents, by type.

\* Two GSA-involved students were also members of the Students with Disabilities Club.

\*\* Includes 62 fully completed and 7 partially completed surveys.

**3.6.3.1. Teacher survey recruitment and participant demographics.** A web-based teacher survey using Survey Monkey was administered to collect teacher perspectives. I received a roster of all school staff and based on the school principal's request, I included all teachers in the survey (rather than a sample as I originally planned). Including all teachers in the school, the response rate was just over 41% (n=69), which included seven

staff who I interviewed and only staff that answered at least one question in addition to demographic questions (62 respondents answered all survey questions).

I was initially planning to survey only a sample of teachers in the school to facilitate a more focused follow-up process and enhance the generalizability of results, but per the request of the principal all teachers were surveyed. To compare the results of the school-wide survey to the original sampling plan, I randomly identified 38 teachers (approximately 25% of the school's teaching staff) who would have been the sample of teachers if I had proceeded with that approach. To select teachers, I assigned each teacher a numeric identifier using the Microsoft Excel random number generator. I then selected the 25% of teachers with the lowest assigned numbers and tracked their participation separately so that I could prioritize follow-up efforts and assess the potential representativeness of the results. Of these 38 teachers, 1 declined, 1 partly completed the survey, and 18 fully completed it, yielding a response rate for this group of 47%. This was slightly higher than the overall response rate. Nonetheless, given the lower-than-desirable response rate, it is possible that these responses do not adequately represent the experiences and perspectives of teachers in the school. The nonrespondents, for example, could have had more negative attitudes toward the GSA and LGBT identity and expression.

Teacher survey respondents were 61% female and 39% male (see Table 5), with similar representation of involvement across school grades (from 75% to 78% by grade; see Table 6). Approximately two thirds of the respondents had taught in the school for at least six years—and more than one third for at least 11 years. A large majority (more than three fourths) began their career in the district in the study high school (see Table 7).

*Table 5. Teacher Survey Respondent Demographics: Gender (n=69)*

<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
60.9%	39.1%

*Note.* Demographic data are for the teachers who completed at least the section on questions about the high school.

*Table 6. Teacher Survey Respondent Demographics: Grades Taught (n=69)*

<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>
78.3%	78.3%	75.4%	75.4%

*Table 7. Teacher Survey Respondent Demographics: Years of Experience Teaching at Extracurricular High (n=69)*

<b>1</b>	<b>2–5</b>	<b>6–10</b>	<b>11–15</b>	<b>16–20</b>	<b>21 or more</b>
15.9%*	15.9%	33.3%	21.7%	7.2%	5.8%

\*Includes one teacher who began in Fall 2012; all other categories exclude Fall 2012.

**3.6.3.2. Student survey recruitment and participation.** To recruit participants for the student survey, I first built a rapport with the advisors of all four clubs. This included interviewing them in Fall 2012 so that they saw me as a trusted or at least trustworthy outsider and not a complete stranger. I then requested their support with administering the survey to students and reviewed the recruitment and protection procedures with them in person or via email. Club advisors were asked to provide an opportunity for all students involved in their club to complete the survey. I have only estimates of the numbers of students involved in the clubs, so I am not reporting a response rate for the student survey, although approximately 15 students were actively involved in the GSA, five of whom completed the survey (including two who were also involved in the SDC). As previously noted, 26 other students completed the survey, including 18 students from The Students with Disabilities Club and 8 students from the African American Students Club. All but one respondent answered all questions on the survey.

In the case of the GSA, student respondents were entirely female, White, and in Grades 10 or 12 (see Tables 8–10). This is not surprising given that almost all GSA participants were White females. Survey respondents for the other clubs included male students (more than one third for the AASC) and more representation from other grades (more than half of the SDC respondents were in Grade 11). All three groups of survey respondents included students with multiple years of experience at the high school (see Table 11). The SDC was similarly entirely comprised of White students. Given the AASC’s purpose, it is not surprising that all of its respondents indicated they were African American/Black. Although the number of completed surveys varied by club, together the data provide a more representative picture than would be the case without the inclusion of student perspectives. The findings are still limited and skewed because no freshmen are represented<sup>14</sup> and no Asian/Pacific Islander and few Hispanic/Latino students completed the survey.

*Table 8. Student Survey Respondent Demographics: Gender*

	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
GSA (n=5)	100.0%	—
AASC (n=8)	62.5%	37.5%
SDC (n=18)	77.8%	22.2%

*Table 9. Student Survey Respondent Demographics: Grade in School*

	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>
GSA (n=5)	—	40.0%	—	60.0%
AASC (n=8)	—	25.0%	12.5%	62.5%
SDC (n=18)	—	5.6%	55.6%	38.9%

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<sup>14</sup> The lack of participation of freshmen is slightly expected and not concerning, though, because survey administration occurred in Fall 2012. At that time, freshmen were enrolled at the school for just a few months and would have been less knowledgeable (albeit still able to share their impressions to date). Furthermore, the African American Students Club was not active in Fall 2012, so students who completed the survey were those who were at the school during the previous school year (2011–12).

Table 10. *Student Survey Demographics: Race/Ethnicity*

	African American/ Black	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Asian/Pacific Islander	Hispanic/ Latino	White
GSA (n=5)	—	—	—	—	100.0%
AASC (n=8)	100.0%	—	—	—	—
SDC (n=18)	—	—	—	5.6%	94.4%

Table 11. *Student Survey Respondent Demographics: Year of Initial Enrollment in Extracurricular High*

	2009	2010	2011	2012
GSA (n=5)	60.0%	—	40.0%	—
AASC (n=8)	37.5%	25.0%	37.5%	—
SDC (n=18)	44.4%	33.3%	22.2%	—

**3.6.4. Physical artifacts.** I also looked for (and documented using the aforementioned observation tool) the presence of signage/symbols that reflected or supported respect for diversity in the school. I took photographs of some student posters outside of the school's library as well as a poster for one of the school's clubs. These are integrated into the findings section.

**3.6.5. Document review.** I requested and collected when available copies of materials about the GSA, the high school, and the school district that addressed the research questions. For example, I requested GSA-related materials (e.g., flyers) although none were available. I obtained a copy of the presentation the GSA leaders gave during a GSA meeting I observed, though. At the school level, I obtained copies of administrative documents such as the school's improvement plan, a list of the types of student clubs the school offered, a copy of a presentation guidance counselors delivered to students at the beginning of the school year, and a report summarizing results from a senior exit survey. This survey, which the school conducted in Spring 2012, provided valuable supplementary data on student perspectives because relevant to this study because it

asked questions about students' school experiences and school climate. I also obtained copies of several relevant articles published in the school's student magazine. At the district level, I collected copies of the district's written policies and I was able to obtain archival data including statistics on reported bullying incidents during the 2011–12 school year. Since the district was a high-performing district it did not have a district improvement plan.

### **3.7. Human Subjects Risks and Protections.**

As a former member of an Institutional Review Board (IRB), I took human subject protections seriously—to the extent that it limited some access to data for the sake of minimizing risk to participants. The George Washington University's IRB reviewed and approved all aspects of the study, including participant recruitment procedures and protections. To build awareness of the study and encourage participation, the principal described the study at a school staff meeting and an assistant principal talked with potential interviewees to ensure they received the consent form and that the staff knew administration approved the study.

All interviewees were asked to review and sign consent forms; for the web-based teacher survey, respondents received information and were asked to proceed with completing the survey only if they agreed to the terms and wanted to participate. For the student organizations, advisors were provided guidelines for administering the surveys, including collecting (e.g., having students fold their survey and place in an envelope) and returning the completed surveys in a way to protect confidentiality.

I made myself available to conduct interviews before, during, and after school hours, based on participants' preferences. Participants chose where to be interviewed

except for students, who were interviewed in a private room within the school library. I provided a list of staff names I was requesting to interview to a school administrator, along with background information on the study. Given this process, several school administrators know which staff members I contacted for interview participation, but not which participated (unless participants self-disclose this information to administrators). Given the number of interviewees, it is not feasible to identify who responded in what ways.

Students were asked to assent before participating. I considered requesting a waiver of parental consent based on Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations Part 46 Section 408 Subpart C because obtaining consent a way that revealed their involved in the GSA could have violated their privacy and (or) put them at psychological/physical risk (Elze, 2003). For students who were not “out” to their parent(s) about their sexual orientation, for example, this would have been problematic. “Some university IRBs have waived parental consent for GLB adolescent participants, allowing agencies serving these youths to act *in loco parentis* … or requiring the presence of a participant advocate” (Elze, p. 130). To alleviate potential concerns the school might have if I attempted to talk with students without parental permission, I instead opted to obtain parental consent for all student interview and survey participants using appropriately detailed consent forms. To enhance student privacy, though, I did not identify the type of club students were participating in (i.e., I worded the consent form in a way that explained to parents I would like to talk with their child about their participation in school clubs generally).

Finally, I did not include focus groups as an additional method for this study because I anticipated that participants, in particular youth, may be less likely to discuss

LGBT-related topics (positive or negative) openly in a group setting due to stigma. In addition, although I would have guaranteed confidentiality as the researcher, focus groups would have allowed other school staff or students to know what other participants shared. Relying on interviews and other data sources rather than focus groups addressed this privacy concern that would have potentially limited the quality of data collected and assurances of confidentiality.

### **3.8. Subjectivity Statement**

I would be remiss if I did not share information about my world views and experiences that partly define who I am. These are the core of my being and an important genesis for this current undertaking. My experiences and passions were an impetus for this study, but throughout this journey I aimed to remain as independent as I could be—in particular when interviewing participants so that I avoided biasing their responses with my nonverbal or verbal communication to the greatest extent within my control.

Foremost, my identity closely relates to the topic of study. I came out as gay at the age of 15, although I knew of this identity at a young age (I can recall having crushes on other males when I was five years old). On some level, I always knew I was “different” from other boys and this, I believe, contributed to my highly introverted childhood and adolescence. My path through high school was not simple, but not terribly difficult either. I was mocked for not being “masculine” enough by some peers, but overall avoided conflict and potential ridicule or rejection from peers by remaining socially withdrawn. This sometimes painful experience—the sense of always being different and feeling unwelcomed at times—is partly why I am so driven toward improving the school and other

experiences of LGBT youth. So they can have a better experience than I did, and to reduce the challenges they may experience due to family/peer/community rejection.

I began to become more confident as I transitioned into my college studies, beginning with my time at the University of Pennsylvania. Throughout my adult life, I have had a deep passion for improving social equity. This drive for applying my knowledge and skill to improving the lives of others carried over to my professional pursuits at the American Institutes for Research (AIR), where since 2000 I have studied and addressed social equity issues. In particular, since 2008 I have been involved in a range of work and personal endeavors such as cultural competence and improving how youth-serving systems (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice, schools) can more effectively support LGBT children/youth and their families. I have also presented and trained extensively on related topics and co-edited *Improving Emotional & Behavioral Outcomes for LGBT Youth: A Guide for Professionals*. In addition to this personal experience, values, and passions, I began this research with a solid understanding about what the literature said about GSAs and presuppositions of what schools should and should not do to support LGBT students. All of these experiences, and knowledge, were a foundation and inspiration for this study.

Throughout this research, though, I strived to keep an independent and nonjudgmental perspective—being open to the unexpected and “keeping in check” my prior assumptions of good practice and expectations for a respectful educational environment for LGBT students. I believe that I have effectively maintained this important balance, which is fundamental to the credibility of this research. Fortunately, I benefited from many years of school-based qualitative data collection experience at AIR, which has provided me with valuable interview training and skill development. Nonetheless, I believe

that qualitative research, including data collection and interpretation, can never truly be detached from what makes us each unique. Hence, this short description is important to you, the reader, so that you understand the foundation for my inquiry.

### **3.9. Analytic Rigor and Trustworthiness**

I followed several practices that prominent qualitative methodologists (e.g., Merriam) advocate applying to enhance analytic rigor and trustworthiness: (a) triangulation of methods and multiple data sources, (b) member checks, (c) peer review, and (d) reflexivity. This was especially important because I developed a positive rapport with multiple staff, in particular the GSA advisors, and I grew to appreciate and genuinely like the adults and GSA students I came to know through my research. Through the following strategies, I reinforced my efforts to maintain an unbiased lens as I could during data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Foremost, incorporating multiple rather than a single method in my research design allowed me to cross-reference findings, identify salient patterns, and overcome weaknesses in particular methods. For example, to fully study the GSA, I incorporated a review of available documents/artifacts; student and teacher surveys; GSA meeting observations; and semi-structured interviews with school and district staff as well as students participating in the GSA. This enabled me to contextualize and understand the experiences of LGBT students and the various factors influencing GSA implementation. Interviews allowed me to explore the complexities of how participants perceive the GSAs and their effects on school climate and student experience in ways that other methods (e.g., surveys) did not allow, but surveys facilitated a more systematic collection of data by including exactly the same questions of each respondent and further removing me

from the process. This also made possible collection of data from a greater set of informants that would have been resource prohibitive to do through interviews.

Obtaining feedback from some interviewees was a second strategy to enhance validity. In the case of the GSA advisor, I conducted a follow-up interview and reviewed take-away points from an earlier interview to confirm my understanding of the GSA. I also shared a draft of preliminary findings with a former administrator at the school, who provided helpful insights in a few places and clarifications that enhanced the accuracy of the findings. During interviews I also regularly summarized important points and confirmed the accuracy of my interpretation of interviewee comments during my time with them. Since almost all interviewees agreed to be audio recorded, I was able to transcribe interviews and return to recordings to revisit these summaries and ensure transcripts were accurate.

Third, I involved a colleague who recently completed her dissertation, is trained in qualitative research methods, and is familiar with the content of my research as a peer reviewer. This allowed me to involve someone who was less vested in the study to review, question, and add to my interpretations of qualitative data. Specifically, she reviewed and provided feedback on my conceptual model, coding hierarchy, and coding of seven interview transcripts (approximately 20% of them). This included various coded transcripts representing various interviewee roles including an administrator, three teachers including the GSA advisor, two guidance counselors, one other school staff member, and a student. As part of the peer's review of coded data, she provided feedback on the consistency and thoroughness of coding based on the node hierarchy and conceptual model. This helped to strengthen the interpretative validity of my analyses

and findings. The reviewer identified only one instance of coding I missed, so her review was not expanded to additional transcripts. Her review also led to discussions about the nodes I used and themes in the data, which was helpful to inform my interpretation of the data. I also met with the peer reviewer to discuss preliminary findings and conclusions to assess the quality of evidence supporting these.

Finally, reflexivity was an important strategy in my larger approach to enhancing the trustworthiness of my findings. Reflexivity is an active effort to explore and monitor our biases (Johnson, 1999) and I accomplished this through several means. I reflected on preliminary findings on an ongoing basis, so that data inform subsequent data collection and analyses, and reflect on my analytic observations. As I analyzed data, I developed short narratives clustered around emerging themes or research questions. These were especially helpful because I strived to respond to some research questions by integrating and analyzing the evidence as I collected it. I also developed the subjectivity statement, described in the preceding section, which was a critical “reflexive” foundation for the aforementioned strategies. Together, my lived and work experiences as well as academic training, shape the lens through which I view findings, and these are both a strength and a challenge relative to my potential biases. They are the basis for my passion for the topic. They are also the inspiration guiding my fundamental belief that social inequities, such as the bullying of LGBT children/youth, need greater attention. However, this passion may have also inclined me to interpret data in a particular way based on my predispositions. To help address this, I wrote short narratives during data collection and analyses to reflect on my observations, interpretations, and general thinking. I reviewed and sometimes added to these narratives during analysis and when writing to further reflect on the data

and minimize bias in my interpretations. I also revisited my subjectivity statement periodically (approximately monthly) as a reminder of my world views, experiences, and potential biases—and added to it as I unearthed a greater self-awareness.

### **3.10. Analytic Techniques**

To facilitate analysis of these various sources of evidence and extensive data, I followed a number of strategies and techniques applied in good qualitative research. As a general strategy, I used the literature review in Chapter 2 to develop and refine the study's research questions and generate ideas for analyzing the data I collected (Coffey & Atkinson). For example, given the large body of literature on how educational policies and programs are implemented and diffused in school districts and schools, I expected that awareness, buy-in, and capacity (such as time and knowledge) would be critical to effective implementation of identified school/district policies and expected practices related to safety and student support. This literature on policy/program as well as GSA implementation also influenced my framing of questions about how the GSA and other student organizations were implemented.

The research questions were the basis for developing all data collection instruments. As Yin explains, “how” and “why” questions are highly conducive to making analytic comparisons, which is important “to treat the evidence fairly, produce compelling analytic conclusions, and rule out alternative interpretations” (p. 130). I then used the instruments to collect the data I needed to explore issues of interest, identify emerging themes, and assess other data I collected.

Importantly, I followed “best practice” strategies for organizing and analyzing qualitative data recommended by leading qualitative researchers such as Merriam (2009)

and Yin. For example, I created a system of folders to organize notes, documents, and personal narratives reflecting on school visits and analyses. I also developed a node hierarchy based on the research questions and associated concepts. I constructed categories, or “conceptual elements that ‘cover’ or span many individual examples” of them (Merriam, p. 181). I ensured these categories met the following important criteria: responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and conceptually congruent (Merriam). This led to a node hierarchy organized around two broad areas—GSA implementation and school and district context—with 27 subcategories such as GSA purpose and physical safety in the school.

I used NVIVO software to then code and analyze interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents. Using the node hierarchy, I assigned data to the categories following first cycle coding methods, including attribute coding and structural coding (Saldaña, 2012). Furthermore, I reviewed all collected documents and coded them based on their relevance to particular nodes. I then ran NVIVO queries to better understand how the data clustered across these various categories. After reviewing similarly coded data, I conducted additional analyses and coding to further organize the data. I reflected on these data to construct findings, categorize data further, and identify themes. As part of this process, I analyzed patterns across different entities (e.g., clubs, types of stakeholders). This analytic process helped to develop “strong, plausible, and fair arguments that are supported by the data” (Yin, p. 160).

Finally, visual representation was an analytic technique to identify, understand, and synthesize findings. In some places to illustrate particular findings, photographs and a word cloud are used to facilitate communication of my findings and related themes.

Matrices are also used to synthesize comparisons of themes evident in the GSA and the comparison clubs, such as their perceived benefits. I was selective and strategic about using these representational tools to avoid oversimplification, as Coffey and Atkinson sagely warn against. The next section presents my subjectivity statement, which is important to clarifying my own experiences and perspectives that informed this study.

### **3.11. Summary**

Qualitative data analysis requires “disciplined, principled choices about how to represent and reconstruct social worlds” including social actors, scenes, and actions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 108). I have aimed to follow this principled approach throughout my research, from planning, to data collection, analysis, and written findings. Using the research design described in this chapter, this dissertation studied a GSA and its high school and school district have approached creating safe school environments in which students are positively connected with adults and peers, and related influences. The research builds on, and contributes to, literature on conditions for learning and the function of extracurricular student activities. Significantly, using case study methods I conducted an in-depth study of a GSA to contribute to our knowledge of how GSAs are implemented, and the extent to which they may affect the lives of students in important ways—and how this is similar or different to other student organizations. It integrates multiple sources of evidence collected over a school year to address the research questions. The next chapter presents findings, organized around the three core study questions.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter synthesizes findings from an analysis of the data collected from the sources and methods described in Chapter 3. The analyses that follow are organized in the order of the three overarching research questions:

- (1) Why, when, and how was the GSA implemented?
- (2) Has the GSA affected the experiences and perception of safety and support in the school and, if so, in what ways?
- (3) What are school and district policies/practices for creating safe, supportive learning environments for students?

As noted in the previous chapter, each of these overarching questions includes related, secondary questions. This chapter answers each of these, focusing on the GSA; safety and support in Extracurricular High and New Suburb School District; and related policies, programs, and practices. The findings that follow describe stakeholder behaviors, experiences, and perspectives. Data from multiple sources—interviews, teacher and student interviews, observations, documents, and physical artifacts—are integrated as applicable to the particular question of focus. The following first set of findings describes the GSA in depth including its purpose, participants, activities, and implementation supports and constraints—with comparisons to other student clubs.

### **4.2. Findings Set One: Gay-Straight Alliance Implementation**

The current GSA was the first such group focused on LGBT students that was sustained in the school. Several staff interviewees mentioned a group that briefly formed in

the mid-1990s. It included gay and straight students and, as one interviewee described, encountered administrative resistance:

There was a young person who wore a t-shirt to school and was challenged by, I believe, an administrator at the time, and it was supporting gay marriage. And it got a lot of attention in the press, this student took it to the press and made a comment about it. I think it was before 1995. ... Nothing formal came out of it, but I think it did unite and fire up some kids (Other1).

Teacher9 commented that the GSA came about because “kids were slowly willing to live their authentic life, they wanted to be who they were, and got wind that there was such a thing [as a GSA] out there somewhere.” These students questioned why the school didn’t have a GSA, and “little by little, they kept pushing, they kept seeking: is anyone, any adult willing to take this on with us” (Teacher9).

The current GSA was established during the 2009–10 school year and expanded during subsequent years, from an “infancy” phase to a “toddler” phase (Teacher3). This teacher also noted that the GSA’s first year “did not go well” due to several factors including poor student participation, but became “stronger and stronger” during subsequent years, with the 2012–13 school year described as “the most successful.” The group’s name, which is replaced with “GSA” throughout the findings to protect the identity of the school, is unique and does not explicitly indicate that the group had or included an LGBT focus.

Interviewees identified several factors influencing the group’s name. According to one GSA officer (Student1), the group’s name was selected to avoid confusion with another student club using an acronym similar to “GSA.” Counselor2 noted that the name was selected to “pull in all types of members” and was influenced by an administrator. The

name of a local LGBT organization, which was also creatively titled, likewise influenced the name choice of the GSA. Student5 suggested that the GSA's name was influenced by a desire to "not spark anything negative" and a desire to not "be really loud because they don't want any backlash in the community." Teacher9 also recalled that the group's name was selected because the students "thought it would be easier to get approved" by the school if it weren't called a GSA.

The following synthesis of findings about the GSA begins with information on its purpose and then its participants and activities. Next, key informants' attitudes toward the GSA are described followed by conditions that have supported or impeded its implementation and sustainability. This section ends with a discussion of how these GSA findings are similar or different to the two comparison clubs, where data are available.

**4.2.1. Gay-straight alliance purpose.** This section addresses two questions. First, what was the GSA's purpose? Second, to what extent was the GSA created to affirm student identity (e.g., LGBT) and expression in the school, versus to address safety and other concerns of students? The findings that follow suggest that the GSA's core purpose was largely to provide an emotionally safe place where all students would be welcomed and respected. Furthermore, while LGBT students were clearly an important focus of the GSA's efforts, several data sources suggested that the group had a large focus on reducing all forms of bullying in the school. Hence, the GSA had a different focus than typical GSAs do, as described in the review of GSA literature in Chapter 2. According to a counselor, the GSA was initiated by a student who was bisexual and felt the school needed more awareness about LGBT-related issues. Although this student wasn't being

bullied, “she was aware of students who just weren’t ready to come out or who just didn’t feel supported,” and that spurred the group’s creation (Counselor3).

Information on the GSA’s purpose came from multiple sources: documents, interviews with six students and 13 staff knowledgeable enough about it to describe its purpose, and GSA meeting observations. The earliest information about the GSA, an article about it in an issue of the school’s 2010–11 literary magazine, described it as a new alliance focused on community service and providing a safe environment for students. This full-page article, which included GSA student and advisor quotations and emphasized that the group was intended for non-LGBTQ students as well, included numerous other references to the GSA’s purpose, including:

- Addressing bullying;
- Helping with community projects that focus on equality;
- Making it easier for students who experience challenges;
- Raising awareness and dispelling stereotypes; and
- Working toward national goals for LGBTQ students on a local level.

Also, a Fall 2012 article about a student’s transgender sibling in this same student publication stated: “our GSA<sup>15</sup> provides a safe, welcoming place for all students. … All students are welcome.”

The interviewees reflected these perspectives when asked about the GSA’s purpose. Their descriptions of the GSA’s purpose cluster around four areas:

- To provide a space that is safe and welcoming of all ideas/people (n=17; all 6 students and 11 of 13 staff)

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<sup>15</sup> This article referred to the group as a GSA, rather than using its creative name.

- To advocate (e.g., for equal rights) and to build more tolerance and acceptance in the school/community (n=7; 2 of 6 students and 5 of 13 staff)
- To address general (not just anti-LGBT) bullying in the school (n=6; 2 of 6 students and 4 of 13 staff)
- To discuss LGBT issues and support LGBT people (n=6; 4 of 6 students and 2 of 13 staff)

For example, Student1 commented that the group's purpose is "to promote more tolerance and acceptance. ... It is a big goal, but who knows." This student went on to share that they:

All work together to promote a safe space and promote anti-bullying, to promote confidence and equality of all sexualities, so in that way we are similar because we are working together for a similar cause, but we are all there because we are different in many ways.

Student2 shared:

It is a safe place for students to congregate and talk about LGBTQIA<sup>16</sup> issues.

Where they can feel free to identify as they are. There is no judgment. There is an opportunity to talk about issues they may be experiencing in the community.

Student3 described the group in simple terms: "I think the goal of it is to give people a place where they can feel safe and feel accepted regardless of who they are."

Staff interviewees familiar with the GSA also reflected these perspectives about its purpose. Teacher3 noted that the group's purpose is "to let kids know they have a

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<sup>16</sup> This acronym stands for LGBT, queer/questioning, intersex (when a person is born with reproductive/sexual anatomy that does not fit typical definitions of "male" or "female"), and allies.

place to go, let kids know it is a safe place, and that they can be who they are with no judgment.” Administrator1 noted that the GSA was intended to “create a safe place where [students] don’t have to define themselves.” Administrator2 commented that “it is not just a group for LGBT kids, it is a group that supports tolerance and wants people to get along with each other and coexist despite their differences.” Counselor4 also shared:

I think it was formed by a group of kids who just wanted people to respect anyone and everyone. So, and I know some kids who joined it have been advocating for anyone to join because they want to promote more, like, unity is a good way of describing it, and I think they are trying to change the perception that you have to be gay or bi[sexual] to join it.

Counselor6 commented that the GSA is “all about people feeling open, it is an open door policy to express who they are, what their view points are, and to provide that safe environment for other students to share with each other.” As another example of teacher perspectives about the GSA’s purpose, one commented that, “it is a place for individuals who share an open philosophy of life to listen and hear the struggles of different people whether that be their race or sexual preference … it provides an open forum for people to discuss things that they struggle with” (Teacher5).

Students also discussed three aspects of the GSA’s purpose—creating a safe space, fighting oppression, and addressing bullying—during the two observed GSA meetings. One of the GSA officers noted in the November 2012 observation: “we are here, we fight against opposition. This is what we do; this is why exist as a club. That is our purpose.” Another GSA officer shared at this same meeting the following:

I really want to burn into your brains, [the GSA] does stuff, we just do stuff that is different than other clubs. We are doing something a lot bigger than one activity.

We are here based around an idea, a belief. We are here to celebrate our similarities and differences, and we are here to create a safe space. We want you to feel that because we have this organization, that we are allowed to have [the GSA]. We really want to ensure you are allowed to have a good time.

One of the officers also noted that the GSA leadership wanted to focus on general anti-bullying efforts in the school because “this is a big thing we are about.”

Multiple interviewees noted that the GSA served an important purpose in the school. For example, one student interviewee noted that: “I feel like we serve a purpose here that no other club can genuinely offer, and the fact that we have a lot of new people this year reinforces that so we are just trying to keep it going” (Student4). Other perspectives about the GSA are described further in a subsequent section on key informant attitudes toward it.

Interviewees did not talk about the GSA as making students physically safer, though. As described further as part of research question set two, key informants did not have a concern about physical safety (e.g., fights) in the school. Hence, although the GSA’s purpose included a focus on emotional safety—creating a place where students could have a sense of belonging and feel fully accepted and respected—it was not intended to address physical safety concerns of students.

Although interviewees pointed to these clear, often multidimensional purposes of the GSA, Student1 also acknowledged some difficulty in defining its purpose because of its focus on beliefs rather than specific activities:

Well it is kind of hard because it is really difficult to base a club around an idea rather than an action. You know, Key Club is about doing things, community service. Theatre, you do things. And GSA, people are getting together because they believe the same things.

Another noted that the GSA struggled in defining its purpose in the past: “sometimes [the GSA] didn’t have a bigger goal” (Student2). Also, one of the advisors acknowledged that the group was refining its purpose because it was still only a few years old, although an anti-bullying message was a main focus. The following section synthesizes information on the GSA’s participants and activities in the school.

**4.2.2. Gay-straight alliance participants.** This section reviews findings on GSA participants. GSA participation is described based on two types of activities: GSA meetings and formal events organized by the GSA, either for the entire school to participate or for GSA members only (e.g., outside-of-school activities). The GSA benefited from a growing student membership since its creation as well as broader school participation of staff and students in GSA events, most notably the GLSEN Day of Silence (described further in the next section on activities). The group had two advisors who were both English teachers, including one who had been involved with the group since its inception. The initial advisor became involved with the GSA through a conversation with an administrator, who the teacher approached about facilitating the group. The second advisor was new to the school and the GSA during the 2012–13 school year and had approached the original advisor about becoming involved in the group. The GSA was student-run, but as needed the advisors would “help out a lot” (Student3).

Several school staff including an administrator who was a strong ally<sup>17</sup> periodically participated in GSA meetings as well.

GSA membership grew following its inception, but remained quite small. According to several interviewees, just three students were GSA members during its first year (2009–10). Membership and meeting attendance grew during the years following, though, to approximately six during the 2011–12 school year. Several interviewees noted that during the 2012–13 school year, the GSA involved a core group of approximately 15 students who participated regularly, which was “a small number of the 2,000” students in the school (Teacher3). This included a couple of students who had recently come out as LGBT, students who were allies, and students with LGBT siblings. The members were “primarily White and female” (Teacher6). Among the three students completing the student survey, one was involved in “all or most” GSA activities and two were involved in “some” during the previous school year. One interviewee noted that based on their conversations during GSA meetings, most LGBT members were out to their families. The GSA was also a “younger GSA than in the past,” due to increased participation of freshmen (approximately four) compared to a largely upperclassmen membership during previous years.

Most staff interviewees, with the exception of the GSA advisors, had not participated in and lacked sufficient familiarity with the GSA meetings to be able to describe who participated in them. However, some staff described the types of students they thought the GSA involved. As an example, one stated that “they want kids in that

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<sup>17</sup> “Allies” are often described as individuals, whether children, youth, or adults, who are not LGBT, but who actively support LGBT people. Allies also see the challenges LGBT individuals experience as social justice issues and work to address them.

group who are accepting of everyone, care about people and the challenges they face” (Teacher3). The Day of Silence was the GSA event with which school staff were most familiar. Numerous staff commented about their students as well as some teachers participating in this annual event during the current and prior school year. Reported student participation rates in this event varied, with some teachers having just one or two students in their classes participating and others reporting 10 to 15 percent participating in this event. As Teacher11 shared, “this past year, I would say 10 to 15% of my kids participated in the Day of Silence.” One GSA advisor noted that some students participating in the Day of Silence in her classes had never been to a GSA meeting, validating that the GSA had a larger reach than simply those participating in the GSA’s meetings.

Students were recruited to participate in the GSA through multiple methods, which expanded over time. According to interviewees and based on GSA meeting observations, recruitment occurred through school announcements, word of mouth, and most recently through the school’s annual freshmen orientation. During the second GSA observation, eight students shared how they became involved in it: three heard about it at freshmen orientation, one from friends, one through school announcements, one from GSA leadership, and one from a GSA advisor. Another student shared that she “just started coming” and really admired what the GSA had done for the school, but that because of the GSA’s name, didn’t know it was a GSA so was slow to become involved. One student talked about coming to the GSA because her friends were coming and she needed something to do, so she came to a GSA meeting, enjoyed it, and stuck with it. Another who heard about it on the school announcements during the previous school

year, wondered what the GSA was about, began coming, and also involved her friends in it. A student completing a survey commented that they became involved in the GSA because “my close friends asked me to come and I have enjoyed the people and events ever since.”

**4.2.3. Gay-straight alliance activities.** Now that the GSA’s purpose and participants have been described, this section turns to two additional questions to further describe this GSA as part of the case study: What supports/activities does it offer? Are GSA students involved in school/political activism, and if so, what does this entail? GSA activities focused on (a) efforts to build awareness about the GSA and recruit new members in the school, (b) formal school-wide events<sup>18</sup> and outreach related to the GSA’s purpose, (c) communication with (including through a Facebook page) and informal social opportunities for GSA members, and (d) ongoing meetings with GSA members. To support GSA activities (e.g., snacks at meetings), students attending meetings regularly were asked to pay a \$5 club fee.

Interviewees noted several changes in the GSA during the 2012–13 school year compared to its three prior years of implementation. This included increased student participation in GSA meetings, expanded recruitment efforts, improved communication both among GSA students and within the larger school community, and more GSA activity in the school. Although the GSA’s main events were similar to those held during the previous school year, several students considered them better organized. One of the

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<sup>18</sup> “School wide” refers to the activities being offered in the larger school setting, rather than within the context of the GSA only—it does not mean that all school staff and students participated in these activities.

advisors also noted “more discussions” and “more serious discussions” among the students than in the past, when GSA meetings tended to be more social.

Most students also talked about the group’s expanded efforts to be more organized and active. As Student1 shared:

So last year every meeting was a general meeting where every person received an agenda, they received a piece of paper, oh here is when our next meeting is and here is some event coming up, you can go to it if you want and we were dismissed. We really didn’t do anything. That is what we are trying to change this year by having activities and discussion and talking.

This student leader also noted that the group wanted to ensure they offered “events and fun things to make people want to keep coming back and understand more about connections to things around them and not just learning about things that have happened.” Student1 attributed the group’s stronger turnout relative to the previous school year to engaging GSA meetings and activities. While also acknowledging the need to be better organized, Student3 acknowledged efforts of the group’s leadership in this area including organizing GSA meetings around units to discuss different topics.

**4.2.3.1. Awareness building.** Foremost, the GSA activities focused on efforts to build awareness about the GSA and recruit new members in the school. In addition to the GSA advisors, multiple school staff talked about the GSA events and meetings being advertised in the school announcements. Teacher7 noted that the announcements state “everyone is welcome to come.” Three of the GSA student interviewees mentioned the group’s efforts to improve awareness of the GSA and member recruitment in the school because “a lot of people still just don’t know … that it exists yet” (Student1).

Two students commented on the group's involvement in the school's freshman orientation for the first time at the beginning of the 2012–13 school year. As Student4 shared, “we have been working increasingly on getting our visibility out,” which included a table with GSA information at freshmen orientation for the first time, which led to the group having more younger students involved in it. Student1 noted, “we have been trying to recruit people as best we can with advertisements on the daily announcements.” In combination with these efforts, member recruitment happened more organically: “this year we have had a really good turnout and we are still randomly getting people who have just heard about it from another person or heard about it on the announcements” (Student1).

Participant recruitment, in particular of younger students, was a salient concern regarding the group’s sustainability. Student4 shared that:

Our challenges are making sure that we have a good foundation for the club for the next year because usually it attracts upperclassmen who are open about these kinds of things. Maybe not a lot of freshmen and sophomores, one, know about its existence or, two, feel comfortable going to a club, where maybe they won’t know anybody.

This was especially important because the GSA had to “recreate the club from scratch every year” due to its historically upperclassmen membership (Student4).

**4.2.3.2. *School-wide events*.** Second, GSA activities included school-wide events as well as GSA parent nights. School-wide events were advertised through school announcements and sometimes signs in the school, occurred during both the Fall and Spring of the school year. In October, the GSA celebrated LGBT history month by

posting in public school spaces a different quote from an LGBT person during each day of the month. It also celebrated Spirit Day that month, when people wear purple to support the LGBT community and to support anti-bullying. Several GSA events also occurred during the school's Spirit Week in the Spring, as part of a "no hate" campaign. The GSA created a t-shirt especially for this week, which it sold to teachers and students to wear on the day of the event; five to six teachers purchased this t-shirt during the 2011–12 school year with more during the following year. During the current school year, the group's message on its t-shirt was "free to be me"; during the prior year the shirt simply had a green equal sign, which was one of the school's colors. GSA students distributed "no hate" stickers and hosted other activities such as "don't be a dummy, don't bully," when the group handed out Dum Dum lollipops and talked about not bullying in the school. Also during this week was a day when students wore their GSA t-shirts and "gave free hugs to people." GSA students discussed during a meeting and also hung flyers to support the school-wide Pay It Forward Day, when school staff were asked "if they saw someone doing something nice to thank them and encourage them to pay it forward" (Teacher6).

On the last day of Spirit Week, students participated in GLSEN's Day of Silence, which it began observing during the GSA's second year (2010–11). On this day, students "don't speak all day to symbolize those people who don't feel like they can't speak because they aren't confident or comfortable enough to speak about their sexuality" or transgender identity (Student1). Students used permission slips so they could talk with teachers ahead of time about their observance of the day. Students also received white boards from the GSA advisor so they could communicate without talking. Some students

wore pins in support of the day, but were not silent during it. The GSA held a meeting at the end of this day to “break the silence” after school (Student4). Several students saw this as an opportunity to also build awareness about the GSA within the school.

As another example of a GSA activity in the larger school community, students participated in a positive message effort. GSA students took post-it notes, wrote positive messages like “you’re beautiful,” and then put them up around the school including on mirrors in the bathrooms. According to Student5, these notes focused on promoting kindness “because it is so hard to get rid of bullying, to wipe it out completely, because it is all dependent on students. And so there is the idea that if you pass kindness along, hopefully that sort of chain reaction will occur.”

**4.2.3.3. *Communication and GSA-specific events.*** Third, in addition to recruitment and formal events during the school year, GSA leaders tried to engage members outside of the school. In particular, members communicated with each other informally via a Facebook page. GSA leaders also coordinated out-of-school “bonding events” such as an ice cream social and movie night (Student5). During the previous school year, the GSA also held a bowling event with a GSA from elsewhere in the region.

The GSA also hosted parent nights with students’ families. Approximately 10 parents attended this event during the 2011–12 school year. During this event, parents of GSA students would come and learn more about the group. For example, students participated on a panel, gave presentations, and talked about their experiences. Administrators also participated in these events so they were visible with the group. Counselor3 commented that “it was amazing because kids could articulate way better than us as adults ever could what they are feeling, seeing, and needed.”

**4.2.3.4. Monthly meetings.** Finally, monthly GSA member meetings, which varied in purpose, were a core group activity. The GSA advertised its meetings through the school announcements for two days before each meeting and the day of each meeting. Meetings consisted of topical conversations, “a lot of videos,” and event planning (Student5). For example, one student shared that the students “running it have been trying to separate into units and talking about different topics. For example, bullying one day, sexualities other than gay, straight, or bisexual, and exploring” these issues, which led to “a lot of discussion” and students “talking about their own stories” (Student3). Student6 provided an example of this from a recent meeting: “we talked about someone in the gay community who we looked up to, or an experience we had ourselves.... . Something where we felt accepted or like not accepted for being who we are.” GSA leaders were trying to meet separately during the week before the monthly large-group meetings. Student5 noted that topical meetings were beneficial because “it won’t be chaotic” since students were focused on discussion. One of the GSA advisors noted that the group addressed politics a little during meetings, specifically same-sex marriage, but were “staying away from the presidential election” to avoid potentially divisive conversations given the conservative backgrounds of some students and their families.

To further understand the GSA and its current activities, I observed two of its meetings, each lasting approximately 75 minutes, to see the group in action. The first observed meeting was held shortly after the Fall 2012 presidential election and gay marriage wins in several states. An observation of a second GSA meeting occurred toward the end of the school year in May 2013. These observations offered valuable

insights about the GSA's 23 participants and activities. A summary of activities follows here.

The GSA meetings took place in one of the advisor's English classrooms, which was a warm, welcoming space with academic-related posters and materials on the walls throughout the room. I did not find GSA- or LGBT-related materials in the room, though. The teacher's desk was in the front of the room in the corner. During the first meeting, students sat at individual desks spread throughout the room in row format. At the second meeting with a guest from the community, students moved desks to sit in a circle in the front of the room with one of the GSA advisors at her desk at the front right side of the room, the guest at the beginning of the semi-circle near this advisor, and the other GSA advisor within the circle on the left side of the room. For both meetings I sat in the back of the room to minimize my influence on the social setting, including the group's dynamics and conversations.

Although the two GSA meetings were similar in some aspects, they were also different in important ways. The meeting agendas were set before meetings when officers met and meetings were almost entirely student led. At the first meeting several GSA student leaders began with a positive messaging activity and then facilitated an LGBT history presentation and discussion that covered important events such as the Stonewall riots in New York. For the activity, students used post-it notes to write down positive messages that they would then post on mirrors of bathrooms and other places such as student lockers in the school at a later date. As part of the presentation, students discussed instances of LGBT hate crimes and other examples of anti-LGBT bias such as the Westboro Baptist Church, which is known for its vehemently anti-gay rhetoric and

protests including at funerals of soldiers. They also discussed some positive topics including instances of LGBT-related support from celebrities, the benefits of GSAs, and the value of supportive school staff. The presentation included various media such as images and video clips.

In contrast, the second meeting involved a guest speaker who was transgender and from a local university. The meeting took on a more serious tone. An advisor discussed the GSA's plans for a booth at freshmen orientation near the end of summer. Then, the guest suggested that, as an icebreaker, students introduce themselves, describe why they became involved in the GSA, and how they heard about it. This serendipitously provided supplemental data that later findings incorporate. Students shared powerful stories about their experiences including personal identity struggles, of questioning faith, of worrying about family and peer acceptance, and of understanding and support. The students discussed this for approximately 20 minutes.

One advisor then suggested the students discuss the group's activities during the school year and for the next 40 minutes, students continued sharing their personal stories and making connections to the GSA's activities and discussions during the year. Several talked about struggles with family attitudes and acceptance. One student shared a deeply powerful story about her struggles with her gender identity and expression that temporarily changed the meeting's mood because of her emotional discussion of her struggles. She talked about being afraid of disappointing her mother, losing her boyfriend, and losing friends at the school. Most other students also shared their perspectives on personal struggles and challenges, as well as aspects of the GSA they valued. Section 4.3.3 provides further detail about students' comments as they suggested

the GSA was a safe space of emotional support. In the final minutes of the meeting, multiple conversations broke out and grew loud and energetic. The meeting concluded with additional announcements from the GSA leaders, including about the group's Facebook page and an upcoming LGBT prom event.

The student leaders had met before both meetings to discuss and plan the sessions. They had a much more active role in facilitating the first meeting. For the second meeting, which was around a time of standardized testing in the school, the student leaders tended to be more passive, requiring an advisor to step in and help facilitate the conversation briefly at one point. Overall, the advisors had little role in the meetings. Their involvement consisted of monitoring the students, talking with individual students before or after the meetings, and making short administrative announcements. The conversations were also largely student driven (i.e., taking turns speaking).

Appendix D provides in-depth descriptions of the two GSA meetings, which are also referenced in other parts of this chapter. The meeting summaries provide a useful grounding for subsequent findings by reconstructing elements of two GSA meetings, to better understand this social world including its setting, actors, and their actions (Coffey & Atkinson). The in-depth descriptions are intended to allow the reader to step into the GSA's world rich nuance and more fully understand how the GSA's purpose was actualized in its activities.

During the 2012–13 school year, the GSA continued these various activities and approaches to engaging the school community in issues relevant to the group. Earlier in

the year, the group considered an additional activity, an “it gets better” video<sup>19</sup> featuring school staff and students, but this did not happen. To more thoroughly understand the GSA within its larger setting, the next section focuses on attitudes toward it in the school.

**4.2.4. Attitudes toward the gay-straight alliance.** This section addresses the following research questions: What are key informants’ attitudes toward the GSA? Do school staff and students tend to view the GSA as one of many social opportunities for students, or as a necessary, targeted source of support and safety for LGBT students? Among the 26 school staff interviewees (excluding the two GSA advisors), 23 were aware of the GSA in the school including 4 of 5 administrators, all 6 counselors, 8 of 9 teachers, and 5 of 6 other school staff. With only a few exceptions, interviewees spoke favorably about having the GSA in the school and its activities. Among those knowledgeable about the GSA, survey data also pointed to large levels of agreement that the GSA was important to students’ school experiences, a source of valuable information and resources, and important for all high schools to offer to students.

School staff knowledgeable of the GSA consistently spoke favorably about having the group in the school, including its significance for supporting students including developing their self-worth. Interviewees regularly used positive words such as “critical,” “wonderful,” and “great” to describe the GSA’s importance in the school. Teacher3 described being someone who students could and did come to talk to about LGBT-related issues, but that was “not the same thing as someone who has actually experienced it,” so the GSA was an important additional resource in the school.

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<sup>19</sup> This related to the It Gets Better Project ([www.itgetsbetter.org](http://www.itgetsbetter.org)) created by writer Dan Savage. The project’s purpose is to give hope to LGBT young people experiencing harassment and rejection. The website features videos from supporters to show young people that it gets better despite the challenges they are currently experiencing.

Moreover, the GSA reinforced “equity between people,” which was an important message for students to hear (Teacher8). When asked how LGBT students are part of the district/school strategies to support students, Administrator3 noted that “we don’t look down upon that but we also aren’t here to highlight it either. If the kids need [the GSA] to be a part of and a support system, you know, then we can help with that. We support it.” Administrator4 talked extensively about how support groups like the GSA are important to developing student self-worth at Extracurricular High:

People need to feel their self-worth. You know if a kid, if a kid, let’s just say gay for example, but it doesn’t make a difference, it could be a bad football player or a non-athlete, or can’t play the tuba, but if a kid starts getting down on himself, and they feel like they are the only one, that is not good, that is not good at all. You need people around you, you need support groups. You need somebody to say, “yeah, I feel the same way as you.” Or you need somebody to say, “Nah, I don’t agree with you, but we’re still friends and here’s my idea on it.” … Kids got to feel good about themselves. There is nothing you can do to help them until they start feeling good about themselves.

The following are other quotes illustrating these perspectives from selected school staff interviewees with different roles in Extracurricular High.

- “The idea, the philosophy of the group, to encourage tolerance amongst differences is definitely important. I think it is needed” (Administrator2).
- “I am happy that there is a place for students to feel wanted in that way and to feel connected here, and look around and say OK I am not the only one

because here isolation could be easy especially in a building of 2,000”

(Administrator5).

- “It is essential. ... [You need] an organization for kids to go and voice whatever they are going through as they navigate through high school” (Teacher2).
- “The best thing about it is that we have it and we know about it. ... For someone who is looking to talk, who is looking to ask questions, who is looking to find friends, just its existence is a great thing” (Teacher5).
- “It is fantastic. I absolutely think it is wonderful” (Teacher7).
- “It is critical. I think it is so important for our LGBT community, for them to have a place where they know it is safe. There are so many kids who support them as well and for them to know as well, hey I can be a peer to these people and not feel targeted or anything” (Teacher8).
- “With this club there is a purpose, they get together and do something. They don’t get together to just bitch and moan and say ‘oh, poor us’.” (Teacher9)
- “I think that is an important support to have. We want to foster open-mindedness, acceptance of others, so yeah, it is a great thing” (Teacher11).
- “It is great, I think the more [we have] different types of groups and just opportunities for kids to feel like they belong somewhere is huge” (Counselor4).

- “The more avenues to be safe and supported the better, because I think what works for one student isn’t going to work for another. . . . I think it is a necessary thing that we have here” (Other1).<sup>20</sup>
- “That’s a great thing. I don’t think them kids don’t have anything to be ashamed about. Bringing that out in the open and showing others they are not ashamed is a good thing. We are all individuals” (Other2).

For some staff interviewees who were not familiar with the school’s GSA, I described the general purpose of a typical GSA (based on the literature). These individuals also expressed support for having a GSA in the school as a resource for students. As another indicator of school staff attitudes toward the GSA, several interviewees commented on the increased number of staff wearing the group’s t-shirt during Spirit Week (described in the previous section on activities).

Furthermore, all six GSA student interviewees indicated that the GSA was important to have in the school. As Student1 shared:

It is really important to me. I am not directly intertwined with the LGBT community. I am straight, but I don’t know. . . . I just care a lot about people and how they should be able to love who they love without being slandered or punished for it. . . . I think it is important even if they don’t show up to a meeting that they know there is a group out there that is sort of fighting for a right for them to feel confident about themselves.

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<sup>20</sup> “Other” interviewees include school staff aside from administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors. For example, this included an attendance officer, a cafeteria worker, security staff, and the school’s social worker.

Student4 shared that it was her “favorite club” that she had been involved in, especially since it had strong faculty support and she had an opportunity to see it grow.

Most interviewees also spoke about the GSA’s specific activities favorably. For example, Teacher1 commented that students participating in the GLSEN Day of Silence “behaved well and took it to heart.” GSA leaders had also not heard of any concerns from administrators or other school staff. However, two teachers and one student raised concerns about the group’s participation in this event. Student3 shared the following:

I don’t think it was a helpful activity. … I think it is kind of a bandwagon idea where I think people who don’t do anything to support gay rights or what not the entire year, or I even know people who have made blatantly homophobic statements in front of me before, they participated in that day because “oh, you have to do this,” and a lot of people joined in on it that day and that didn’t represent what they did the rest of the year.

Teacher10 also raised a concern about the event’s impact on learning:

It is kind of difficult to have a day of school where nobody talks, it defeats the purpose of it. So, I think there could be a place for that, but not in the middle of class; do it over lunch kind of thing. It is not to be disrespectful, but if the purpose of school is to show up and learn and interact then choose not to do that, that is different than a moment of silence.

GSA member interviewees had mixed perspectives about how students in the school viewed the GSA. Student6 shared that although some students supported the GSA in the school, a lot of students were indifferent toward it and approximately half of students were not so supportive of it or LGBT issues generally in the school. Another

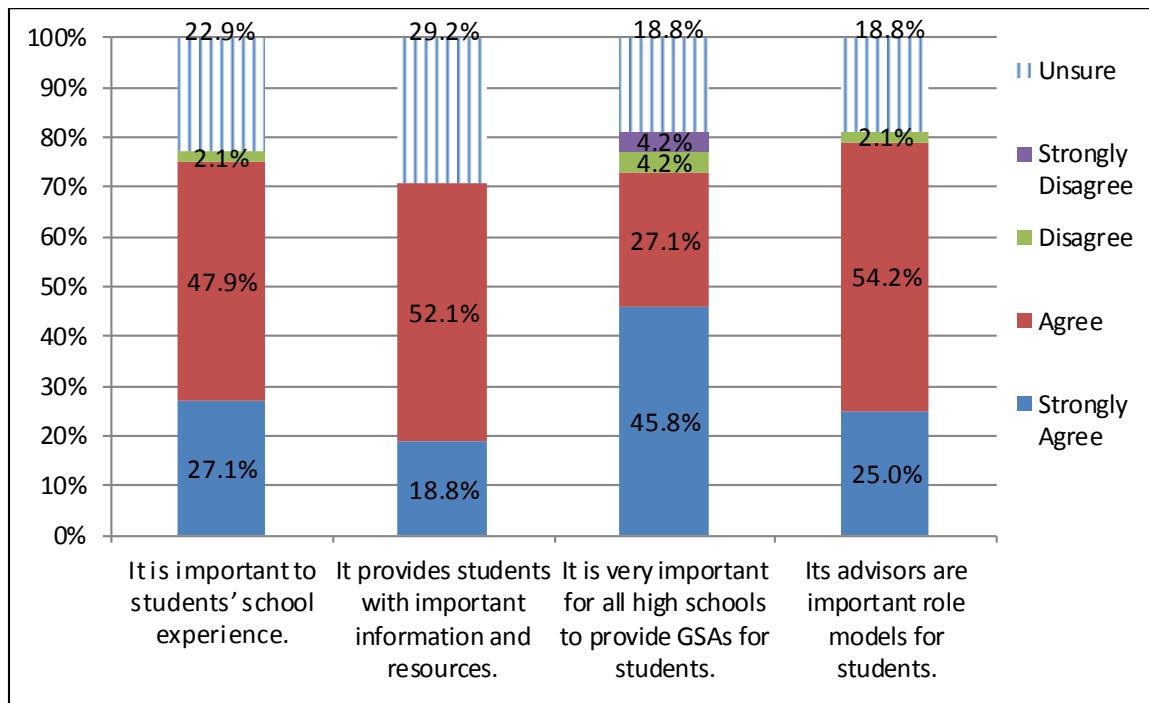
noted that some students made an issue of students wanting to be involved in the GSA as allies: “even with allies, they find something wrong with that” (Student6). In other words, some students in the school took issue with non-LGBT students being involved in the GSA. However, some teachers tended to have more favorable or at least neutral student reactions to the GSA and its events. Teacher6 shared that she wrote information about the GSA’s meetings on her classroom board and although students had questions about what the group was, she did not experience “pushback” from students about it. Teacher11 noted that “there are a lot of kids who participate in [the Day of Silence], and the other kids respect it.” Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the school’s administration was seen as largely supporting the GSA, although Student5 commented that “I know some administrators are more open and more supportive … and some aren’t.” Section 4.3.3 provides more information about GSA-related benefits that GSA students shared.

The teacher and student surveys also included questions intended to capture various teacher opinions about various aspects of the GSA’s importance. Foremost, there was large agreement when asked if it is important for every high school to have a GSA: almost half of responding teachers with at least “very little” knowledge of the GSA “strongly agreed” and another quarter “agreed” (see Figure 7) and all three of the GSA student survey respondents “strongly agreed.” Most of the 19% of teachers responding “unsure” about the importance of having GSAs in every high school were also those teachers who indicated they had little knowledge of the GSA.<sup>21</sup> In addition, for the 15 teachers who answered this question based on the GSA definition provided to them in the

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<sup>21</sup> Of the “unsure” respondents, 67% self-reported “very little” familiarity with the GSA.

survey (because they had no familiarity with the GSA), these respondents were more likely to be “unsure” (53%).



**Figure 7.** Teacher opinions about the GSA (n=48).

Furthermore, a similar proportion of teacher survey respondents at least “agreed” that the GSA (a) was important to students’ school experiences, (b) provided students with important information and resources, and (c) involved advisors who were role models for students. Smaller percentages “strongly agreed,” though. Again, for these three items, a majority of teachers responding “unsure” were also those teachers who indicated they had little knowledge of the GSA.<sup>22</sup> Also, for the 15 teachers answering based on the GSA definition provided to them, responses were almost the same relative to whether the GSA provided important information and resources. Since these

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<sup>22</sup> The percentages of “unsure” respondents who also self-reported “very little” familiarity with the GSA, by survey item, were: 64%, it is important to students’ school experience; 57%, it provides students with important information and resources; 67%, 100%, its advisors are important role models for students.

respondents were not familiar with the GSA, the survey asked fewer questions and did not include the questions about whether the GSA was important to students' school experience and whether the advisors were important role models for students.

Several teachers also wrote responses to a final open-ended question<sup>23</sup> on the survey that provided an opportunity to share additional comments. Among the 62 teachers who fully completed the survey, 12 shared comments in this final item (see Table E9 in the appendices for the full set of responses). Nine of these responses were about the GSA and most of these reflected some attitude toward it, all positive with one concern. A sample of these comments from teachers who were not interviewed include:

- “All schools should have a GSA—it is about time.”
- “Clubs are formed with the needs of the students in mind. GSA [sic] was formed upon the request of the students. That is a sign of how our school wants to make our students feel more welcome and supported and to make it a safer more comfortable place for them.”
- “I feel that a specialized club or organization may do more harm than good by singling students out. I am deeply hopeful that gay students would not be afraid to be who they are without a club, but would, instead feel welcomed into the school community just as any other student.”

Other findings suggest mixed perspectives about the GSA's importance, though. On the one hand, when asked if the GSA was “just a social opportunity and not different

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<sup>23</sup> This item states, “please share any additional comments you would like to about your school or student clubs/organizations, in particular your school's GSA.”

than other student clubs/organizations,” 10% at least agreed and 38% were unsure.<sup>24</sup> However, through an open-ended question, teacher survey respondents were asked to name the top three reasons they thought students participated in the GSA.<sup>25</sup> Most teachers (n=40) entered reasons. Of the comments respondents entered, 79 addressed benefits to students themselves (see Table E4 for a complete list). Of these, 53 responses focused on the GSA providing some form of support to participating students, such as increasing a sense of belonging or acceptance (n=23), finding a supportive community (n=10), or sharing similar interests/beliefs (n=8). For example, one respondent wrote, “to help create a school environment that reflects their values to have an environment where all students—but particularly LGBT students—can feel respected, valued, and supported.” Eight respondents listed reasons related to the issues the GSA stood for (e.g., “promoting tolerance”). Other respondents (n=17) mentioned some benefit to the larger school/community, such as support LGBT friends (n=6) and to help others feel welcomed and valued (n=6). The next section focuses on conditions and other factors that supported or constrained the GSA’s implementation and sustainability in the school.

**4.2.5. Gay-straight alliance implementation supports and constraints.** This section explores the conditions that supported or hindered the GSA’s implementation and sustainability. Information on implementation supports and constraints includes comments from interviewees who explicitly addressed this (e.g., when someone identified a challenge the GSA experienced). Aside from positive attitudes toward the GSA, factors directly affecting GSA implementation included: (a) faculty support

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<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, for the 15 teachers who answered this questions based on the GSA definition provided to them in the survey, responses were somewhat similar but with greater agreement: 27% “agreed” and 47% were “unsure.”

<sup>25</sup> The survey included a skip pattern, so teachers were only asked to answer this question if they reported their familiarity with the GSA was “very little,” “somewhat,” or “very much.”

including administrators and GSA advisors; (b) awareness of the GSA and visibility in the school; (c) GSA leadership, including their communication and focus on sustainability; (d) student participation and recruitment; (e) quality of GSA meetings. Indirect factors related to the GSA's larger context, such as a physically safe school environment, are discussed in the next section as part of research question set two findings.

**4.2.5.1. Faculty support.** Foremost, the GSA greatly benefited from supportive administration, advisors and faculty. GSA student interviewees as well as some staff interviewees reported that the school administration supported the GSA. Administrators themselves also expressed support for the GSA in various ways during interviews. The current administrators and a former assistant principal helped to grow the GSA and create its identity. Administrator3 noted that the former assistant principal effectively helped students establishing the GSA to work together, helping them feel supported and teaching them how to accomplish goals while also “having them see the big picture and political picture and stay focused” on their goal rather than trying to make “a political statement.”

As she reflected about the GSA, Teacher3 emphasized that the school’s administration definitely supports “teachers who are passionate about helping students, and since this helps students, we are going to do it.” A current assistant principal was frequently mentioned as a strong ally of the GSA and was someone who “makes good connections with students” (Teacher9). Some support for the GSA was evident at the district level as well because the school board approved the club’s creation before it launched in the school.

Administrative resistance to the GSA was a past implementation challenge, though.<sup>26</sup> Several interviewees talked about a former school administrator who resisted having a GSA in the school. For example, a teacher not involved in the GSA commented that “this would not have happened” with a previous principal, but with “this principal it can and I respect that.” Another shared that:

There was a time under a previous administration, a previous principal, with the group not being allowed to meet. He was even uncomfortable with students saying they were gay. I think his philosophy was like “don’t ask don’t tell,” I think he had so much fear about it, but he is gone and retired. The GSA wouldn’t be here if he was still here.

A teacher survey respondent, who was not interviewed, reinforced this concern:

There was initial resistance (read: denial of permission) to starting one, which was disappointing, but that was due to a particularly conservative principal. When he left, an organization was started. That was great. It’s unfortunate that the views of a single administrator can make or break the possibility of a GSA. Now that the GSA is active, I sense that it is making good changes among the members.

This lack of support from a prior principal was further echoed by two other teachers including one who shared that “most of the teachers were afraid to be the advisor of the GSA under the last principal.”<sup>27</sup> Another teacher commented that “I think the kids had a

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<sup>26</sup> As an additional measure to protect participant confidentiality, given the concerns raised in this section, key informants are identified by role only (e.g., teacher) and not by number (e.g., Teacher10).

<sup>27</sup> Although this respondent referenced the “last” principal, evidence suggests that it was another former principal who resisted the GSA (and has since retired from the school district). The GSA was put in place under the principal immediately preceding the current one.

hard time finding an adult in the building who would take it on because they may have felt repercussions.”

Also, within the larger community context, the GSA was a potentially divisive issue that could have caused negative attention for administrators and the school. For example, Administrator3 commented that the GSA has “so many political aspects to it, you just want to be sure you do it right and you are careful and thoughtful.” A district leader also talked about “kickback” from some “traditional parents” about the GSA’s availability. In response, school leaders would talk with parents, after its implementation, about the district policies that supported having a GSA and made it “a good thing” in the school.

The GSA advisors were an important faculty asset for the group and developed relationships with GSA students as the group progressed. Significantly, the GSA benefited from an energetic, committed advisor, who was joined by a co-advisor during the 2012–13 school year. The GSA was very much student led, however, with the group’s officers meeting to plan and carry out GSA activities and meetings. The advisor was an “anchor” with the students “steering the ship” as the GSA progressed (Teacher3). She supported the group’s implementation in important ways, though. For example, she worked with the student leaders to “nurture” relationships with other students and keep members coming to GSA meetings. The advisor, who taught a course on persuasion, also worked with students on the group’s messaging to help students communicate about the GSA and related issues without pushing the issues too hard so that people pushed back, but while still helping to educate others. Student4 described this support as:

Fantastic, I feel it is one of the reasons we are able to keep afloat as a club. [The advisor] is fantastic. She has been involved since the beginning as the main advisor and she has helped get out visibility to other teachers who are very supportive. ... We wouldn't be able to continue as a club without such great staff support. The principal himself [too].

As another example of positive student perspectives about the GSA advisor, Student2 shared that, “having a strong GSA advisor and the assistant principal behind you makes your voice more amplified in the school too and school staff just followed with them.”

Several staff interviewees also spoke favorably about the GSA advisor who had been involved with the GSA since its inception.<sup>28</sup> For example, Counselor3 shared that “she is an outstanding educator and person. ... She has brought more to that club because she is able to bring more students, not just gay and lesbian students, but just students in general who care about humanity and just care about others.” Teacher8 similarly commented that “the teacher who is advising that group, I think a lot of her driving personality has made that group more accepted among the building staff.” Administrator3 also noted that the advisor “supports diversity in any form, so she is the perfect advisor.” In an open-ended comment on the teacher survey, one respondent referenced the GSA advisor, sharing an appreciation for her “volunteer effort ... to provide the club with official, adult support at the school.” The GSA advisors were important to the GSA’s progress in the school. As Counselor2 shared when talking about clubs generally, “the enthusiasm of the advisor makes a difference in student follow-thru.” Additionally, the

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<sup>28</sup> This is not to suggest that negative comments were shared about the second advisor new to the group during the 2012–13 school year. Rather, almost all interviewees did not mention her role, which was likely due to her newness to the school and the group.

second GSA advisor's office was centrally located in the school and was able to see more of the group's members on a daily basis, which was another asset for the GSA.

Teachers were commonly identified as an important source of support for the GSA. For example, the teacher overseeing the yearbook and literary magazine supported articles about the GSA and coordinated photographs of its participants. As another example, the number of teachers wearing the GSA's t-shirt during the prior two years expanded from primarily teachers in the English department to teachers in other departments (e.g., math, special education) as well as counselors. Several individuals involved in the GSA considered this an important sign of support. The GSA advisor also reported feeling supported by her peers in her department because of their involvement in GSA events during the year. Despite this support, some interviewees thought it could be stronger and competed for teacher attention with other school priorities. For example, Student2 noted that some teachers "had their own causes they were pushing, like autism awareness, so when it came to LGBT issues they wouldn't push it because it took away from their own issues."

Beyond administrators and teachers, several interviewees identified counseling department activities that demonstrated support for the GSA. In particular, at the beginning of the year the counselors presented to all students, by grade, about healthy relationships and being an upstander by addressing bullying (rather than being a bystander and not responding when it happened). These presentations included references to the GSA as a resource in the school.

**4.2.5.2. Awareness and visibility.** Second, numerous interviewees considered the GSA's visibility in the school and staff and student awareness about it important to the

group's implementation and sustainability. Although the GSA events brought awareness to the group and its anti-bullying focus, many interviewees talked about the importance of students knowing the GSA is an available support in the school, in particular for students who were struggling and needed support. For example, Administrator2 commented that it was important for there to be awareness about the group in the school, "so if a student is struggling with sexual orientation or is in a position where they really need support; that a kid knows it is there." Some also wanted more awareness about the GSA in the school to address LGBT-biased behaviors. For example, when asked about what other positive contributions the group could make in the school, Administrator5 pointed to

Whatever awareness pieces they can bring and highlight, just so that people are aware, and to fend off stereotypes, any prejudice behavior that could exist because students just don't know or they are fighting. It is probably not talked about in the home all that much, because when we see students with that kind of behavior or who project that kind of behavior, we tend to see it is because it is rarely discussed at home or it is the views of their parents. So how do we provide that awareness for them so as they become young adults, they can form their own opinions and beliefs.

In addition to GSA-specific awareness efforts, as previously noted, the school's literary magazine featured the GSA in several articles in an issue from the 2010–11 school year. A recent issue with an article about a student's transgender sibling (which is discussed further in section 4.2.2) included information about the GSA and the GSA was featured in the school's yearbook for the first time during the 2011–12 school year as well. The school's 2011–12 student handbook did not list the GSA in its section on extracurricular

activities, but this may have been because the GSA was still too new during the previous school year.<sup>29</sup>

However, the most commonly cited challenge among interviewees, in particular GSA students, pertained to awareness about the GSA in the school. This concern emerged during several interviews. Student1 commented that:

The other thing too is you will say there is a GSA meeting and me, I didn't know what it was. They hear "GSA" and have no idea what it is. So I have been telling people that we need to make it a point that people understand what [the GSA] is when they hear about it because it is a very creative name.

Several students commented that they did know what the GSA was and would have joined sooner had they known about its focus—and that other students did not know about it. For example, "a lot of people still just don't know it is a thing. That it exists yet, which is what we are trying to do this year. Get it out more in the school" (Student1).

Another student leader noted that publicity was an important GSA priority because of this lack of awareness about it in the school. Several teachers commented about not hearing enough about the GSA in the school. For example, one pointed out that "I don't hear much about it a lot, though. Maybe it is because I am not out at lunch reading the signs. I hope it is being advertised, I don't personally see it a lot" (Teacher11).

The lack of school-wide awareness of the GSA was evident in teacher survey results. Although staff interviewees were largely familiar with the GSA, based on the teacher survey one in four respondents were "not at all" aware of it (see Table 12). For

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<sup>29</sup> The 2012–13 and 2013–14 student handbooks were not school specific (i.e., they were for each of the district's high schools) and did not list any student clubs.

example, in an open-ended comment, one respondent shared that “I did not know that Extracurricular High<sup>30</sup> has an active GSA!” Another commented that:

Outside its membership, I don't think most know what it is. The organization is not closeted, per say, but I think it's a little bit under the radar. But I am not the advisor or directly involved with it. I'm just speaking from my impressions.

Another third of teachers reported having “very little” familiarity with it. Only 1 in 10 respondents were “very much” familiar with it.

*Table 12. Teacher Survey Respondent Familiarity with the School’s Gay-Straight Alliance (n=65)*

Not at all	Very little	Somewhat	Very much
24.6%	32.3%	32.3%	10.8%

Several interviewees pointed to the school’s size as a factor affecting GSA awareness and participation. As one teacher shared when asked about what may have hindered GSA implementation, “the size of our school might have slowed it down. … It is a huge school and we have so many clubs, it is easy to get lost in the shuffle.” Another teacher noted that it is a challenge to ensure students are aware of all opportunities to them in the school, not just the GSA.

**4.2.5.3. Student leadership.** Third, multiple informants noted that student leadership was a significant driver of the GSA. The GSA’s initial year did not go well because of strife between students who wanted to lead it. Several interviewees commented that the current leaders were instrumental to developing the group, recruiting new students, and coordinating events. The students “do all of the work” and do “an amazing job” according to one teacher. Also, this teacher also noted that the prior year’s GSA leader had

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<sup>30</sup> As noted in chapter 2, “Extracurricular High” and “New Suburb School District” are used as pseudonyms for the school and district to protect their identity.

a major role in moving the GSA “out of the infancy phase” and modeling GSA leadership for the current leaders. In turn, the current GSA leaders have modeled this for the GSA leaders for the 2013–14 school year. Since the GSA’s initial year, it has benefited from student leaders with a “self-awareness that now is not the time to get my anger out, now is the time to speak rationally about what I believe” (Teacher3). This ability to not be “overly antagonistic because they are so passionate” was considered important to effective GSA leadership (Teacher3). Teacher9 also noted that it has been important for the GSA to have spokespeople who are seen as “decent kids” and are respected by their peers.

Despite these strengths, communication and organization among GSA leaders was somewhat of a challenge as noted by one student in particular, but one that the group was working to address. Communication among GSA members, which included a Facebook page beginning in the 2012–13 school year, facilitated information sharing about GSA meetings and events. As Student3 commented, this was an improvement from the prior year:

Last year was my first year in the club, the year before I would try to get involved but every time it would get cancelled or moved and I wouldn’t hear about it until the day after. We have a Facebook page now, which helps a lot with that.

Student3 also noted an opportunity for the leadership to be more organized: “I think we could do a better job of staying better organized, making things happening … mostly organizational. … For example, for the officers meetings, they say they are going to be there, but just don’t show up or they get really, really off topic.”

The GSA leaders were also concerned with ensuring the group would sustain itself after they left the school. For example, Student4 noted that:

We make sure among the officers, our goal is to make sure the club continues and it thrives. ... I want to make sure that it doesn't fall apart when I leave here, not that I am the hinge on the door, but yeah I want to make sure even when I leave there is still this resource for people. ... I want to be sure it can be its own thing. Part of this sustainability effort also included a focus on ensuring GSA activities and meetings were engaging and meaningful for students.

**4.2.5.4. Student participation and recruitment.** Student participation in GSA meetings and events and recruitment of new members were also commonly mentioned as factors affecting the quality of the GSA and its ability to sustain itself. Participation in the group's activities during the school's Spirit Week, including wearing the GSA's t-shirt, was greatly supported by a school culture and students who were "really spirit driven and want to wear their school stuff" (Teacher3). The current GSA membership was also considered a cohesive group.

Several factors hindered student participation in GSA meetings, however. For example, Student1 worried that students "don't understand the concept of an ally and that you don't have to be gay or have a gay uncle" to participate in the GSA. Student5 echoed this sentiment:

That is probably the number one stereotype I get. The number one thing that bothers me in my heart, is that even if people believe anti-hate, or marriage equality, or anything like that, that they think they can't go to something like the GSA because "oh, well I am straight, so I can't go to that." It is not about your sexuality, it is about do you believe in this and do you not believe in this.

Student3 shared that the GSA “could definitely do a better job of letting people know who [they] are, convincing people to come and participate.”

Also, some students were not able to join GSA meetings regularly (or at all) because of schedule conflicts with other school club/activity commitments. For example, Student1 commented that “theatre people are busy a lot” because of theatre rehearsals and events and would need to miss GSA meetings. She also noted that “a lot of people ... just can’t participate because they just really can’t make meetings, can’t participate because of other commitments.” This likely also affected the dynamics of the group when it met: during one of the observed GSA meetings, a GSA leader noted that the group was less vocal than typical because two of the most talkative GSA members were not present. She also noted that the student leaders were tired from recent testing. This may have affected meeting-related planning. In particular, although a guest was present during this meeting, the GSA leaders did not appear to have topics planned for her or facilitate the discussion—and the conversation seemed to stall at several points since students did not ask questions, requiring some facilitation from one of the GSA advisors and the guest. In the case of activities out of school, participation was lower than desired because some students would not ask their parents to sign consent forms to avoid having their parents know about their participation in the GSA.

Additionally, these informal out-of-school events were seen as valuable but unsuccessful. During the previous school year, the GSA held a bowling event with a GSA from elsewhere in the region, but despite a large number of students signing up, few participated. Student2 noted: “I think it is because a lot of the other students were allies so they didn’t have as much of a reason to participate. They also were in other clubs that

were more important to them.” Despite their lack of success with these informal activities outside of school, Student5 commented about the significance of these connections:

Especially going into the summer, I think it is really important to promote the idea that, yes, we won’t be meeting, but if you need anything there is a group of people who will support you even though during those three months we won’t be in school.

Parent reactions to students participating in the GSA were another factor affecting turnout for group’s activities. Administrator1 shared the following: “I think lots of times kids are afraid [to join the GSA] because of their families, not so much their peers, from what I have found.” Student3 also noted that “it gets hard to do things off school grounds, particularly when people don’t want to talk with their parents about being in the club and can’t get the parent consent form signed.” This student went on to emphasize that the GSA does not want “to put students in the position of lying to their parents.”

**4.2.5.5. *Quality of gay-straight alliance meetings.*** Finally, interviewees viewed the GSA meetings as valuable strengths that brought the group together and facilitated bonding among its members, and therefore supports its ongoing sustainability. They also noted some challenges associated with the meetings. I observed several aspects of the GSA meetings that seemed to engage and facilitate lively meetings. For example, during meeting observation one, students were actively involved in a positive messaging activity and then the GSA officers delivered a multimedia presentation on LGBT issues that the group seemed to enjoy. During meeting observation two, the guest was funny and self-deprecating, which seemed to create a comfortable, welcoming space. The guest made

students laugh and facilitated an icebreaker so that students felt more comfortable and began talking.

Some challenges were evident, though. As previously noted, one GSA student leader commented that during the previous year the GSA meetings were well organized with printed agendas at the beginning of each meeting, but that the meetings tended to be more administrative (e.g., discussing upcoming events and meeting schedules) rather than engaging. This student thought that addressing this was an important change during the 2012–13 school year to maintain student involvement in the group. Also, one GSA student officer acknowledged some difficulty in figuring out how to implement the GSA and carry out its meetings: “it was kind of discombobulating last year, we didn’t really know what to do and how to get it going” (Student1). A GSA member commented that during the previous school year, “sometimes the GSA conversations got stagnant because we were all there for the same reason and we would stare at each other and did not know what to do next” (Student2). This student also “felt like people were attending out of social obligation and they weren’t getting anything out of it.” To explore how the GSA may be different and similar to other clubs aimed at support student identity, the next and final section of this first research question set compares the GSA to other student organizations, the African American Students Club (AASC) and Students with Disabilities Club (SDC).<sup>31</sup>

**4.2.6. Comparisons to other student organizations.** This section compares the GSA to the AASC and SDC, using data from interviews, surveys, and documents where available. It begins with a description about the purpose of the two clubs, in particular the

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<sup>31</sup> As a reminder, these are pseudonyms for the clubs to protect the school’s identity.

AASC for which more information was available. The section continues with demographics on survey respondents and level of student involvement in the clubs, followed by attitudes toward the clubs, and then club supports and challenges. Table 13 summarizes the similarities and differences between the GSA and the two comparison clubs. The purpose, participants, and activities of the groups all had similarities and differences. The three clubs also had largely similar implementation supports, but experienced different challenges in their implementation. Many of these similarities and differences are described further in this section.

*Table 13. Similarities and Differences between the Gay-Straight Alliance and Comparison Clubs*

Theme	GSA	AASC	SDC
<i>Purpose</i>			
Academic success	–	+	+
Anti-bullying	+	–	–
Student acceptance/belonging	+	+	+
<i>Participants</i>			
Growing/consistent student participation	+	–	+
<i>Activities During Prior School Years</i>			
Awareness efforts in the school	+	–	–
Group lunches	–	+	+
Meetings/after school activities	+	–	+
<i>Implementation Supports</i>			
Active/committed advisors	+	+	+
Administrative support	+	+	+
Connected to curriculum	–	–	+
Positive staff attitudes	+	+	+
Student members consider the club important to their school experiences	+	+	+
Student leadership	+	+	–
<i>Implementation Constraints</i>			
Awareness/visibility	+	–	–
Lack of student interest	–	+	–
Parent knowledge of club involvement/consent for activities out of school	+	–	–
Quality of meetings	+	–	–
Student participation in meetings	+	+	–

Theme	GSA	AASC	SDC
Student transportation	-	+	-

*Note.* “+” indicates themes evident in the interview data based on the analytic procedures of the study; “-” indicates where themes did not emerge from analysis of the interview data.

**4.2.6.1. Purpose of comparison clubs.** As previously discussed, similar to the GSA, the AASC and SDC were both created to support students who may have felt disconnected and “different” in the school. This included a desire among school staff to foster acceptance of student differences. However, the clubs focused on different student populations.

The AASC, co-advised by a guidance counselor and teacher, had its roots in a club created in the late 1990s for African American/Black males in the school. The AASC emerged based on the interests of students who moved to the district and “were not comfortable because of the school’s lack of racial diversity” (Teacher2). Another interviewee noted that the school’s African American/Black students coming from inner-city communities “have some real challenges in struggling to adapt” to the school (Other1). The club was created to provide a support network for these students and to help develop their skills to effectively navigate through the school. As a counselor described, the AASC came about due to a lot of student conflict in the school around racial identity:

You are not Black, or you are not Black enough. You are not this. ... So we tried to create an atmosphere that would help them have conversations, accept the differences, not fight.

Administrator3 also shared that the AASC was established:

To create a group that promoted academic success, to make that cool, to bridge that gap, to knock down that barrier that it is not cool. We have kids who live in

incredible circumstances and when they leave here and go [home] it is not cool to be good at school, it just is not, it is not cool to be an honor student, and they have to fit in at home and their surroundings. The bottom line of it was to support academic excellence, that was the mission, and behind the scenes for us to break down that barrier and allow kids to be successful here, as successful as they could be, and fit in with their surroundings and help them and support them.

In addition to data from these interviews, a document with minutes from an AASC leadership advisory committee during the 2010–11 school year summarized students' goals for the group such as mentorship, interpersonal support, empowerment, and outreach in the school. Other student expectations for the AASC included developing leadership skills, learning about African American culture, becoming a positive community of students, and developing a partnership with African American/Black students at the other district's high schools. Teacher2 compared the AASC to the school's GSA in describing the former's purpose: "the mission is like [the GSA], in that it is for anyone to show up and support African American students."

In contrast, the SDC was an extension of an elective course, which the school offered for academic credit. The course (also referred to as a "program"), which a guidance counselor oversaw, provided students with opportunities to learn about disabilities, diversity, and acceptance while supporting their peers. The course paired approximately 150 students with peers in the school who needed support, whether because of their special educational needs (e.g., helping students transition between classes or participate during class), academics (i.e., tutoring), language (i.e., students for whom English is a second language), or social skills. As part of the course students were supporting peers with their

class assignments and participation, including transitioning between classes. Enrolled students received a three-day training at the beginning of the year, focused on such topics as celebrating and accepting each other, and follow-up training throughout the year. The school also offered the SDC, advised by the school's social worker, as a separate but related extracurricular activity in which any student could participate and support other students through various activities. A similar program was in place at other schools in the district, including at the elementary and middle school levels.

**4.2.6.2. Comparison club participants.** Characteristics of typical students participating in the AASC and SDC differed from each other, with SDC student characteristics more similar to those of GSA students. Although non-African American/Black students had participated in the AASC during previous years, none were involved in it during the prior year. In contrast, the GSA and SDC were comprised of primarily White students. The GSA and SDC also tended to have more female students involved. Respondents to the student surveys ( $n=31$ ) reflected these characteristics. Respondents were largely female: 5 of the 8 AASC respondents and 16 of the 20 SDC respondents were female, along with all three of the GSA respondents. Respondents for the GSA and SDC were entirely White (except for one SDC student who was Latino), and all 8 of the AASC respondents were African American/Black. Respondents were primarily students in the upper grades, with more than half in Grade 12 in all three clubs (see Table 14).

Table 14. *Student Survey Results: Student Grade*

Club	Grade		
	10	11	12
GSA (n=3)	33.3%	—	66.6%
AASC (n=8)	25.0%	12.5%	62.5%
SDC (n=20)	10.0%	40.0%	50.0%

Recruitment strategies varied for the AASC and the SDC. Similar to the GSA, AASC participants were recruited through word of mouth. In contrast, SDC participants were recruited through a larger school program associated with it. Compared to the other organizations studied, the three GSA student survey respondents were overall more involved in at least some group activities. The AASC had the highest proportion of students indicating they were involved in all or most activities during the previous school year (see Table 15). During the 2011–12 school year, approximately half of the school’s 80 African American/Black students participated in the AASC.

Table 15. *Student Survey Results: Level of Involvement in Student Organizations during the Previous School Year*

	Involved in a Few Activities	Involved in Some Activities	Involved in All or Most Activities
GSA (n=3)	—	66.7%	33.3%
AASC (n=8)	12.5%	37.5%	50.0%
SDC (n=20)	35.0%	45.0%	20.0%

**4.2.6.3. Comparison club activities.** Activities of the AASC and SDC also differed from each other and the GSA. Because of declining student interest, the AASC did not meet regularly during the 2012–13 school year. Instead, its advisor was focusing on more individualized outreach to and support to the school’s African American/Black students. During prior years, though, the AASC offered an icebreaker event in the fall and a monthly lunch. It also provided students with educational opportunities, including connecting them with tutors as needed, and periodic afterschool events (e.g., a trip to an

amusement park). Like the GSA, the group communicated via a Facebook page. Due to decreased interest because students did not want to continue meeting as a group, during the 2012–13 school year the group did not convene as a formal club. Instead, the group’s advisor focused on networking, talking with students in the halls, and meeting with students individually to support their particular needs.

Unlike the GSA and AASC, the SDC involved a weekly social lunch focused on developing communications and social skills by “doing something fun while they eat lunch” (Other6). The group also included afterschool activities that helped students “who don’t know where they fit in at the school,” according to a guidance counselor. This facilitated development of their leadership skills and provided an opportunity for them to care about other students regardless of their differences. As part of the larger curricular program the SDC was a part of, the group participated in a carnival at the end of the school year for students with special needs. Only one interviewee mentioned this activity, but had a positive opinion about it:

It is more for the special needs kids. It is so popular and so fun, and so many kids are involved in it. It is amazing. It is wonderful for the kids. . . And it has grown, which is great, every year it has gotten bigger (Teacher11).

**4.2.6.4. Attitudes toward comparison clubs.** In comparing attitudes toward the GSA with those toward other clubs, similarities and differences are evident. Over half of staff interviewees (16) mentioned the AASC at some point during their interviews. A smaller proportion of interviewees (nine) mentioned the larger program of which the SDC was a part or the SDC itself at some point during their interviews.

Comments about the AASC were somewhat favorable. Positive comments included:

- “I think these types of clubs are very important” (Teacher1).
- “Finding a familiarity within culture is helpful. … Our African American population is growing. Our Muslim population is growing. Finding a familiarity within culture is helpful” (Counselor3).
- It “is a great connection for students” (Other6).

Some comments about the AASC were more critical, though. One teacher (who was not involved in the GSA) was concerned about the group’s lack of impact in the larger school community:

I look at the AASC and I think they don’t do anything but eat lunch. They don’t have events. They don’t support anything. Yes, they support a safe place for a pocket of kids to come and eat lunch.

Several interviewees also noted that the AASC has “lost its umph,” as one administrator noted, in the school. In contrast, all comments about the SDC and its larger program suggested highly positive attitudes toward it. For example:

- The program is “just phenomenal” (Administrator3).
- “It is an extremely successful anti-bullying effort” (Counselor2).
- “One of the programs that I find to be the most impressive and that has the biggest impact on our school environment is our [peer support] program” (Counselor5).
- “A lot of good kids helping others. … I am really proud of it, and I have nothing to do with it, but I am proud of it” (Other3).

Another interviewee also addressed both clubs in a single comment:

- “Our building has created other opportunities for these kids to feel safe. AASC. SDC program. You know what I mean? I think they can hone in on opportunities to make a difference. So, I think the fabric comes together in a beautiful way, and I think it’s wherever they feel a part of it. I think those clubs play a huge role, I really do” (Other1).

Turning to the student survey, results for the AASC and SDC were largely similar to the GSA across most survey items, but with a few noteworthy differences:

- Whereas half of students answering about the AASC “strongly agreed” that it is very important for all schools to provide student clubs like it, this proportion was higher for the GSA (100%) and SDC (95%) students.
- A larger proportion of students answering about the SDC (65%) “strongly agreed” that the organization was important to their student experience (compared to none of the three GSA students and 25% of the AASC students).

The teacher survey also found several similarities among the GSA, AASC, and SDC, along with some differences when these three groups are compared to the other types of student clubs teachers responded about on the survey. Teacher attitudes toward the AASC and SDC (n=6) were also largely similar to responses about the GSA (n=1), with all of these teachers “agreeing” or “strongly agreeing” when asked (a) if the club is important to students’ school experience, (b) if the clubs provide students with important information and resources, (c) it is very important for all high schools to offer the club, school experiences, and (d) its advisors are role models for students. Overall, for the other clusters of student organizations, the combined average teacher agreement to these

four items was similar to the GSA.<sup>32</sup> However, findings varied by type of club.

Agreement to the items was greater than for the GSA in several instances. In particular, on all four items, 100% of teachers answering about service clubs “agreed” or “strongly agreed.” This was also true for student council for three of the items and for the “other” cluster of clubs for two items.

In contrast, agreement about the extent to which the student organizations provide important information and resources was lower—57% of the teachers answering about sports “disagreed” to this statement whereas respondents answering about other student clubs largely at least “agreed” this was the case. Furthermore, when asked if it is important for all high schools to offer each club/organization, some small disagreement was evident among teachers answering about sports (29%), foreign language/academic clubs (15%), and student council (11%). These percentages were larger than for teacher responses about the GSA, for which 4% “disagreed” about the importance of its availability.

**4.2.6.5. Comparison club implementation supports and constraints.** Turning to implementation supports and constraints, some similarities and differences between the GSA and the AASC as well as the SDC were evident. Like the GSA, the AASC and SDC benefited from a supportive administration. For the AASC, a current administrator helped to grow the program, contributing to its goal development and funding events for it. As a counselor shared:

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<sup>32</sup> The combined average agreement (i.e., mean) was calculated by summing and then averaging the percentage that “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with each item. The combined average agreement includes results for foreign language and academic clubs, service clubs, sports, student council, and the “other” cluster of clubs. The GSA, AASC, and SDC results are excluded from the mean.

I applaud the administration and our principal in particular, which is extremely supportive of everything we do and help in this way. Anything we need we ask and if he can't present it or provide it, he gives us ideas. ... He has been part of the school and has great relationships with a number of our students.

Perspectives on implementation challenges varied for AASC and SDC. One challenge the AASC experienced pertained to student involvement and leadership. As Administrator1 noted, some students want to be involved in the club and others "don't want to have to come to a club" focused on their racial identity. This was similar to the GSA's challenge that some students did not want to join a club based on their sexual/gender identity. Also, the AASC's lunch meetings led to some challenges because some students did not want to miss having lunch with their friends to attend the AASC lunch, whereas those attending suggested those who did not of lacking pride in their Black identity.

Several other factors impeded the AASC at Extracurricular High. The group's activity has fluctuated with the group's student leadership despite strong support for the group from an administrator and guidance counselor. A teacher also noted that student interest in the AASC varied across years and the group "fizzled out" after active students graduated from the school. Transportation was another challenge affecting past participation in AASC events: students weren't able to get to the school early enough in the morning and didn't have transportation after school, and the school wanted to avoid taking students away from academics during the school day to meet. One interviewee also shared that as the number of African American/Black students in the school increased, interest in the group has decreased.

In contrast, the SDC did not have any major barriers. Unlike the GSA, student recruitment was not a challenge because “there are always students who are interested” in joining the SDC (Other6). Ensuring broader involvement of the student body, because the club tended to attract primarily high-achieving students, was the only identified challenge.

#### **4.3. Findings Set Two: Gay-Straight Alliance Influences on Student Experiences**

This second section of findings explores how key informants thought the GSA affected students’ experiences and perceptions of school safety and support. It begins, however, by synthesizing findings about safety and support in the school. This provides important contextual information about the GSA including the conditions its students and advisors were experiencing and potential GSA benefits. Next, the experiences of LGBT students as well as key informants’ attitudes toward them are described. GSA benefits and consequences are then explored, followed by a discussion of the similarities and differences to the other student organizations.

**4.3.1. School and district conditions.** This section provides valuable information about this GSA and the context in which it exists: What were conditions related to physical and emotional safety and student support in Extracurricular High, and more broadly within New Suburb School District? Understanding these conditions provides valuable contextual information for understanding the GSA’s purpose in the school and interpreting from the data how it benefited GSA students and their school. This section synthesizes these findings, beginning with physical safety including violence. This is followed by a discussion of conditions related to emotional safety, including students feeling like they belong in the school and are respected, and support adults provide to

students. Each section includes relevant data from interviews, observations, and archival data. Additionally, findings from the dissertation's teacher and student survey are integrated here (see appendices E and F, respectively, for the full set of results).

**4.3.1.1. Physical safety.** Current perceptions of physical safety at Extracurricular High were positive. Together, teacher and student survey results as well as observations and archival data provided evidence supporting what many interviewees shared: the school was widely considered a physically safe, supportive environment. None of the 30 staff interviewees reported feeling physically unsafe in the school currently. Several staff noted that weapons were not a concern at the school and that the handful of times students had knives it was accidental and not intended “for protection or to do something to someone” (Administrator3). Multiple staff including administrators, teachers, and counselors referenced the school’s senior exit survey (discussed later in this section) that also found students thought the school was physically safe. Selected interviewee comments reflecting this sense of physical safety in the school include the following:

- “There are some years when we don’t have any issues at all, with physical things that happen, and then there are some years where we have a group of really volatile students and there will be more outbreaks and we have to sort through or work through that and try to get help with that. We don’t have a lot” (Administrator1).
- “I think people generally feel very safe here. I think when you come in the building it feels like a safe, happy place generally, and that is the expectation. There is very much a zero tolerance policy for on bullying and violence. ... We have to ensure this is a safe place” (Administrator2).

- “When we have a fight usually the whole school usually finds out about it quickly because it is a rare thing” (Teacher1).
- “I think this school is great in terms of physical safety. You rarely hear of people just randomly getting hurt. Of course there are instances, but for the most part students feel very safe here, at least physically anyway.” (Teacher7)
- “I think the kids feel safe. I feel safe” (Teacher11).
- “We have traditionally been a school where the expectation is kids don’t fight and granted, if kids do fight they will chatter about it, but there are 2,000 kids in the building. They are not getting along all of the time, but getting physical is not how we handle relationships here” (Counselor3).
- “You are going to laugh, because a fight here at [Extracurricular High] isn’t really much of one. You know, usually maybe there is some pushing and a lot of verbal, usually there is someone there to break it up. ... We have been blessed to not have anything bad happen here as far as a kid bringing in a weapon or anything like that” (Counselor4).
- “[The school has] a set procedures about keeping doors locked, [the security officers] is here, there’s a certain entryway, there’s a protocol in being able to come in and see staff. As far as things that provide us with safety, we have phones in classrooms. There are systems within classroom settings that you don’t have to feel isolated. You know there are video cameras in a lot of the locations within the school, so if something is to happen there is a possibility it was also caught on video. Things are well maintained here. It is just not a concern really that I have” (Counselor6).

- “These kids are really good kids, they are coming from really good families and backgrounds. We don’t have really too many altercations and usually like I said it is verbal. Something we can get in there and mediate and get it worked out normally. … I feel like we have definitely built a strong, safe environment in this school for these students” (Other2).

Another interviewee who also reported feeling safe pointed to the potential for physical safety issues in the school: “our incidence number isn’t really that high, the actual number of physical fights is not that high compared to other schools I have been at” (Teacher10). This teacher attributed the school’s physical safety to it having “some good kids being raised by good parents, as opposed to the school’s implementation of different things.”

Although data suggest the school had an environment largely free of physical violence, numerous staff alluded to past issues with physical safety. Teacher3 shared:

I have never had a fight in my classroom or seen one actually, but they have occurred at lunch and they have occurred before school. Last year we had quite a few, for [Extracurricular High] at least. Last year we had maybe five.

In several instances these past physical safety issues and violence were race related. For example, Teacher7 shared that past challenges were:

More of a race relation thing between different ethnicities just fighting on the bus and it would just kind of come in and go through the school. I haven’t seen any of it this year so far and I saw very little of it last year, but before that there was this string of heightened race tension.

Counselor4 also echoed this past “cultural tension” in the school. These issues seemingly peaked during the year before the GSA’s creation, which was “a very violent school year” with “horrible acts of violence” that a small group of students carried out (Teacher8). Teacher 11 commented that “I haven’t heard of any fights this year. Five years ago there seemed to be a lot more.” Teacher8 also talked about past concerns with “all types of really inappropriate behavior from students, jumping on each other and things like that” in the cafeteria. Another interviewee noted that the school still needs to “pay attention more to what is going on in the cafeteria,” where physical safety concerns may arise (Other4). Only one interviewee raised a concern about the potential for physical safety issues in the school: “we have a huge potential for incidences, we don’t have metal detectors at our doors, we don’t have security cameras in every classroom or hallway, we don’t check book bags. … So I think our potential is ridiculously high” (Teacher10). Despite these concerns, Extracurricular High was still largely considered a physically safe school.

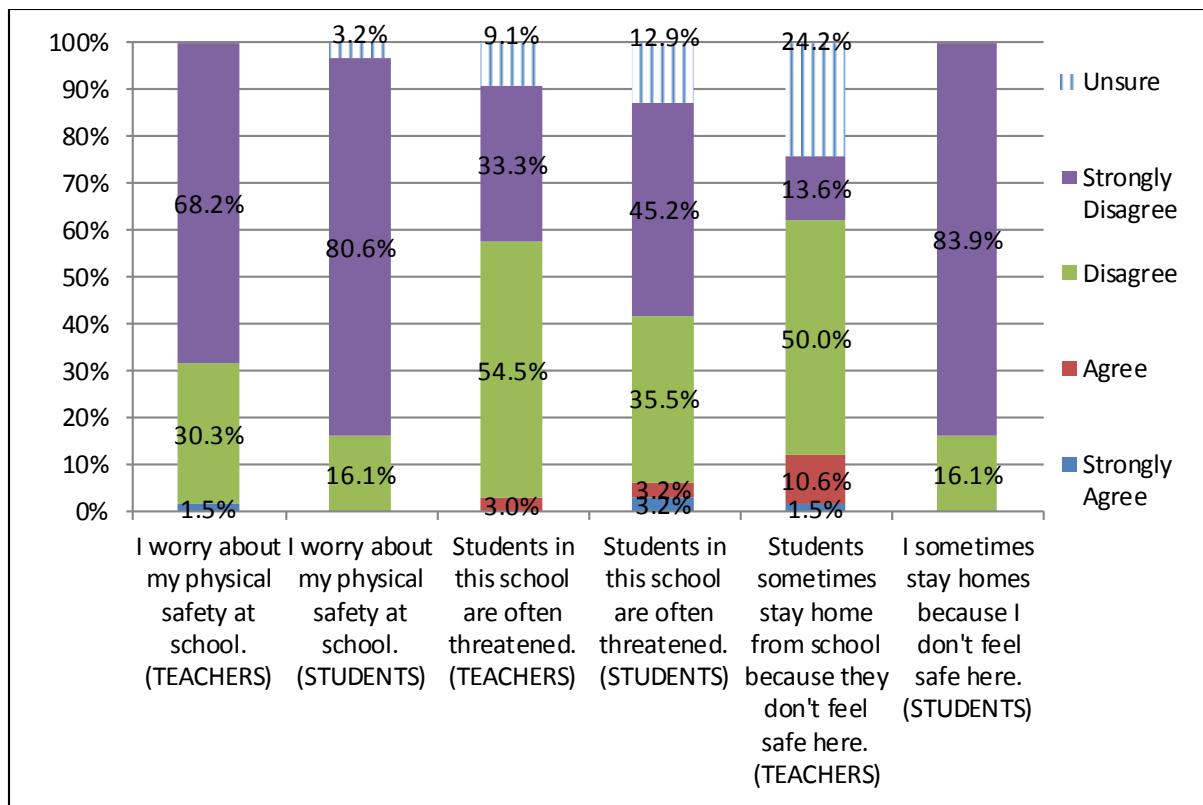
All six GSA student interviewees reported being physically safe in the school and that LGBT students were as physically safe as non-LGBT students. For example, Student1 commented that she felt safe and hadn’t seen “physically threatening events” at the school, despite “every once in a while there will be some people in the lunch room who will get people riled up as if they are going to have a fight.” Student4 shared that:

We don’t have any “gay” physical violence. I feel like people are safe, but I think they would be safe physically in almost any scenario. I think that is the credit to the school system.

Student6 also reported thinking the school “is pretty safe” and also noted that school staff “are not going to let anything happen.” Student5 acknowledged feeling unsafe only as a freshman in the school because of “a negative connation of being so young” among older peers in the school.

Moreover, based on the teacher (n=66) and student (n=31) surveys I administered, respondents also had generally favorable perceptions of physical safety in the school (see Figure 8). Respondents did not feel unsafe in the school and did not have concerns about students being threatened. Specifically:

- Almost all respondents “disagreed” that they worried about safety in the school, with large majorities (68% of teachers and 81% of students) who “strongly disagreed.”
- Almost all respondents “disagreed” that students in the school were often threatened.
- All students at least “disagreed” (84% strongly) that they sometimes stayed home because they didn’t feel safe at school. Although a majority of teachers also “disagreed” to this statement, 10% “agreed” this was the case and 24% were “unsure.”



**Figure 8.** Student (n=31) and teacher (n=66) survey results: Physical safety in Extracurricular High.

Observations of common school areas largely supported these findings about the school's physical safety. I observed seemingly positive interactions among students—I did not observe fights, harassment, or hostility. Although the hallways were busy during class transitions, overall students were calm and orderly. I did not observe instances of students yelling at each other. I observed one instance of a student talking about aggressive behavior toward another. Specifically, one morning in the library I overheard a female student telling three other female students about how she threw a girl against a wall because of something the other student had done to her.

Beyond school-level findings, available district-level data on physical safety consisted of reported bullying incidents for the 2011–12 school year as well as results

from a 2011 district survey of students in Grades 8, 10, and 12 that asked students about problem behaviors including violence and use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

District-level bullying data documented only three such events at the high school level district wide.<sup>33</sup> The anti-bullying process is described further in the policies and practices section. Furthermore, the survey of student problem behaviors, which was intended to inform the district's related prevention and intervention efforts and identify potential safety concerns, found the following:

- 15% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders and 15% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders had *pushed others around* to make them afraid; and
- 11% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders and 9% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders had *feared for their physical safety* at school (with similar percentages for students who had been physically attacked at school).<sup>34</sup>

While these results are not available by high school, they are consistent with the previously described findings about Extracurricular High.

**4.3.1.2. Emotional safety: Student belonging and a respectful climate.** Data suggest that the conditions in the school were strong in the areas of student belonging and a climate of respect when it came to how adults treated students. However, concerns were evident about some groups of students and how peers treated them. Staff interviewees regularly described how all adults make students feel welcomed and that the school focused on fostering a caring place that is “incredibly welcoming” (Other3) and where all

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<sup>33</sup> The data do not identify at which of the three district high schools the incidents occurred. The district had 44 bullying reports at the elementary and middle school levels.

<sup>34</sup> This survey also found that 43% and 61% of 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders had drunk alcohol, respectively; and 26% and 40% of 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders had smoked marijuana, respectively. Moreover, relative to class and school attendance, 28% and 40% of 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders had skipped class at least once in the prior year, respectively; and 18% and 27% of 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders had skipped school at least once in the prior year, respectively.

students and diversity were welcomed. Several staff emphasized and illustrated how the school was trying to create an authentic community and open students' minds to diversity. Some pointed to particular student organizations, such as the African American Students Club (AASC), band, Multicultural Club, and Students with Disabilities Club (SDC) as sources of support and connectedness for students. For example, the Multicultural Club advisor raised awareness in the school about Ramadan and other cultural events or salient issues. Related quotations from staff in different roles that reflect the school's emphasis on student belonging and connectedness include:

- “No matter what color, what sexual orientation, what background, what ethnicity, it is becoming, I think, a very comfortable melting pot” (Administrator3).
- “Our coaches … don’t tolerate [putting students down] at all. That is the opposite of what we are trying to do here. You don’t make fun of other kids, you don’t haze kids. You don’t put down other kids, you don’t point out their weaknesses. You try to find a way to pick them up. So that goes to that atmosphere we are talking about. … In sports that is what you try to build” (Administrator4).
- “Our culture is one of inclusiveness and that goes for multicultural, LGBT, you know certainly students who are our special education. … We have done a lot to make sure everybody and anybody has a home here” (Teacher1).
- For students, “if you don’t feel comfortable going to guidance, there is at least one teacher in the school you can go to. I think the staff are warm and friendly when it comes to that” (Teacher7).

- “Everybody knows everybody, everybody knows somebody from all kinds of different subgroups. I don’t know, I may be in la la land” (Teacher9).
- “All adults make students feel welcomed” (Counselor2).
- “It is the eye contact that we all give each other. It’s the smiles, saying a kid’s name or if we don’t know a kid’s name, addressing them so they know we are with them. Any staff member provides that opportunity to connect with the kids and I think the kids feel connected. … [Even] the custodians are amazing at connecting with the kids as well” (Other1).
- “I think our kids here are pretty open minded” (Other2).
- “All the way around, kids are very polite and I haven’t seen too many issues of them being disrespectful toward each other. Even we have a boy in a wheelchair and they love him, they even elected him as homecoming king. It really seems like it doesn’t bother them. I haven’t had much trouble with kids being disrespectful to me or [other cafeteria] staff” (Other4).
- “Kids are very accepting of everything. We have so many special needs kids here, so they are just super accepting of everyone” (Other5).

Some concerns emerged about student belonging and respect from their peers.

Several staff interviewees noted that developing a school environment where all students felt like they belonged was a difficult one given the school’s size. For example, Teacher12 shared that:

As a whole, to make students feel like they belong, with a school as large as ours I think that is a constant struggle; to make sure that students feel they are part of the

school environment. That is the toughest thing in big, big schools like this.

Students can get lost.

Moreover, some staff raised concerns around emotional safety and respect among students. Several staff also noted that safety and bullying concerns were largely emotional—verbal and online harassment. While minor compared to the overwhelmingly positive comments, these are worth noting and pertain to (a) general bullying and online harassment and (b) particular groups of students, including students from particular racial/ethnic backgrounds as well as English language learners (ELL) experiencing challenges around belonging and connection. As Counselor3 shared when talking about safety in the school, “it is not so physical as much as it is emotional. I think kids with online things and the social media pieces; they have things to hide behind now.” Teacher3 also commented that bullying is “probably a little more underground” and “harder to spot,” which suggests that school staff may not always have an adequate perspective on emotional safety in the school. Despite concerns about this, though, the school had few confirmed incidents of bullying.

Some challenges with students not feeling respected by their peers in the school were evident in interviews. This included behavior of some students with racist attitudes. One administrator shared that some students are “outright racist” and “probably homophobic too.” Within-group tensions were also a concern among the school’s growing Muslim population, in particular females, and African American/Black students. One teacher interviewee noted that “how they treat each other sometimes is based more on their original ethnic group,” using “their religion as a weapon against each other” by putting each other down for being more or less authentically Muslim based on their

ethnic background (Teacher8). One school staff interviewee also noted that approximately one third of ELL students did not feel like they belonged in the school and another half felt only some connection, with involvement in extracurricular activities being the primary reason the remaining students feel connected to the school.

Concerns about how African American/Black students were treated by their peers within this racial group seemed to be rooted in cultural differences. Specifically, as one counselor noted, that students who were born and raised in the district and enrolled in higher academic classes “struggled with” those who were new to the school from other districts who were “wild … loud, boisterous, hung out in crowds.” Another interviewee echoed this perspective:

I have worked with some of my African American students who struggle in a building like this, when they are trying to be studious and working hard and they are being called “White” by peers within their cultural group as well as from family at home (Counselor3).

While still a concern for some staff, these issues did not seem to be a major challenge currently.

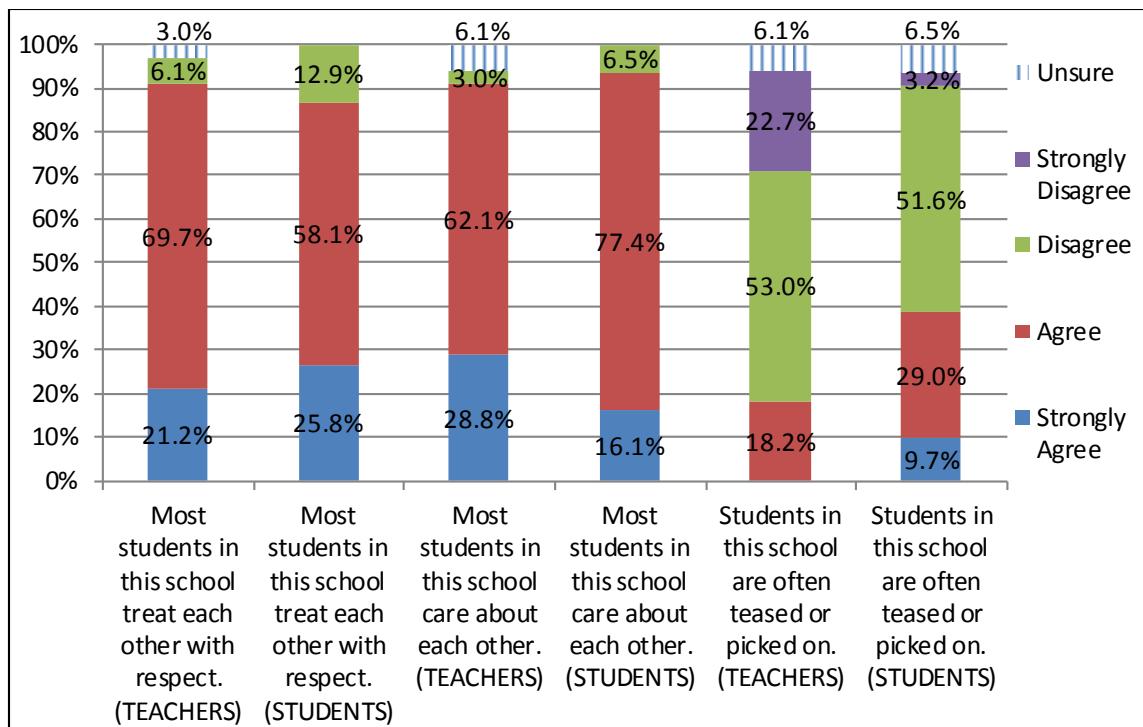
GSA student interviewees raised a number of concerns about the behaviors of their peers in the school, suggesting the presence of some disparities in perceptions of emotional safety. These students tended to talk about emotional safety within the context of being LGBT and related treatment, which is the focus of section of 4.3.2. Student2 noted, for example, that “most of the backlash [from other students] was emotional rather than physical” and that although the school “did a lot … there is definitely a lot of room for improvement” in the emotional safety of LGBT students at the school. As section 4.3.2 also

explores in detail, some GSA students raised some concerns about staff responses to anti-LGBT bias and other issues in the school. While these findings do not suggest serious student concerns, they do suggest some small pockets of concerns.

Overall, based on the teacher (n=66) and student (n=31) surveys I administered, respondents also had generally favorable perceptions about students respecting and caring about each other, but still had concerns about students being teased and picked on (see Figure 9). Although agreement tended to not be strong, most respondents agreed that students treated each other with respect and cared about each other. Specific findings include:

- Although most teachers and students at least “agreed” students in the school treat each other with respect, a higher percentage of students (13%) “disagreed” compared to teachers (6%).
- A larger proportion of teachers (29%) than students (16%) “strongly agreed” that students in the school care about each other, but the overall level of agreement was similar.
- A sizable proportion of students “agreed” (29%) or “strongly agreed” (10%) that students were often teased or picked on in the school, compared to smaller proportion of teachers (18%) who “agreed” (and no teachers “strongly disagreed”).

Additionally, on the surveys, 15% of teachers and 19% of students indicated that male students are bullied/teased if they “don’t act masculine enough” and another 26% were unsure about this.

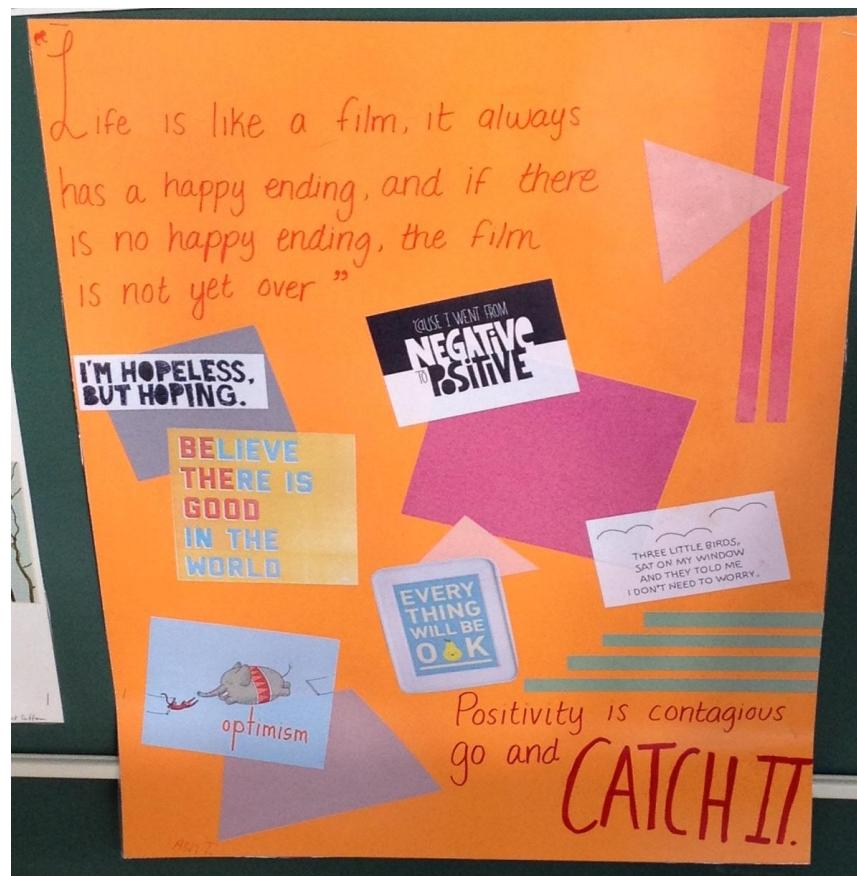


**Figure 9.** Student (n=31) and teacher (n=66) survey results: Student-student relationships and respect in Extracurricular High.

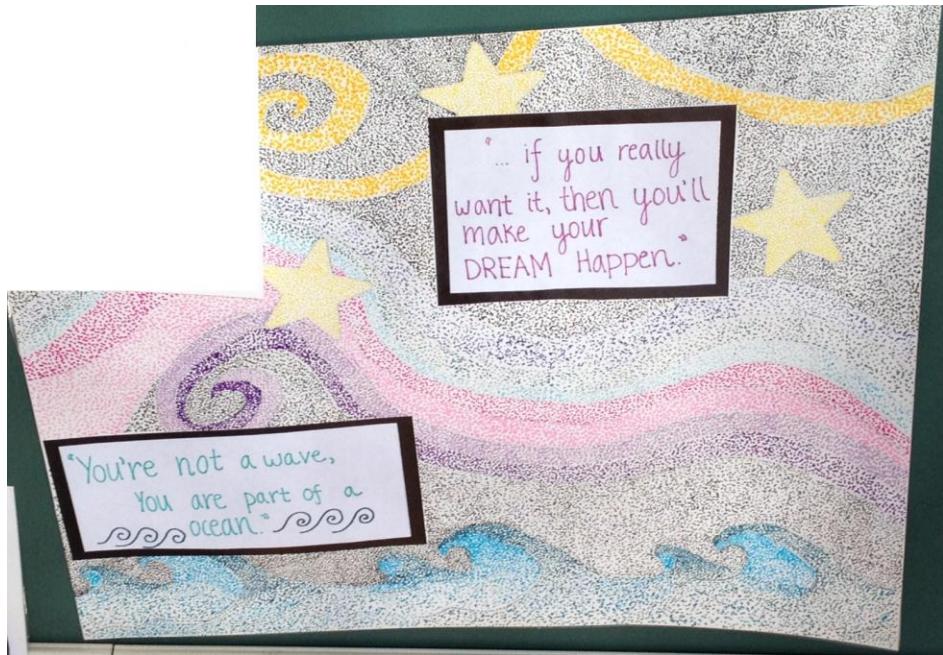
*Note.* One student skipped the statement about most students in the school treating each other with respect.

Observations of common school areas demonstrated positive student-student relationships. Some poignant examples of emotional safety and support—students caring about, respecting, and welcoming one another—were evident during school observations. In one instance, I observed a student attentively walking with a severely disabled female student; holding her hand, walking slowly by a set of lockers, and saying “you are doing great” in a kind voice of encouragement to the student. As another example, I observed a student dropping some materials she was carrying in the hall and another student quickly asking if they were OK. Overall, students appeared well integrated racially (e.g., I observed many racially mixed groups of students sitting together in the library and transitioning in the halls).

During several visits I also observed positive messages posted around the school, including in the form of student art. For example, Figure 10 shows student art that included language related to hope, optimism, and positivity. This poster also reflects my impression of the larger school environment, which was welcoming and friendly. Figure 11 shows another piece of student art in the school with a positive message focused on making dreams a reality. The next section synthesizes findings about LGBT students' experiences.



**Figure 10.** Student poster outside of school library.



**Figure 11.** Student poster outside of school library.

I also observed students proactively trying to be “upstanders.” For example, Student5 shared a story about approaching administrators and teachers to address the concerning behavior of two older students toward a freshman: “my friend and I who sit next to the student, the first time it happened, we were like ‘This is not OK! This is absolutely too much.’” I also observed one instance of a male student trying to intervene and address how a female student was treating another male student who was socially awkward, telling her “not to be mean” and “I look back at you [in class] and think, just stop. … Some people just can’t make friends.” His efforts seemed fruitless, as she went on to say that she was going to continue being mean to him because he was annoying, bothered her, and thinks he knew information others didn’t: “he is mean to me, he thinks he is a know-it-all and is God.” In one last effort, the student trying to intervene said, “the only reason he is mean to you is because you are mean to him.”

Available archival data included the district wide high school survey described in the previous section. Findings relevant to emotional safety from this survey include:

- 45% of the 10<sup>th</sup> graders and 35% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported having *been verbally attacked*;
- 34% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders and 37% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported doing *nothing when another student was being called mean or hurtful names*

This is consistent with the findings on emotional safety at Extracurricular High. Another source of archival data addressing emotional safety included a senior exit survey, which the next section describes more fully. One question on this survey asked students how well they felt “a sense of belonging” while at the school. Just over half indicated “excellent” while 15% replied “average” and 5% indicated “below average” or “needs improvement.” Whereas approximately 18% of students who were African American or White responded with “average” or lower, 27% to 30% of Asian, Hispanic, and “other” students indicated their sense of belonging in the school was “average” or lower.

**4.3.1.3. Student support from adults in the school.** In addition to these findings related to whether and how students experienced a school that was welcoming and respectful, interviewees were also asked about how the school supported students. A theme throughout all of the interviews, informants uniformly reported that support for students in the school was extensive—described as “really strong,” “high,” and “phenomenal” at times. Interviewees pointed to myriad ways that the school aimed to support student success and well-being. For example, numerous interviewees talked about proactive teachers who are “very good about letting other people know when they feel a student needs support” (Other6). Some interviewees also talked about the strengths

of the school's administration, counseling department, prevention specialist, school psychologist, security personnel, social worker, and even custodians. The policies and practices section later in this chapter fully explores the school's specific approaches to supporting students. However, the following quotations reflect staff perspectives about general conditions in the school in this area of focus. Some comments addressed the school environment generally:

- “We tell kids we are there for you and then we really are there for them. [We are] a community that really cares and extends ourselves to the students” (Administrator1).
- “I think our goal is to always have them walk out, knowing that we still care about them” (Administrator5).

Interviewees also pointed to the supports of particular staff in the school, from administrators to teachers, counselors, and other adults in the building:

- “The environment is friendly for kids to succeed whether it’s a positive attitude by all the teachers, faculty, the secretaries, the athletic director who has nothing to do with calculus or chemistry. It is an environment that lends itself to kids being able to see their goals and reach for them” (Administrator4).
- “The kids feel supported. ... Our social worker is amazing. She is really in tune with things around her. The teachers are definitely in it for the kids, so they are looking out for their well-being. I feel like it is a pretty strong support system” (Teacher3).

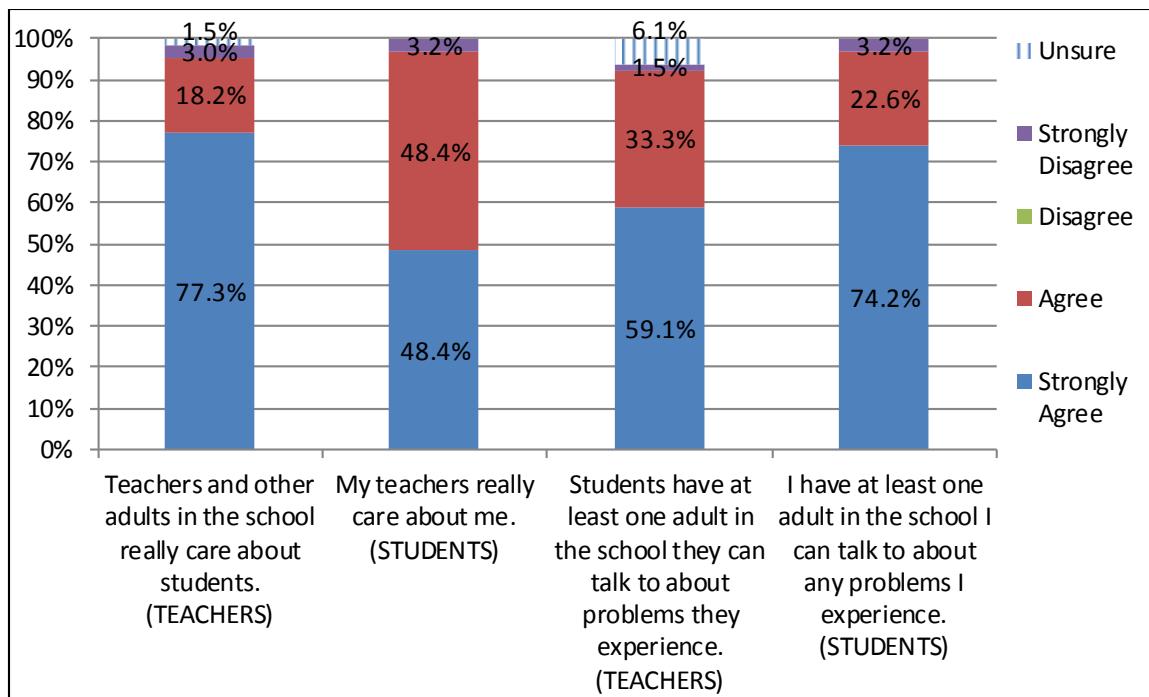
- “Having a counseling office, having teachers that listen and pay attention. Being there to listen as a caring adult. We are always here if students want to see us” (Counselor2).
- “This is a wonderful place, I think, for a student to be because of the support....If you were to ask a lot of our kids if they have teachers they can go to and confide in, share like worries, fears, or even happy occasions; it goes across the board, so we are very lucky” (Counselor4).
- “In talking with students, I get the feeling that most students feel extremely comfortable to know that they can go in and see the principal and let him know how they feel” (Counselor6).
- “I know that a lot of students really trust [the security guard]. I had a student who, if she was having a rough morning, she would want to walk the rounds with him when he would check the doors in the morning. The students love him. So I think just having those people visible and available, his job is building security but he also helps students on an emotional level too” (Other6).
- “We have a great administrative team in the school and we have a great guidance team in this school and they are always there for the kids. I think the kids know if they need to come and talk about their problems, the staff is here for them, including our teachers are great too. They are here for them and really go beyond the call of duty” (Other2).

Students also were seen as part of the support structure in the school. Several staff commented that students would come to adults in the school if they were worried about a

peer. For example, Counselor4 shared that “students also look out for each other, so we get feedback from kids, ‘I am worried about my friends’.” Also, a few interviewees talked about themselves feeling more supported by the current school administration than the previous one.

Overall, based on the teacher (n=66) and student (n=31) surveys I administered, respondents also had generally favorable perceptions about supports from adults in the school (see Figure 12). Students were less likely to “strongly agree” that their teachers really care about them, compared to teachers completing the survey, but students were more likely to “strongly agree” that they have at least one adult in the school they can talk to about problems they experience. Specific findings include:

- Although most teachers and students at least “agreed” teachers/adults care about students, a much larger percentage of teachers (77%) “strongly agreed” than did students (48%).
- In contrast, although most teachers and students again at least “agreed” students have at least one adult they can talk to about problems they experience, a smaller percentage of teachers (59%) “strongly agreed” than did students (74%).



**Figure 12.** Student (n=31) and teacher (n=66) survey results: Student-teacher relationships in Extracurricular High.

However, as noted in the previous section, Extracurricular High had some historic race-related challenges. This also included how adults in the school responded to some students who were African American/Black. In the past, one staff interviewee shared that these students experienced bias when they were seen in groups in the school:

They were seen as suspicious, seen as possibly creating some problems or potentially going to. They noticed that most of their White friends would stay away from them when they were grouped together. It got to a place where they felt this empowerment and they would walk in the hallways purposely to intimidate, almost to send out a signal that we are here and proud of it.

This interviewee also noted that in the past these students “weren’t sure there was an understanding and sensitivity to a particular culture and background and being in classrooms, there were things being talked about or discussed that in some cases were

offensives or in some cases were insensitive.” These concerns contributed to creating the AASC, as described earlier in the findings, and some changes to the dress code. Furthermore, other cultural groups of students, including those who were Muslim, were also “challenged with feeling they were losing their identity” in the school, which led to other school efforts including its Multicultural Club to support these students (Counselor1).

GSA student interviewees reported feeling largely supported by adults in the school. For example, Student1 shared that “a lot of the teachers here are very welcoming to students, at least from what I have noticed.” Another shared that:

I have loved all of my teachers, I have to admit that staff here is great. I don’t think there is one teacher that I couldn’t go to if I really needed something. There might be some teachers I prefer to others, but even the teacher at the bottom of the list I feel like I could still go to and say, “hey, I am having an issue” (Student5).

However, Student3 shared a different perspective about the school’s priorities:

It seems like this school is more interested in keeping college admissions rates high and making sure everyone is doing well academically than emotionally. ... If students come to the school asking for help, they will help but they don’t really make any effort to seek out students other than the stereotypical “let’s raise awareness on this issue.”

Archival data collected from the school included additional data on teacher perspectives collected from a survey the school administered in Spring 2012. Most questions on the 34-item survey are not directly relevant to this dissertation (e.g., about the quality of professional development and the teacher evaluation system). Several

items, however, provide additional information on the school's climate and culture (some focus on staff satisfaction and their ability to support students). Of the 145 teachers completing the survey, 80% to 89% "agreed" or "strongly agreed"<sup>35</sup> with the following:

- I enjoy working at [Extracurricular High] and [it] has a family atmosphere.
- There is a feeling of trust and confidence among the staff.
- The principal is supportive and approachable (74% strongly agreed to this item).
- If I have a problem with a student, I feel comfortable and confident seeking help from our guidance counselors (with a similar result when asked about seeking help from administration).

As these bulleted findings illustrate, the school's teacher survey was overwhelmingly positive in these areas. One small area of concern emerged: 10% of teachers responding to the survey "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that "the administration handles student discipline in a thorough and efficient manner."<sup>36</sup>

Additional archival data collected from the school, a Spring 2012 exit survey of the senior class, provided additional evidence of the school's positive climate, as well as some potential areas for improvement. Importantly, the school administration's voluntary decision to conduct this survey for purposes of informing their understanding of school experiences is further evidence of the administration's commitment to creating a safe, supportive learning environment for students. The exit survey found that almost all of the students participating in it reported that their experience at the school was positive (96%),

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<sup>35</sup> In all cases, a large portion of teachers "strongly agreed" to the listed statements; across the examples provided, this percentage ranged from 39% to 74%, with almost all 50% or higher.

<sup>36</sup> Among responding teachers, 7% omitted a response to this question.

teachers “generally held high standards and demanded quality work” (95%), and “building principals created a positive environment” that supported students’ overall well-being (93%).

Student perspectives showed areas needing some improvement on other questions. For example, one question asked how well the school prepared students for “becoming connected to the cultural and economic diversity in the school.” While 71% said “excellent” or “good,” almost 1 in 3 students felt this area was “average” (21%), “below average” (5%), or “needs improvement” (3%). These findings varied only slightly when data were disaggregated by gender and race/ethnicity.

Observations provided additional evidence that the school provided a supportive environment where adults genuinely cared about students and took time to demonstrate this. Several examples illustrate this. I observed one staff member asking a student about their birthday: “someone has a birthday coming up, you have anything fun planned this weekend?” I observed another staff member interacting with a student, saying “you are such a good kid,” and asking him about his plans for college.

Other observations of positive staff-student interactions were documented too. I observed an administrator walking with her arm on the shoulder of a young female student who was crying and experiencing some sort of physical pain. The administrator looked deeply attentive and fully focused on the student (e.g., through eye and body language), asking “what can I do to help you,” despite being in the midst of coordinating standardized testing scheduled for the next school day. I did not observe a single staff-student interaction or staff behavior that demonstrated staff disrespect toward students. As another example, a staff member in the library had to break up a larger group of

students clustered around a table, and did so by respectfully saying, “only six [students] per table, I hope when I come back you have made the right choice.” In several cases, during interviews, school staff paused to address the needs of students or families, which demonstrated that they came first. For example, as I walked with one of the GSA advisors one day, the advisor enthusiastically answered a student’s questions about parallelism while we were walking to her classroom.

Although few school staff were regularly visible in hallways during school observations, including during student transitions between class periods, adults were visible in many other parts of the school. I regularly saw the school security (who was dressed in regular school staff attire) in one of the hallways connecting different wings of the building. He appeared to be monitoring student transitions and talked with some students as they passed by. In the mornings I also regularly observed the attendance officer at his desk outside of his office, where students went if they were tardy. I occasionally observed teachers transitioning in the hallways and administrators in the cafeteria during lunch periods. The front office, which housed a receptionist and administrative assistant as well as the school’s principal and four other administrators, also typically had at least one administrator (if not several) present during my observations at different times of the day. The guidance office was also consistently bustling during my visits, with guidance counselors meeting with students in their offices and students waiting to meet with counselors in the guidance reception area (where several receptionists greeted students).

**4.3.2. Experiences of LGBT students.** Whereas the preceding sections explored school conditions in the areas of physical safety, emotional safety, and student support

for students generally, this section examines the experiences of students who were, or who were perceived to be, LGBT at Extracurricular High. This section provides information addressing the following research questions: What are the experiences of LGBT students relative to safety and support (e.g., how are they treated, to what extent is their LGBT identity affirmed, to what extent do they experience harassment)? What are key informants' attitudes toward LGBT students generally?

Staff interviewees tended to largely view the experiences of LGBT students as greatly improved compared to prior years, although some student interviewees expressed concerns about the experiences of LGBT students in the school. Staff also generally suggested an appreciation for the school's efforts to create a safe, supportive environment for LGBT students and a desire for LGBT students to feel that they belong in the school.

Counselor2 shared that:

My hope is that they are getting involved in school, feeling good about being here, and then they feel comfortable being who they are. If they feel involved in school and comfortable, then they are more likely to become open about who they are.

Another supportive counselor even went as far as to talk about not liking the word “acceptance” when talking about LGBT identity: “I hate that word too because ‘acceptance’ gives someone the power to say whether it is an OK thing or not” (Counselor3).

Staff interviewees generally spoke favorably about the experiences of LGBT students in the school. Several acknowledged, understandably, a desire to not generalize their impressions to all LGBT students in the school—but in looking at staff perspectives

collectively, it appears that LGBT students have many supports and are experiencing more positive, supportive conditions in the school compared to in the past. For example:

- “We have had a large share of homosexual students, and honestly I can’t say that this would be the case in other schools, but our kids are very, very accepting. We had just the other night, I was at the football game, the second row of the game two girls were holding hands together. It was not, nobody was pointing, it wasn’t a big deal, it was just the same kids like anybody else” (Teacher1).
- “I feel like here we have a pretty good support system [for LGBT students], but I think it could be better too. . . . I know that my students who are out have a pretty decent support system that I have seen as far their friends are concerned, but I don’t know how that translates into their class overall” (Teacher3).
- “I have never seen at least in my organization anything that led them to be unsafe, or persecuted, or questioned, or anything. I never felt they were unsafe, or I would have put a halt to that or sought help to address those situations. I have never come across it” (Teacher5).
- “Some of them are out. Some of them, we as teachers suspect possibly and we’re sensitive, well we are sensitive to everybody, but we are sensitive to that. It has to be really hard for them. So we watch out for it. I haven’t seen in the last few years any negative things going on, any bullying or judging” (Teacher11).

- “Most teachers are committed to the growth and success of every student regardless of their individual sexual orientation” (teacher survey respondent).
- “The number of kids who have had that, LGBT, and or questioning that and come in and have conversations about it, how they feel they are treated by everyone else. Most of it has gotten really a lot better, but for some they are still struggling because … there are still things that are insensitively said by certain students. … This year in particular and last year, there seems to be a really interesting acceptance, a lot more” (Counselor1).
- “I would be surprised if they felt this was an environment that is not accepting of others. I haven’t had any students come to me with those types of concerns, feeling like their experience is not as good because of that, because of their sexual orientation” (Counselor5).
- “Overall, at least with the young people I have had an opportunity to talk with, they feel pretty safe with it. It is not the issue here at school as much as the process of allowing themselves to be who they are and feel safe within themselves” (Other1).
- “I know there is a boy who comes in at breakfast time who I think is gay and I don’t think anybody has said anything to him that I know of” (Other4).

Numerous staff talked about hearing fewer LGBT-related biased language, such as “that’s so gay” or “fag(got),” than in the past although several also noted this still occurred. Several interviewees shared anecdotes of specific issues involving LGBT students in the school and how they were addressed. For example, one staff interviewee described how a previous school administrator did not want to allow two female students

to dance together at a school event. This person addressed this with the administrator, noting that it was not right to intervene and that the same rule would apply to all students at the dance. The administrator then agreed and the two girls continued to dance together without issue. Several staff also noted the lack of pushback from staff (e.g., negative comments) when the school's literary magazine has published LGBT-related articles, although an article on a student who was lesbian from a number of years ago was addressed within a larger focus on the adolescent brain because of concerns about community reaction to an article on a gay student only.

Most staff were aware of some LGB students in the school. None were aware of transgender students in the school, although some were aware of a current student with a transgender sibling in a nearby middle school. They also noted increased numbers of LGB students in the school. Teacher7 commented that:

8, 9, 10 years ago, I did not see any students come out and express themselves, but over the last few years that has been huge. ... I think over the last two to three years there has been a huge increase in how comfortable and welcomed they feel here.

Counselor3 also described these improved experiences of LGBT students in the school:

I remember [a number of] years ago there was an openly gay couple, two lesbian girls, they were very open with the relationship and you heard the buzz, "they were holding hands, they kissed." I have seen multiple relationships since then and especially even in the last few years holding hands and you know they are more than just friends. You know, they are a couple, and it is not that "shh shh shh shh, you know, oh my gosh." I am not getting that from the kids now.

Another counselor also commented that in the last few years:

There seems to be a really interesting acceptance, a lot more ... kids may be surprised that a certain kid is gay or a certain kid is lesbian, but I don't see that person being put down or ostracized like it had been way, way back (Counselor1).

Staff who have relationships with LGB students noted that students' concerns tended to pertain to understanding their identity or coming out to their parents, rather than about their treatment by peers in the school. For example, Counselor4 commented that "the kids that I have worked with, usually their struggles are finding their identity, what that looks like, rather than not feeling safe." Four staff talked about supporting students either individually or along with their families as they tried to understand and express their LGB identity. As Counselor3 shared:

I think our biggest challenge right now is our parents. Personally, from some of my students, I just see that turmoil. It may be OK to come to school and hold hands with their girlfriend, but they go home, and oh, that is my best friend. Like mom and dad aren't really seeing or accepting, and they know that they are being loved, but they really are struggling coming out to mom and dad. It is almost like it is OK, I am not going to get any flack for it in the school setting, but maybe at home they are not out. Or they are trying to be out and mom and dad aren't seeing it or are trying not to see it.

Another interviewee noted that parent support was a "common" challenge for students trying to express their LGBT identity (Other6). Several talked about supporting students directly with coming out to their parents, even as far as an administrator and counselor

meeting with a student and a parent in the school's guidance department when the student first came out as LGBT.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, a small number of staff pointed to invisibility of LGBT students in the school. Related perspectives about the experiences of LGBT students in the school, which come from other staff not already quoted in this section, include the following:

- “I never heard of gay athletes on any of our teams” and “I don’t know if that is good that the kids knew it and it was just part of the deal or it’s bad the kid kept it quiet” (Administrator4).
- “If you are openly gay, you probably get a lot more negative attention. So I think what happens, is, a lot of the gay students will try their best to be as normal, or fit in as best they can, without revealing their sexual orientation so they don’t have to deal with scrutiny from their classmates” (Teacher2).
- “It is none of my business nor appropriate for me to inquire about a student’s sexuality. I know of no openly gay or lesbian students in the school, nor [sic] should I assume a student is gay” (Teacher survey respondent).

Additionally, no staff interviewees expressed explicitly or indirectly derogatory or even negative attitudes about LGBT identity or students. A handful of staff did refer to gay identity as a “lifestyle,” though. Whether they intended to or not, this suggested a potential attitude that sexual orientation is a choice. Interviewees’ interactions with me when discussing LGBT topics were another indicator of their attitudes toward these issues and the school’s climate for LGBT students. For example, several teachers talked openly about LGBT issues in front of students who may have been passing by and within

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<sup>37</sup> This description avoids including some details, like the student’s gender, to protect their identity.

listening distance, or working elsewhere in a classroom. I did not observe interviewees lowering their voices when addressing LGBT issues, although I sensed that a few had some difficulty with saying “gay” or “LGBT.”

Several staff pointed to a few reasons for the fairly positive climate for LGBT students in the school. For example, Counselor3 commented that “one of the advantages of living in a social media time, I think kids are seeing more that there are students like them or there is more of an acceptance” of LGBT identity. Some other interviewees pointed to improved social attitudes as well, which have trickled down to the school level. Several also pointed to the school’s GSA, including a comment from Teacher 12 who was not involved in it: “I think students belonging to that organization and knowing the organization is here” has contributed to a more respectful school environment. However, another teacher not involved in the GSA noted a need for the school to provide education to students about sexual orientation:

I am not aware of any program that speaks to all students about being accepting of sexual orientation outside of just the bullying topics. So it is like lumped in with that, but it is not helping other students who are either not comfortable with that or are raised in families where anything but being heterosexual is OK. It can be really difficult for some students to just pretend it is OK, and if they are not exposed to it at all then they maybe they don’t know how to respond, but maybe with some discussion or whatever, they might be able to respond in a healthier way. I don’t know how you would go about that, but I don’t know of anything outside of the clubs that fosters this (Teacher10).

Finally, a few staff mentioned the presence of LGBT staff in the school. Counselor3 noted “a surprisingly large percentage of gay staff members,” which has helped to model for kids that gay identity can be accepted, whereas Teacher2 raised a concern about the perceived lack of openly LGBT staff (“we don’t have a single openly gay staff member”). While these perspectives contrast each other, they reveal that at least a few interviewees believed that openly LGBT staff might contribute to a more positive climate for LGBT students.

In contrast, GSA student interviewees shared mixed perspectives about the experiences of LGBT students in the school. Several noted positive experiences with “a lot of different support groups” and teachers who were “very supportive” (Student4). Student2 pointed to a drama club multicultural event with various skits including some on students coming out as gay as an example of the school’s inclusivity for LGBT students. Furthermore, a previous GSA president wore to school a shirt with “legalize gay” printed on it and distributed handouts to tell people about the GSA. Student4 noted that some students looking at this other student oddly, but she received “a whole lot of support. People were like whoa, good for you, and I think that was cool.”

None of the GSA student interviewees reported LGBT-related physical violence in the school, where they felt “people are free to be themselves without the fear of being beat after school” (Student4). Most noted, however, experiences observing or hearing about behaviors that created an unwelcoming environment for LGBT students such as “slurs or some secret behind-the-back talk” (Student4). Student2 shared that she:

Knew one student who ... was extroverted about being gay so that made him a target in the school. Students wouldn’t say things to his face, that wasn’t part of

the culture, they would say it behind his back and he knew what they were saying about him.

Another student interviewee commented that some students didn't view language such as "no homo" as hurtful (Student2). A third talked about some student assumptions of others' sexual orientation:

I have heard of ridiculous instances of two guys hugging for just two seconds and people will say "I wonder if they are gay." I say, "yes, two people can't hug without being attracted to each other, that makes perfect sense, and I am attracted to my mom." People not understanding what is OK or not OK to say. The idea that someone would think others are gay for hugging someone of the same sex I think is absolutely ridiculous (Student5).

The following provides another longer student quote illustrating the student experience of biased language in the school.

Anti-gay slurs—that is something you hear a lot, whether it is directed at a person or just used interchangeably. You will hear "that's so gay;" you will hear that a lot. You will hear people say bad things whether they are LGBT or not. ... Sometimes people will just see a girl who is dressed in more masculine clothing and won't think twice about shouting out a slur. ... Just going down the hallway you hear it a lot. In a way it is just as harmful as physical threats.... [You hear it] somewhere between 1 and 4 times per day maybe. And again, not directed at any person in particular, but just used ignorantly without realizing what effects it has on people who take it offensively (Student1).

A fifth student commented that “we have LGBT students who, they are here and they are out and they do well, but there is a lot of talk behind their backs and what not, general distrust and dislike toward them” (Student3).

Several GSA interviewees commented that they and other LGBT students were mostly able to develop meaningful friendships, albeit with some challenges. For example, Student2 noted that her friends were fine with hearing about her involvement in the GSA, but if she talked about her girlfriend they would “shy away and want the conversation to end.” This student also raised challenges with students being out as LGBT in the school during previous years:

There were some older students who had a bad experience when they came out. They lost a few friends. I didn’t know them personally, but heard about it through friends. Some LGBT students were more distant because they thought they would not be accepted. . . There was a bad stigma attached to coming out at the school. Another student also shared challenges with making friends with other students of the same sex because of their discomfort with her sexual identity.

Furthermore, three students raised concerns about how teachers handled LGBT-related issues in the school. This included not addressing anti-LGBT language as they would in response to other biased student behavior:

It really depended from teacher to teacher. . . Some teachers were great about it, and they would say, “that’s not OK” when they heard “that’s so gay” or things like that. Other teachers would not say anything, both in classes and in the halls. They would stop students from saying other slurs, but not LGBT slurs. They just didn’t say anything to address it (Student2).

This student also had concerns with how other staff in the building responded to this language, such as calling students “faggot” and “taunt[ing] others’ masculinity.” For example, “when in line in the cafeteria, the cafeteria staff wouldn’t speak up when students used slurs in front of them. Custodial staff wouldn’t either.” This student shared that despite being fortunate to have a school environment that “is very safe and very supportive compared to other schools” in the state and the country, the school was not doing enough to make it safe and welcoming for LGBT students. This student shared that:

When you see staff standing by when students say anti-gay slurs, it says to other students that teachers aren’t going to support you. It creates a hostile environment and suggests to students they can get away with it. It makes you feel silenced.

Student3 noted that teachers did not address LGBT topics in their classes in cases where you would expect it, such as literature and health: “our health teacher pretended gay relationships didn’t even exist.”

Teacher survey responses suggest some mixed findings relative to the experiences of LGBT students in the school. While a majority of teachers did not think LGBT students are “often bullied or teased,” approximately 1 in 10 at least agreed this was the case and more than another third (36%) were unsure. Approximately three fourths of teachers at least agreed that adults treat LGBT students and non-LGBT students similarly in the school and another 18% were unsure. One teacher survey respondent also shared a related comment when asked about what adults in the school do to make students cared about and welcomed: “most teachers are committed to the growth and success of every student regardless of their individual sexual orientation.”

As part of my observations, I sought to identify LGBT-related documents, signage, or other information. Based on my observations, the school did not have such materials visibly displayed. I also did not see GSA-related materials displayed in the school during observations. One GSA student leader also confirmed during an interview that the GSA did not have printed, “tangible” resources for LGBT students, but that this was something she wanted it to address in the school.

However, the school’s literary magazine, which was student-led, had published four LGBT-related articles that provided significant, positive visibility to Spectrum and related issues. This included the aforementioned article about the GSA and three other articles including one during the 2010–11 school year as part of a “relationship special” and feature articles during the 2011–12 and 2012–13 school years. All of the articles directly addressed LGBT acceptance and support in various ways, typically referencing GLSEN data on the experiences of LGBT students and political issues like same-sex marriage. The articles were also written with generally affirming perspectives and language, although “homosexual,” a somewhat outdated term, was used in earlier articles and one article referred to a student no longer keeping her “preference” a secret.

For example, the early article focused on a gay male student, describing his worries about coming out and challenges with peer support, but noting that he was accepted by friends. The article addresses the student’s concerns about peers’ looks and language as well as misconceptions about people who are gay and their relationships. The article included a teacher quote addressing the challenges LGBT people may experience: “they are a minority and often feel alone and isolated if there are lack of resources, such as people to talk to or local clubs and organizations for support.” Moreover, the article

included a mini-story about a school administrator's experience of her daughter coming out as lesbian and a blurb about how celebrities have supported efforts to promote positive images of gay people and further marriage equality. Similarly, another article covered, in depth, the coming-out experiences of a student who began sharing her lesbian identity as a sophomore in the school, covering related issues including religion and violence against LGBT students. It also noted that the local community had "become more accepting in recent years," but was more accepting of lesbians than gay men.

The literary magazine also covered transgender issues. The most recent literary magazine article focused on a 10-year-old transgender sibling of a student in the high school. The article included references to GLSEN data on school-based harassment, a reference to the American Psychological Association's gender identity disorder diagnosis, a short description about a trans celebrity (Chaz Bono), and quotations from the young person (and a photograph with a happy smile). In addition to providing background information about transgender identity, the article describing the importance of parental acceptance and addressed some challenges and supports the young person was experiencing, including at school, from friends, and through a transgender therapy group. For example, the article described how the family supported the young person's trans identity and that teachers in the local elementary school were "totally fine with it" when they were told at school orientation. The article also quoted the Spectrum member: "it's been nice having the club as a way to discuss what's going on with my kid brother."

During my observations, I heard only a couple instances of negative language (e.g., vulgarities, anti-gay slurs). I documented a couple of instances of biased language. One day I observed a couple of younger male students calling each other "faggots" in the

hall. They appeared to be joking around and although I overheard the comment and it was said in front of other students during transition between classes, it was said in conversational voice. Another day in the library, I overheard four young male students joking and fooling around at a table. One of the students rubbed the head of another saying “you’re so gay” while smiling, in a friendly way. The other student didn’t react negatively to being called gay. Others in the group repeated it four other times.

Interviewees shared concerns about LGBT bias at home and in the larger community. The larger community was seen by many staff and students as socially conservative and unwelcoming to LGBT identity. Teacher7 shared that “the school is more accepting than the outside community.” Negative family responses to GSA involvement and LGBT identity and expression were also a moderate concern. For example Student6 shared an experience with her father removing her from a previous school:

I brought home a girl one time and introduced her as my girlfriend and my dad flipped out and made her leave, and he was like, “I don’t want you to see her again” and said “I’ll be damned if you are going back to the same school as her.” So, like he switched me schools, and said “you don’t like girls, you are straight.”

Although the larger community was considered socially conservative, no key informants noted physical safety issues for LGBT young people. For example, one GSA student interviewee shared that in the larger community:

You can be yourself as long as you aren’t bothering anyone else. That seems to be like the general unspoken rule around here because we are mostly a conservative area, but again as long as you are not bothering anyone people will stay out of your way (Student4).

Other GSA students noted greater concerns, such as hearing about “more homophobic incidents with adults” (Student5) in the community than at the high school and that “a lot of people … just don’t come out because they don’t know how yet, especially in [New Suburb] where there is a lot of pressure on people to be what is expected of them as a [New Suburb] person” (Student1). Although the GSA was not holding events outside of the school, Student1 also commented that the GSA is trying to address these concerns and “promote more tolerance and acceptance among the school community and the [New Suburb] community.”

New Suburb School District did not have LGBT-serving organizations or chapters of national LGBT organizations for students or their families to access. For example, there is not a GLSEN chapter in the region. A Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) chapter, however, was in a nearby urban area, although no interviewees mentioned this as a support or resource.<sup>38</sup> Also, an LGBT youth-serving organization was outside of the district, although only a few interviewees identified this as a resource and support. According to the youth organization, two students from the high school had visited it within the past year and two current students from the high school were receiving the group’s newsletter. Several students also commented on an “LGBT prom” in a nearby city as another affirming event available to LGBT students at the school. Having explored students’ experiences in the high school generally, the following section explores perceived benefits and consequences of the GSA.

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<sup>38</sup> PFLAG is a national organization with chapters around the country. It is committed to advancing LGBT equality through its mission of support, education and advocacy.

**4.3.3. Perceived benefits and consequences.** This section explores how the GSA affected participating students. It addresses the following questions: What are perceived benefits or consequences of the GSA? To what extent do participating students report feeling more physically safe due to participating in the GSA? More welcomed, accepted, and supported? Connected with school staff and peers? How did this compare to other clubs?

Data on the GSA's perceived benefits came from key informant interviews as well as teacher and student surveys. This section is organized around relevant constructs from the literature, including that on conditions for learning and GSAs. It synthesizes findings about perceived benefits as well as consequences, which the teacher survey and student interview protocols addressed. The teacher survey asked a number of questions intended to capture teacher perceptions of the school's GSA. If teachers indicated they were not at all familiar with the GSA, they were provided a definition<sup>39</sup> of a GSA and then asked to answer questions based on that definition. This section focuses on those respondents who indicated they were at least a little familiar with the GSA, but then addresses similarities and differences with responses from teachers who answered based on the GSA definition provided. The following findings begin with physical safety, followed by emotional safety and support, student well-being, and end with student empowerment.

In addition to stakeholder interviews, the teacher and student surveys were sources of data for making comparisons of the GSA to other student organizations. As

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<sup>39</sup> The survey included the following definition: A GSA is a student organization that is intended to provide a safe, supportive environment for LGBT students. GSAs provide opportunities for LGBT students to meet with each other and a caring adult, as well as non-LGBT students who support them (i.e., 'allies'). GSAs are supposed to provide a welcoming space for students regardless of their sexual orientation or gender expression.

noted in the methods section (chapter 3), student participants in the GSA, African American Students Club (AASC), and Students with Disabilities Club (SDC) received paper-based surveys to complete. The teacher survey collected this information via web-based administration. These findings are included here for comparison to the GSA.

The teacher survey asked respondents to identify a student organization with which they were most familiar and answer similar questions as they did for the GSA. Five respondents identified the SDC and one identified the AASC. The other organizations respondents identified are clustered into six categories. To identify categories, clubs were organized by focus and categories were created if at least five clubs fell within a particular area (to facilitate comparisons across categories). These include academic and foreign language clubs ( $n=13$ ), service clubs ( $n=7$ ), sports ( $n=7$ ), student council ( $n=9$ ), and other student organizations ( $n=8$ ). Appendix Table E7 lists these results more fully. The findings that follow focus on instances where the combined proportion of respondents “agreeing” or “strongly agreeing” to survey items is at least 20 percentage points greater or lower than for the GSA.<sup>40</sup> Teacher perspectives on the GSA compared to other types of student organizations revealed noteworthy similarities and differences.

Table 16 synthesizes these findings, illustrating themes across data sources (teacher and student surveys, as well as student interviews). For example, whereas findings suggest that all types of clubs were seen as benefitting students in the areas of empowerment and well-being, this is not the case for physical safety among teachers.

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<sup>40</sup> While this is an imperfect approach, because it does not allow for comparisons of those who “strongly agreed” versus “agreed,” it is applied to facilitate communication of the results for the reader while still drawing to key findings. Furthermore, the purpose here is to focus on instances where there is at least some agreement on the survey items.

Results are mixed for emotional safety and support. Students had favorable perspectives about the clubs across all four areas of focus: physical safety, emotional safety and support, well-being, and empowerment. These findings help to better understand how perspectives on the GSA compare to that of other student clubs of various types. The sections that follow describe these findings about the perceived benefits of these clubs further, emphasizing salient differences. First, physical safety is discussed.

*Table 16. Similarities and Differences between Perceived Benefits of the Gay-Straight Alliance and Comparison Clubs*

Club or Type of Club	Physical Safety	Emotional Safety and Support	Well-Being	Empowerment
<i>Teacher Survey Perspectives</i>				
Gay-Straight Alliance (n=48)	+	+	+	+
African American Students Club (n=1)	-	+	+	+
Students with Disabilities Club (n=5)	+	++	++	++
Academic and Foreign Language Clubs (n=13)	-	-	+	+
Service clubs (n=7)	+	++	++	++
Sports (n=7)	-	+	+	+
Student Council (n=9)	-	-	+	+
<i>Student Perspectives</i>				
Gay-Straight Alliance (3 survey respondents; 6 interviewees)	+	++	++	++
African American Students Club (8 survey respondents)	+	+	++	++
Students with Disabilities Club (20 survey respondents)	+	+	++	++

*Note.* “+” indicates a perceived benefit of the club with at least 50 percent of teacher or student survey respondents at least “agreeing” to related items and, in the case of the GSA, student interviewees tended to state this was a benefit; “++” indicates that at least half of respondents “strongly agreed” to two or more related items on the surveys and, in the case of the GSA, student interviewees tended to state this was an important benefit; “-” indicates where data did not meet this criteria for identification as a perceived benefit.

**4.3.3.1. Physical safety.** Perspectives on whether the GSA affected physical safety in the school varied by data source. Interviewees viewed the school as physically safe so did not think the GSA helped them to feel safer. However, on the student survey, the three students answering about the GSA “agreed” that the GSA made the school safer and two students “agreed” the GSA made them feel safer in the school (the third did not answer this question). Two of the three also indicated that the GSA was important because it provided a safe place for them.<sup>41</sup>

On the teacher survey, for those with at least a little familiarity with the school’s GSA (n=49),<sup>42</sup> as Figure 13 shows, a slight majority at least agreed that it made the school safer and students feel safer. More than 30% of respondents were unsure, although a majority of these were teachers with self-reported little knowledge of the GSA.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, for the 15 teachers who answered these questions based on the GSA definition provided in the survey, responses were almost the same.<sup>44</sup> However, these 15 teachers were asked whether “GSAs can make schools safer,” rather than whether the school was safer because of its own GSA. Agreement was slightly higher (73%) among these teachers than those who answered about their school’s GSA (63%).

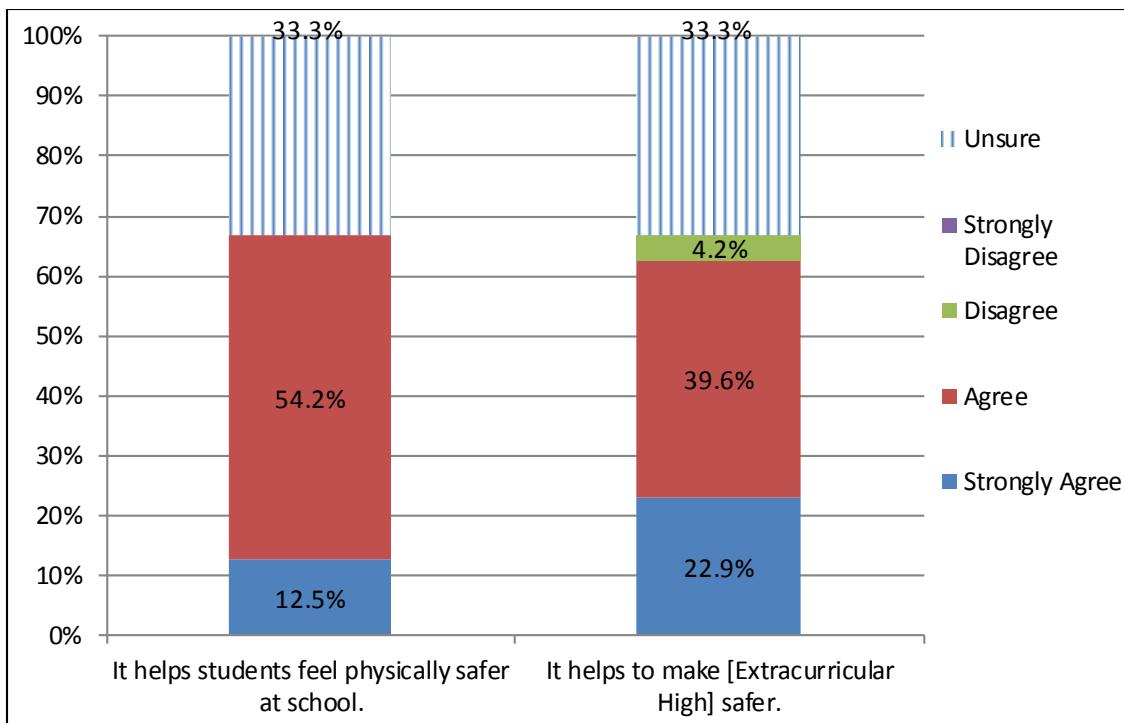
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<sup>41</sup> One GSA student “agreed,” one “strongly agreed,” and one was “unsure.”

<sup>42</sup> As noted previously, this includes 21 respondents with “very little” familiarity of the GSA, 21 who were “somewhat” familiar with it, and 7 who were “very much” familiar with it.

<sup>43</sup> The percentages of “unsure” respondents who also self-reported “very little” familiarity with the GSA, by survey item, were: 73%, it helps students feel physically safer at school; 56%, it makes [name of high school] safer.

<sup>44</sup> One student did not answer the question asking about whether the GSA made them feel safer in school.



**Figure 13.** Teacher perspectives on the GSA: Physical safety (n=48).

Comparisons of the GSA to other student organizations are now synthesized based on student and teacher survey results, beginning with comparisons to the AASC and SDC, which, as previously discussed, were designed to support students. On the student survey, responses about whether the student organizations made the school safer varied. For example, all three of the GSA students “agreed” to this item, but sizable proportions of the AASC and SDC students “strongly agreed” (25% and 35%, respectively) and were also “unsure” (50% and 10%, respectively). In contrast, the results for teachers answering about the AASC and SDC (n=6), were similar to teacher responses about the GSA.

However, compared to the other student organizations teachers answered about in their survey, the combined average agreement to the physical safety items was lower than

for the GSA.<sup>45</sup> For example, overall, a larger percentage of teachers “agreed” (54%) or “strongly agreed” (13%) that the GSA made students feel physically safer at school, compared to 37% and 5% all other student organizations (n=42). This difference was concentrated in the results for academic and foreign language clubs, sports, and student council. Sizable proportions of respondents responded “unsure” in many cases, although for the student council there were large percentages of teachers who “disagreed” (44% on both items) that the group contributed to physical safety.

**4.3.3.2. Emotional safety and support.** A range of survey and qualitative data suggest that the GSA was a critical source of emotional safety and support for students involved in it. Survey data included responses to four student and teacher questions about emotional safety and support. Students mostly agreed with several of these survey items, but with some variation. All three students at least “agreed” (two strongly) when asked if they participated to spend time with students who supported them. In contrast, agreement was lower when asked if (a) they participated to meet others like themselves<sup>46</sup> and (b) the GSA was important because it helped them feel like they belonged in the school.<sup>47</sup> Also, for these three students, the GSA was *not* an important source of connection to a caring adult.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to the student survey, student interviews and GSA meeting observations provided other sources of information that suggested the GSA provided

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<sup>45</sup> The combined average agreement (i.e., mean) was calculated by summing and then averaging the percentage that “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with each item. The combined average agreement includes results for foreign language and academic clubs, service clubs, sports, student council, and the “other” cluster of clubs. The GSA, AASC, and SDC results are excluded from the mean.

<sup>46</sup> One GSA student “disagreed,” one “agreed,” and one “strongly agreed.”

<sup>47</sup> One GSA student “agreed,” one “strongly agreed,” and one was “unsure.”

<sup>48</sup> One GSA student “disagreed,” one “agreed,” and one was “unsure.”

valuable emotional safety and support to participating students. For example, when describing their involvement in the GSA at the second observed GSA meeting, six students attended talked about positive perceptions of support. Examples include:

- The GSA “is an open place where everyone is accepted.”
- “I like that this is a comforting environment.”
- “I like to support people and let people know I am someone they can talk to.”
- “I don’t feel accepted in the school, but I do in this group. It makes coming to school a little easier.”
- “It is good to be in a place where everyone feels supported and can be who they are.”

As these comments illustrate, the GSA was a place for some students to access an emotionally safe environment, and for others to be part of creating that space within the school. Additionally, another student described how she had grown up with a lot of discrimination, which I interpreted was because of her race/ethnicity, so she likes to “come someplace where she is accepted.” A self-identified bisexual student also came to the GSA with her boyfriend, suggesting that the GSA provided a welcoming environment for multiple LGBT identities. As evident in the GSA student survey findings, the presence of caring adults in the GSA did not seem to be a strong factor influencing student participation.

All six GSA student interviewees also addressed how the GSA provided a welcoming, supportive environment to students. This was the most frequently benefit that the GSA students talked about during the interviews. Some relevant quotes from these students include:

- The GSA is “a great social channel for students to learn from each other. When we were able to talk about issues we all learned something from each other. ... Everyone was open-minded. It really was a judgment-free zone. We would talk about ideas and why we agreed or didn’t. We would dissect issues. In other groups a bad idea would be rejected and there wouldn’t be that level of discussion and openness” (Student2).
- “I like that again it gives me purpose in a way. Helping other people, helping myself in a way too. ... We had a lot of really touching stories in the club this year, and it just makes me glad that we exist. ... I am just so proud of these kids who are able to say those things and feel like they are in an environment where they can say it” (Student4).
- “One of the nice things about [the GSA] is that there are a lot of nice people who are looking out for you. ... I felt like, even with my own dad, I felt alienated because of who I am and it is just not a good feeling so I think being there for other people, having other people there for you, is really important to becoming who you are” (Student6).

Also, when asked if the GSA makes students feel more welcomed in the school, Student1 responded “I think so, that is our whole goal, and that it does, especially for the people who show up to the meetings.” Reflecting a similar perspective, Student5 shared the following about how the GSA provided emotional safety:

What I tell my friends is that it is an incredible feeling to know you are in a room full of opportunity and you are safe and they will accept you no matter what, and you don’t have to be friends with all of them. It is really, really kind of rare at

[this school] to be in a room full of people you know with the same values that they do. ... There is a lack of acceptance of difference in the school. I have seen student homophobia happen a lot.

Furthermore, school staff commented about the emotional safety the GSA provided to students. Many were, understandably, reluctant to presume or generalize benefits for students given that individual staff knew few students involved in the GSA (and none in some cases). For example, a counselor commented that the GSA was “incredibly helpful” because:

Any time a teenager knows that they are not the only one experiencing anything whether it is test anxiety, depression, sexual orientation that is not in the majority, I think safety in security of numbers. They get a sense of camaraderie or empowerment to see other kids maybe in the same place as them or who have worked through that place and are more confident and stronger (Counselor3).

Another noted that some students participate in the GSA “to feel like they belong somewhere, gay or straight” because “having that sense of belonging is important” (Counselor4).

Several teachers echoed this perspective. For example, one commented that “it helps them, just by having someone to talk to, who is going through what they are going through, that support system is so essential to developing who they are and seeing how they fit into the world around them” (Teacher2). One of the GSA advisors noted that the GSA meetings were helpful because students could be with others “having similar struggles.” Another staff interviewee further reinforced the significance of the GSA for student connection to peers: “it functions more as an outlet for these kids to be connected,

that is how I would see it more, for kids to be connected to the school. I believe it helps students to not feel so isolated” (Administrator5).

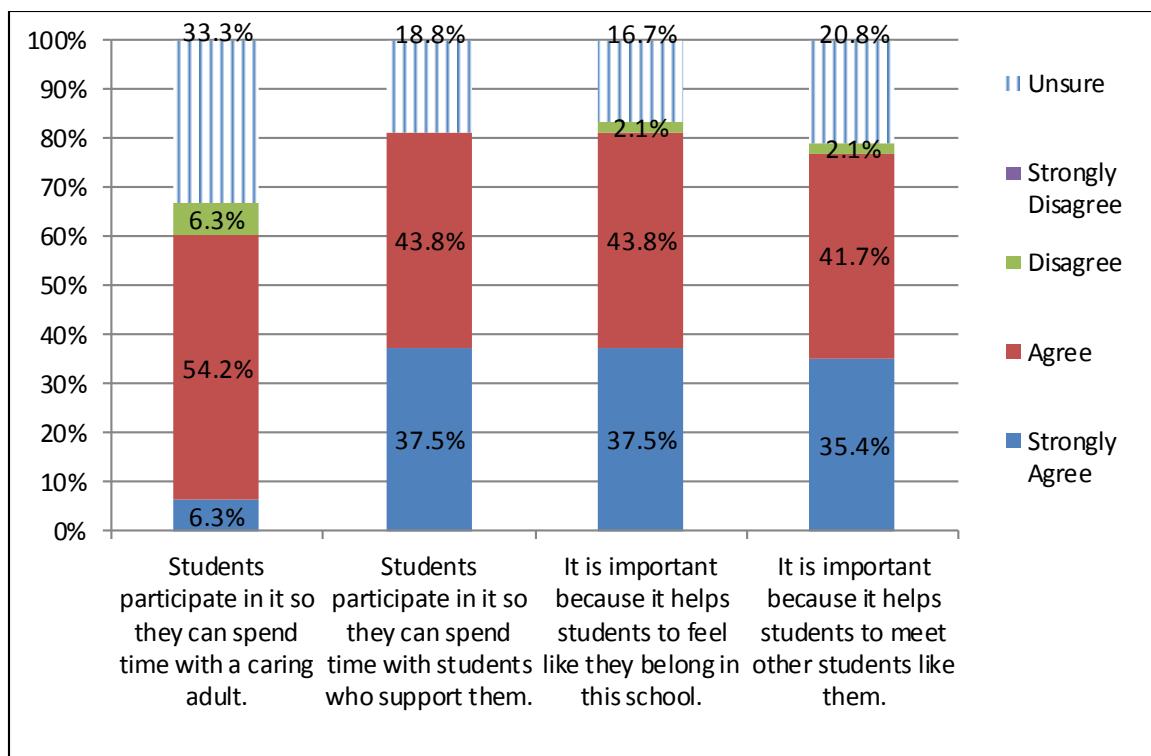
On the teacher survey, responses to questions about belonging and connection suggested that teachers also viewed the GSA as a place for students to feel a sense of belonging and connection in the school (see Figure 14). A large percentage of respondents indicated they felt students participated so they could spend time with students who support them (38% “agreed,” 44% “strongly agreed”), that the GSA was important because it helped students feel like they belong in the school (38% “agreed,” 44% “strongly agreed”), and the GSA helps students meet others like themselves (42% “agreed,” 35% “strongly agreed”). However, on one question—students participate so they can spend time with a caring adult—the overall level of agreement was smaller: the percentage of teachers who “strongly agreed” was much smaller (6%) and the “unsure” response was larger (33%).

A majority of the “unsure” responses for these survey items were from teachers with little knowledge of the GSA.<sup>49</sup> For the 15 teachers who responded based on the GSA definition only, the results were largely similar. When asked, however, if the “GSA would help students feel like they belong in the school,” agreement was slightly lower: 66% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” compared to 81% for teachers who answered about their school’s GSA.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The percentages of “unsure” respondents who also self-reported “very little” familiarity with the GSA, by survey item, were: 67%, it makes students feel happy; 78%, it helps students feel more pride about who they are; 73%, it helps students to feel more comfortable about who they are; 46%, it helps students do better academically in school.

<sup>50</sup> This difference may not be meaningful due to sample size.



**Figure 14.** Teacher perspectives on the GSA: Student belonging and connection (n=48).

The GSA findings are now compared to those for other student organizations based on student and teacher survey results. On the student survey, responses about the AASC and SDC were similar to those for the GSA on the student belonging and connection items, although a smaller proportion of AASC students “strongly agreed” on two of the questions compared to the GSA and SDC.<sup>51</sup> Among teachers answering about the AASC and SDC, the findings were similar. Only one noticeable difference compared to the GSA was evident: 100% of teachers at least “agreed” when asked if the club is important because it helps students to meet others like them (compared to 77% for the GSA). Additionally, the combined mean agreement for the other student organizations

<sup>51</sup> The percentage of AASC students who “strongly agreed” that they participated in the club to spend time with students who support them was 25%, compared to 35% for the SDC and 2 of the 3 GSA students. None of the AASC students “strongly agreed” that the club was important because it helped them to meet other students like them, compared to 35% of the SDC students and 1 of the 3 GSA students. Furthermore, the percentage of AASC students who “strongly agreed” that the club helped them belong in the school was 38%, compared to 65% for the SDC and 1 of the 3 GSA students.

was similar (within six percentage points) of the GSA results for three of the four questions about belonging and connection. This mean was lower than that of the GSA, by 12 percentage points for one item: whether the organizations helped students to meet others like themselves. A counselor noted that “a lot of LGBT students” were involved in the SDC because:

Regardless of their difference, they feel they can fit in. Everybody fits in as a friend. Everybody fits in with helping each other. Everyone wants to feel wanted and belong. We all want some sort of connection.

Several interviewees also noted how the AASC and SDC helped to foster a sense of belonging, connection, and support in the school. Similar to the GSA, these two clubs helped provide supports to students feeling “different” than their peers. For example, Teacher2 commented that the group helped to create connection in “a big place” where students may walk around and say to themselves, “God, I am the only Black kid in the school.” Similar to the GSA, the AASC was also a support for students experiencing a form of identity-related rejection from their families. When talking about a student whose family is rejecting her for being too “White” because they are studious and the benefit of the AASC, Counselor3 shared the following reflection: “I can’t imagine the inner turmoil she is experiencing. You know, ‘am I going against my parents?’ The AASC gives kids this opportunity to express these things and encourage each other.” On the student survey, a student involved with the AASC echoed how the group was beneficial: “it made a difference in my school and social life. It caused me to be even more comfortable in my own skin, despite the community we live in.” Other examples in talking about the AASC include the following from a teacher.

Kids who come from an urban school setting or a school setting that was more like them, they crave an AASC setting because they don't just fit in after transferring schools. Culturally they have to make a huge adjustment in a hurry because they are thrown right in, and they are looking for this supportive environment. ... We read things like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *A Raisin in the Sun*, and when discussion of the ‘n word’ and how it is handled in the classroom, they talk about whether they feel like the teacher is handling the subject matter well or not. Typically they don't feel comfortable about it. When they come together they want to talk about it, they want to know someone else understands and can relate to what they are talking about, not just listening. I know too that students won't talk to their parents about these issues. ... I don't think it benefits physical safety. It is definitely a social-emotional connection. ... The Black kids talk about feeling isolated.

In talking about the SDC (and the larger program of which it was a part), some interviewees shared the following additional, positive perspectives:

- “The students build relationships with other students. ... Students of all races, creeds participate. They feel like they are part of the school. They don't let anyone bully anyone else. After they get into this and see that everyone is vulnerable like themselves they step up. It helps with students who don't know where they fit in at school, they join and become leaders” (Counselor2).
- “I honestly feel like those kids really appreciate that they are working with students as opposed to an adult of the time, so it makes them feel like they are more a part of the student population. They don't feel as different from the

others, and I also think it creates an environment where when people see others picking on those who are different, there is a higher percentage chance that someone will step in and say that is not what we do here, that is not what we are about" (Counselor5).

- It "is great in bridging that gap between people who are different" (Teacher7).
- "Getting them involved in that [program] gives them a reason to be in school every day. I have seen students really blossom that were marginal students. Get them involved in that and they just take off, it is kind of interesting" (Other3).

Turning to other clusters of student organizations on the surveys, agreement was greater (by at least 20 percentage points) on some belonging and connection items for other clusters of student organizations compared to the GSA, suggesting that these other groups increased belonging and connection. This was true for service clubs (two items) and sports (two items). In both cases, these items included: (a) students participate in it so they can spend time with a caring adult, and (b) it is important because it helps students to meet other students like them.

Moreover, perceptions about whether students participated in the organizations so they could spend time with a caring adult are mixed when results are disaggregated by student organization cluster. Sizable proportions "disagreed" with this item for student council (56%), the "other" cluster (25%), and academic and foreign languages (23%)—compared to only 6% for the GSA. In contrast, in the case of service clubs and sports a larger proportion at least "agreed" (86% in both cases) that students participated to spend time with a caring adult—compared to 60% for the GSA.

Other instances of how the GSA provided emotional safety and support are inferred from the stories students shared during the observed GSA meetings. For example, the previously described story about a student's struggle with her gender identity and expression suggested that the GSA was an emotionally safe space for students to open up and share deeply personal thoughts and struggles, even with strangers in the room. A student also talked about being abused as a child and another shared how she came from a conservative family, was not supposed to date, was bisexual, and didn't feel part of her family. She shared how she felt "very different" from her brother (i.e., not as conservative as) and that her parents told her she was "messed up," and how this was hard but that she "leaves all of that at home." At school she could be who she wanted to be. Originally she came to the GSA to "piss off her parents," who questioned why she came to the GSA, but now it is where she comes "to feel accepted."

Another student shared her personal story during the second observed GSA meeting. Specifically, this student talked about having a girlfriend when she was in the third grade and shared the experience of coming out as bisexual to her mother in the 6th grade. Even though her mom had "lots of gay friends," her parents have struggled with her identity including doubting whether she was truly bisexual since she dated boys. She talked about how this had been a difficult experience because she had been friends with this girl since she was little and their families were close.

**4.3.3.3. Student well-being.** When talking about how the GSA benefited them, GSA student interviewees largely focused on emotional safety and support, which the previous section explored. Some interviewees also pointed to benefits to student well-

being, such as the GSA making them feel happy or good about themselves. For example, Student1, who described herself as an ally to LGBT students, talked about how the GSA:

Just feels like it is a good deed that it is somewhere helping someone even though it is not really for me, it is for other people. ... I enjoy being around people who want to see other people be happy for who they are and it makes me feel good that a lot of people are so supportive of that and that people come together to ensure people are safe. It is a really good feeling.

This student also acknowledged the experiences of students, which made the GSA an important support for their well-being:

There are a lot of people who are confused and lost and don't feel like they can talk to anybody. There are people in horrible situations and don't have a lot of support around them. .... That is why it is so important to have the whole safe space thing because there are a lot of people who aren't supportive and that is why we are here. It is not necessarily negative [here] but it is not necessarily positive either.

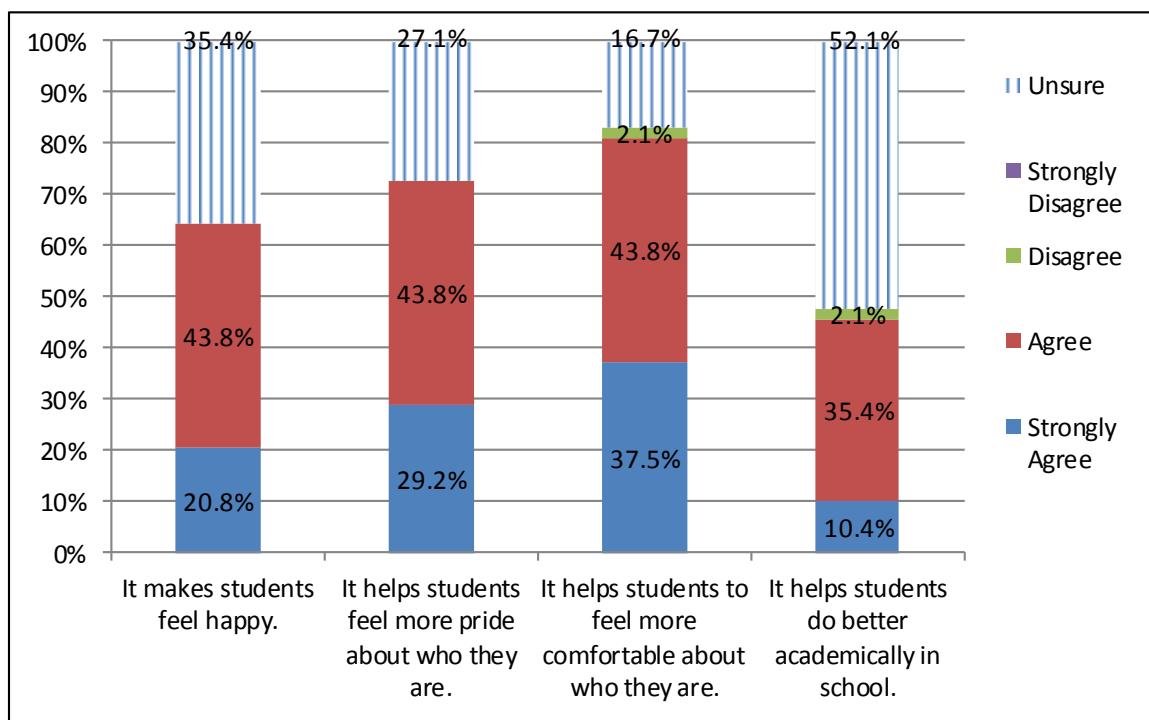
Student3 likewise talked about being "happy that people who are in it don't necessarily have to hide" their LGBT identity. A third student shared her perspective as someone who benefited from this support by not feeling alone with the LGBT-related challenges she experienced. Other student perspectives about this emotional support also emerged during the second GSA meeting observation, when one student shared that she looks forward to the GSA meeting every month.

Staff interviewees tended to note several ways that the GSA benefited students' well-being. One of the GSA's advisors also commented that it has the potential to benefit students academically: "because they are feeling safe, it is a lot easier to be motivated to do

other things, to get involved in other things, or to succeed academically.” This person also saw students’ self-confidence grow: “instead of being quiet and to the side and in the background, they were invested in the conversation” as students participated in the GSA over time. Another staff interviewee also noted how the GSA benefited particular students who were struggling with their sexual/gender identity and “they found that going to that group meeting was just so supportive for them” (Counselor4). Several interviewees also noted that student participation in the GSA and its events also facilitated conversations with their parents about their LGBT identity. That is, their participation in the Day of Silence, for example, provided an opportunity for students to discuss their LGBT identity with their parents. The parent night was also an opportunity for parents who were “struggling with things themselves” to connect with other parents, which potentially benefited students’ families and students themselves by creating a broader support network (Counselor3).

As another data source to better understand perspectives on whether the GSA supported student well-being, four student and teacher survey items asked questions about the GSA’s benefits relative to student well-being. These included questions about whether the GSA made students feel pride in themselves and supported their academic success. GSA students had similar responses with one exception. All three students at least “agreed” (one strongly) when asked if (a) the GSA made them happy, (b) the GSA made them have more pride in who they were, and (c) it helped students feel more comfortable in who they were. When asked if the GSA helped them academically, one student “disagreed” whereas the other two were split between “agreeing” and “strongly agreeing.”

For teacher respondents, variation among these responses is evident (see Figure 15). Although similar proportions of teachers “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the GSA made students feel happy (65%), a larger percentage responded that the GSA made students feel more comfortable with who they are (81%). Furthermore, similar to the GSA students’ perspectives, agreement was lower when asked if the GSA helped students do better academically; more than half of respondents were “unsure” about this. A majority of “unsure” responses were again from teachers with little knowledge of the GSA, but agreement was lower across all knowledge levels of the GSA when asked about the GSA’s benefits for student academic success.<sup>52</sup>



**Figure 15.** Teacher perspectives on the GSA: Student well-being and academic success (n=48).

<sup>52</sup> The percentages of “unsure” respondents who also self-reported “very little” familiarity with the GSA, by survey item, were: 80%, it helps students to address challenges they experience in school; 73%, it provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in their community.; 63%, it provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in the world.; 75%, it provides students with leadership opportunities..

For the 15 teachers who answered these questions based on the GSA definition provided to them, in a couple instances responses were slightly varied. Slightly smaller percentages of these teachers “agreed” (40%) or “strongly agreed” (27%) that a GSA “would help students feel more comfortable about who they are.” Slightly larger percentages of these teachers “agreed” (47%) or “strongly agreed” (20%) that a GSA “would help students do better academically in school.”<sup>53</sup>

The GSA findings are now compared to those for other student organizations based on student and teacher survey results. On the student survey, GSA results were largely similar to those for the AASC and SDC on two of the well-being items and different on the other two. Specifically, a much larger proportion of SDC students “strongly agreed” that the club makes them feel happy (80%) compared to the GSA (1 of 3 students) and the AASC (25%). Additionally, 65% of SDC students at least “agreed” that the club helped them to do better academically in the school, compared to 13% for AASC students and 1 of the 3 GSA students.

On the teacher survey, agreement was stronger on all four well-being items for the AASC and SDC (exceeding 20 percentage points for three items) compared to the GSA. The combined average agreement among the other student organizations was similar to that of the GSA on two items. However, compared to the GSA, agreement was greater that the organizations helped students do better academically (75% compared to 46% for the GSA) and made students happy (83% compared to 65% for the GSA). In particular, for teachers responding about the student council and service clubs, on three of these items agreement was stronger (by at least 20 percentage points) that these groups

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<sup>53</sup> This difference may not be meaningful due to sample size.

contributed to student well-being compared to the GSA.<sup>54</sup> The next section examines one final area of perceived GSA benefits: student empowerment.

**4.3.3.4. Student empowerment.** Lastly, interview protocols as well as the surveys included questions asking about whether the GSA empowered students. One of the GSA advisors commented that by contributing to the students' self-esteem and allowing students to largely decide on the GSA's approach, the GSA empowered them: "they feel like this is their club and they are doing what they want with it, and I let them run with it in reason." Five of the six GSA student interviewees also indicated that the GSA empowered them in some way; the sixth shared that the GSA was "not significantly [empowering], but every little bit helps." For example, some students who reported feeling empowered by their involvement in the GSA shared the following:

- "I think it does. I feel accomplished that I am part of it. Even if we are not doing anything super specific, I am fighting for other people's rights. It makes me feel good, it just feels like it is a good deed that it is somewhere helping someone even though it is not really for me, it is for other people" (Student1).
- "It gave me a sense that I had a voice in the community and a channel to make a difference. When you are an individual and you talk about the issues, people don't take you as seriously. When you are part of an alliance, you have more backbone and people take you more seriously. You can also support each other. ... For me, it helped define my role as a leader and helped me to figure

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<sup>54</sup> A slightly greater proportion of teachers at least "agreed" on two of the four well-being items in the case of "other" clubs (100% on both), foreign language and academic clubs (1 item), and sports (1 item).

out how to motivate a group, lead people, reach out to the community whether the school or [New Suburb]" (Student2).

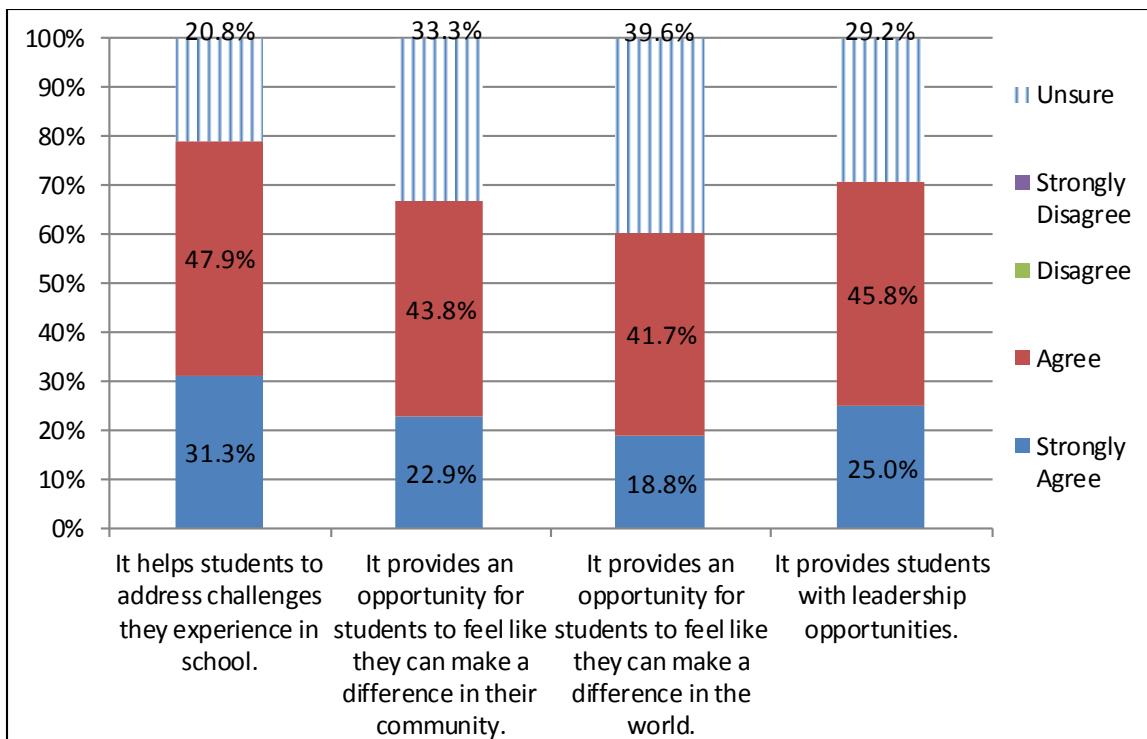
- "Oh yes, absolutely. ... We can do more when you have a force behind you" (Student5).

Results from the student and teacher surveys, which included questions about whether the GSA provided opportunities for students to feel like they could make a difference in their community or in the world, were mixed. All three GSA students at least "agreed" (one strongly) when asked if the GSA helped them to address challenges they experienced and feel like they could make a difference in their community. However, two "agreed" and one "disagreed" when asked if the GSA provided leadership opportunities and two at least "agreed" (one strongly) and one "disagreed" when asked if the GSA provided them opportunities to feel like they could make a difference in the world.

Teacher respondents tended to answer similarly to the empowerment-related items (see Figure 16). However, a slightly larger percentage "agreed" (48%) or "strongly agreed" (31%) that the GSA helped students address challenges they experienced in the school. A majority of "unsure" responses were again from teachers with little knowledge of the GSA.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The percentages of "unsure" respondents who also self-reported "very little" familiarity with the GSA, by survey item, were: 80%, it helps students to address challenges they experience in school; 73%, it provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in their community.; 63%, it provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in the world.; 75%, it provides students with leadership opportunities..



**Figure 16.** Teacher perspectives on the GSA: Student empowerment (n=48).

For the 15 teachers who answered these questions based on the GSA definition provided in the survey, responses were again largely similar to those from teachers with more knowledge, with two exceptions. In general, these respondents were slightly less likely to “strongly agree” with the empowerment-related questions.<sup>56</sup> For example, when asked if the GSA provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in the world, 53% “agreed” and 7% (1 respondent) “strongly agreed.” However, these responses were 42% and 19%, respectively, for teachers who were familiar with the school’s GSA. In addition, slightly more of the 15 teachers were “unsure (40%) when asked if the “GSA would provide students with leadership opportunities.”<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> This difference may not be meaningful due to sample size.

<sup>57</sup> This difference may not be meaningful due to sample size.

The GSA findings are now compared to those for other student organizations using the student and teacher survey results. On the student survey, GSA results were similar to those for the AASC and SDC on the empowerment items with a few minor exceptions. On three of the items, a larger proportion of SDC students “strongly agreed.” For example, when asked if the club provided leadership opportunities, 90% of SDC students “strongly agreed” compared to 50% of AASC students and none of the three GSA students. In contrast, on the teacher survey, all six respondents answering about the AASC or the SDC either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” to all four empowerment items, indicating greater agreement relative to teacher responses about the GSA.

For teachers answering student empowerment questions about the other student organizations, compared to the GSA average agreement was greater on three of the items. These differences were small, though, ranging from 4 to 17 percentage points. In particular, agreement that the student council and service clubs contributed to student empowerment was greater compared to the GSA.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, slightly more teachers agreed that the GSA contributed to student empowerment on only one of these four survey items, on average: 46% “agreed” and 17% “strongly agreed” that the other organizations helped students address challenges they experienced in school (compared to 48% and 31%, respectively, for the GSA). However, agreement with this item varied by cluster of student organization: agreement was *smaller* compared for the GSA by at least 20 percentage points for academics and foreign language as well as “other” and agreement was *larger* for the student council.

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<sup>58</sup> Compared to the GSA, the item results were greater by at least 20 percentage points on all four items for the student council and on three items for service clubs.

#### **4.4. Findings Set Three: School and District Policies and Practices**

This third and final section of findings describes how Extracurricular High and New Suburb School District have approached issues of school safety and support, including how LGBT students fit into these efforts. It answers a primary question: What are the school and district policies/practices for creating safe, supportive learning environments for students? It also presents information addressing the following secondary questions, where available:

- When, why, and how were the policies and practices implemented? Who influenced implementation?
- Are student organizations considered part of these strategies, and if so, how? How about the GSA?
- What are the school/district LGBT-affirming policies and practices?
- What are key informants' attitudes toward these efforts?

The findings that follow provide additional rich data to further understand the larger environment of the GSA. This section synthesizes policies and practices that were identified by key informants as contributing to safety and support in the school. Together, these findings help to paint a more complete picture of Extracurricular High. First, school policies and practices are described. District policies and practices then follow.

**4.4.1. School policies and practices.** The GSA exists in a school with numerous practices that, according to interviewees, help to foster a safe, supportive school environment for all students and, in some case, subgroups of students. Staff interviewees did not point to formal policies beyond an anti-bullying policy, which the next section on district policies and practices describes. Interviewees identified numerous school

practices to create a safe, supportive learning environment. Several noted that school practice is not rooted in policy. For example, one interviewee shared the following:

The policies are secondary to the expectations that we all live in an environment where you are accepted. ... Our administrative staff, our counselors, and I think our kids do a really good job if we find there is somebody who is not. I think we have policies in place where that is addressed. I don't think our administrators ever turn a cheek from people who are experiencing disabilities, to kids who are quote unquote different in whatever way, to kids who just want to be part of the school. ... It is almost like a tradition that [Extracurricular High] has expectations, it is a family, and we embrace it in that way. ... I am not so sure any of that is based on policy. I think that's, I think it is because that is who we want to be. We support each other as a staff, that allows our young people to see that is who we are and they feel safe to be who they are (Other1).

Other staff reflected this perspective too. Administrator1 noted that the school encourages "students to be caring and nurturing citizens, so I don't know if we have policies, but that is the values of our school here." Counselor4 commented that it was not possible to "pinpoint a specific policy that makes this a safe school." Furthermore, many interviewees emphasized that school proactively responds to student needs, beyond any formal policy: "even if it weren't an official policy or procedure, we would be doing it. If we see someone being bullied, or in trouble in any way academically, or we sense emotional problems or whatever, we will pursue it" (Teacher11).

According to a district leader, a significant effort began under the previous principal to shift the environment to be more student-centered and individualized. This

also included higher expectations for students and improved instruction. As one person shared, “we spent a ton of time getting the school turned around.” This refocusing greatly influenced many of the school’s current practices.

School approaches to fostering a safe, supportive environment cluster around eight areas. These include: (a) school values and spirit; (b) strong, supportive student-adult relationships; (c) strategies to build staff capacity to support students; (d) clear behavioral expectations and supports, including the anti-bullying policy; (e) extensive extracurricular opportunities; (f) resources for particular groups of students, such as freshmen and other students new to the school; (g) school physical plant; and (h) home-school connections. These themes are explored in this order in the following subsections. Where available, information on when and why practices were put in places is integrated here—as well as perspectives on their importance. Importantly, these practices foster a positive and supportive context for the GSA.

**4.4.1.1. *School values and spirit.*** Extracurricular High leadership values a commitment to ensuring every student can and will learn. Under the leadership of the former principal, the school refined its vision, which was represented in multiple, conflicting statements posted around the school, into three values: academic rigor, appreciation of our history, and authentic community where both students and staff feel that they belong in the school. These values are on a banner at the school entrance and, according to one interviewee, on staff agendas and in students’ school planners. These values, which are expected to guide the work of all staff, including custodians and secretaries, also inform various school efforts. To appreciate its history, the school has a “hall of fame” with pictures of athletes and others who made a difference in the school, to

help recognize them and honor the school's history. To create an authentic community, the school started a faculty musical fundraiser in collaboration with the school's parent-teacher organization (PTO). Other interviewees talked about the school's values in direct ways:

- “I think actions are the biggest thing we try to do model for people, we have them on our walls and when we speak to students during opening ceremonies, any kind of time we come together with students, we talk about our values, and I think through actions. I think as a staff we try to hold ourselves accountable and role model that, and we try to hold the kids accountable when they are not open and caring to all people whether it have to be related to race, religion, creed, sexuality, you know background. I think it is easy to talk the talk, but not always to walk the walk” (Administrator1).
- “The principal has never come in and said, ‘your job is to develop rapport with students,’ because if you look at state standards and the direction they are going, it is all about test results. … But within our building, I think just the environment we have developed here is one of making those connections to students a key priority” (Teacher12).
- “I think it is just a philosophy of who this building is. And I am not so sure, years and years ago, maybe 20 years ago, I remember doing diversity trainings and I think it flipped some switches for some staff that had them realize that perhaps everybody isn’t like themself and they can’t put themself in the position of judging others. Really, I think, I really think that our staff does an amazing job of setting the climate, setting a standard, with the kids setting an

expectation for wherever a young person is on the continuum we will accept them, meet them, and follow them along their journey. ... I am not so sure any of that is based on policy. I think that's, I think it is because that is who we want to be. We support each other as a staff, that allows our young people to see that is who we are and they feel safe to be who they are" (Other1).

The school also has several routine practices to foster positive school spirit. This includes a Spirit Week each Spring, which is discussed earlier in the findings, as well as tailgates at sporting events. Teacher3 noted that the school has "one pep rally per year to try to get spirit up." Counselor2 also commented that Extracurricular High is "a very spirited school."

**4.4.1.2. Strong, supportive student-adult relationships.** Before discussing specific practices, it is important to begin by noting a significant commitment to supporting students at the administrative and staff levels at Extracurricular High. This was an important foundation for other formal practices that interviewees also discussed. School staff were strongly committed to creating a welcoming, supportive environment for all students. Student2 shared that:

The teachers are very supportive. For the most part, the teachers are very involved in student life. The teachers I found were more connected with the students and developed friendships with students. I think that bridge of authority with students made it more comfortable for students to come out. If this was not the case, it would have been more uncomfortable.

Another GSA student reflected this positive attitude toward teacher support:

A lot of teachers try to break down the wall between teacher and student as much as they can with nicknames you can address a teacher that are still respectful, but are more comfortable for students. I think teachers really care about students to make sure they feel comfortable enough to talk with them about anything (Student1).

Additionally, staff interviewees consistently pointed to and discussed numerous examples of this commitment. On the teacher survey, for example, one respondent commented that the school “accepts students for who they are and values them as unique individuals, each with their own gifts and abilities.” As a more detailed example, Counselor2 shared the following perspective that also reflects the common attitude that formal policy wasn’t a foundation for the school’s efforts to serve students effectively:

I think it is the relationship, our administration working with teachers and how teachers work with students. That is the policy that works. Teachers let counselors know students are struggling. You can put a million policies in place, but you have to have staff who are aware and communicate about social-emotional needs.

Later this interviewee went on to share that all adults in the school make students feel welcomed:

We have a phenomenal staff.... I am fascinated by how supportive they are here. They have the middle school teacher instinct. I see teachers here very happy to help, they are here before school, after school. They have office hours beyond the school day. They are insightful. ... They are teaching kids, not subjects. I like this. Anyone can teach math.”

Other interviewees echoed these sentiments about staff commitment to fully supporting

students:

- “We work very hard with not only building trusting [student] relationships with teachers, but also relationships with staff, like the custodial staff, the hall monitors. ... We do something as simple as introducing students to these other staff, and when the other staff are introduced they just know they need to look out for the kids and they do” (Teacher2).
- “I feel like at least from a teacher’s perspective and from looking at my peers, we are really invested in the kids and there is nothing more important than they are. So I feel that helps out with creating that safe environment. ... We stand at the door as teachers when students are entering to keep our eyes and ears on the hallways and the classrooms, and trying to keep them as safe as possible” (Teacher3).
- “We have a very open door policy. Counselors are always ready and willing to help out. So, I just think the adults, the administration, the guidance, do a really good job of just being available for people. ... We as a staff, I feel, really know we can go to them and say ‘hey, I have a student who is doing this’” (Teacher7).
- “We really try to create a family community here ... a person-centered approach. We care about the climate here, policies or not, we want this to be a place where students feel safe and welcomed and accepted” (Counselor3).
- “I think, in general, it starts with the classroom teacher having a warm, supportive environment, which I think the teachers here are great at. And then, also having the layer of other support staff, whether it be security walking

around the building, or the guidance support, or the administration support. People in addition to teachers who are available for that next level of support even. ... The coaches that work here are very attuned to what students need. ... So I think, just in general, having good communication among staff helps support the students" (Other6).

As an example of individual efforts, one teacher proactively sends information to school staff when other countries have social issues that may affect students in the school who were not born in the United States or have strong cultural roots to these other countries.

Student mentoring was another strategy. Teacher2 shared that "I have had some gay students who I have connected with gay staff members to mentor them and provide support, because I knew the staff are gay. A lot of teachers agree to mentor kids."

Another interviewee likewise noted that "setting up informal mentors for our kids is something we all work" on at Extracurricular High (Administrator1).

Administrators had positive perceptions of faculty commitment to supporting students. One noted that the school is "a community that really cares" with staff who extend themselves to students (Administrator1). This administrator also shared that:

Our staff is great about being aware of students and their concerns and will come forth and share it with a counselor and maybe even one of the administrators so we can pull around that student. Maybe even with a custodian, we have great custodians here. We have great you know office staff, so we don't hesitate no matter who you are here. People step up and say "well, I am going to check in on that child or that family."

Five other interviewees also commented about the school's custodians who "are amazing at connecting with the kids" (Other1).

Numerous interviewees also pointed to a strong administration when talking about school practices to create a safe, supportive environment. This included their ability to develop strong relationships with students, including knowing them by name. Several also mentioned administrator involvement in school activities and how they role model a safe, respectful environment through their interactions with students. For example, on the teacher survey, one respondent commented that "there is a feeling of respect for everyone ... from the administration" and the principal "is the most genuine adult I have ever worked for. He cares about his teachers and students and that comes through in everything he says and does." GSA student interviewees also provided additional evidence supporting this perspective. One commented that one of the vice principals "is such a sweet lady, she is always around and helping" (Student1).

One non-teacher interviewee commented that it was the school leadership, including the current principal who has been in the school for 20 years (and in his fourth year as principal), rather than the central office that drives school efforts to support students. Administrative practices include being visible in the school and developing positive relationships with students. One staff interviewee noted that:

Our administrators, including our principal are very hands on. He is out and about. I pass him quite often. He is in the classrooms. He is visible. He is definitely there for the children if they need him. ... I think that is key here: visibility, our administrators and staff are visible and that makes it easier on me (Other2).

Counselor4 also shared that “our administration is pretty open with the kids they are always at lunch, they are at all their sporting events, they build a relationship with students.” Another teacher noted the following about school leadership:

Our administration is very good about walking around and they are very present. You will see them in the commons, before and after school, they are there when the buses come, they walk around and poke in and even participate in class from time to time. So I think they really do try to make themselves available, not just behind that door, but they will talk to you and say hi, ask you how it is going. So they try to bridge that gap. “I am not just your disciplinarian, but I am someone you can go to.”

Teacher2 shared:

I think the atmosphere is definitely established by the leadership. You look at each kid individually, they aren’t lumped together. You say, what is happening in that kid’s private life, what should we know about the kid’s private life. This is a philosophy that comes down from all of the principals. When there is a situation, we don’t just look at the problem on the surface, we look deeper.... Not just going to the surface, but looking deeper, and we then tend to have a more sympathetic perspective.

Counselor5 also shared the following perspective:

The administrative team is extremely open to listening and sitting down with everyone and listening to how to make things best for our kids and it seems like a very good environment as far as making sure it is safe for everyone. Not only the students, they make you feel like it is safe to come to them with ideas and

suggestions and you don't feel like you are challenging them on things. They are very open to hearing your opinion. I think that is great. I think the leadership here is awesome.

These perspective and emphasis on authentically supporting students and staff were evident in how some interviewees described their roles in the school. For example, one administrator commented that:

I see myself as a resource, whether it be with students to be successful, whether it be staff to be successful and I have a lot of assigned jobs under that. I see myself as a problem solver, you know, someone who works through solutions with people, encourages people to be creative, and be a wholesome good citizen in the world along with their academic journey (Administrator1).

As another practice to create a supportive community, administrators also try to foster positive relationships with staff. For example, the principal sets aside a portion of staff meetings called "celebrations" to recognize and highlight staff accomplishments or other news. Administrators also reflected a commitment to supporting teachers, for example:

The climate of the school comes down to, what I think, what happens in each of these classrooms every single day, and if kids walk out of that classroom feeling good, feel like they are working hard and are accomplishing something, it takes care of itself. I am here for them and if we need to do things differently then we need to do things differently. I need to accommodate what they need and that is how I look at it. The [administrative team], we are here to do what the teachers need us to do. They are the ones who do the work (Administrator3).

Beyond teachers and administrators, multiple interviewees talked about how guidance counselors, which one counselor shared was a “great” team, help to create a supportive school. The counselors are divided across students by alphabet and focus on three domains in their work with students: academics, career and college counseling, and social-emotional health. As Counselor3 shared, “we realize how all three of those can impact each other.” When talking about the supports the counselors provide to students, one teacher talked about feeling that they were “connected” to teachers. A counselor noted that the guidance office also makes the space welcoming and comfortable for students, including by hanging a confidentiality agreement on the wall.

GSA students also shared positive perspectives about the counselors. When asked how the school supports them, Student4 pointed to the guidance counselors:

I am really only acquainted with one, they are very open. If you are having an issue you can go to them and you can. I have been emailing back and forth with my guidance counselor for a while now. They do a good job with that.

Another student noted that the guidance counselors have assigned students by last name, but students can go to anyone they want to if they need to talk to someone. Also, Student2 noted “a lot of resources at the school for students who want to find them,” including a “very supportive” guidance staff that would make referrals to external supports as needed.

Open-ended responses on the student survey pointed to multiple ways the school supported students. In particular, this included talking and listening to students and helping them. The word cloud in Figure 17 illustrates the most commonly mentioned

words students used. When asked how adults 15 of the 31 students who completed the survey included words “talk” or “ask” in their responses.



**Figure 17.** Word cloud of student perspectives about how the school supports them (n=31)

Table 17 further synthesizes the staff behaviors students mentioned in their responses. All 31 responding students included a response to this item, almost all of which pointed to ways the school supported students. Student comments about staff behavior clustered around three themes: (a) communicating with and developing personal connections with students; (b) supporting student needs, learning, interests, and development; and (c) accepting, respecting, and valuing students. Table F2 in the appendices includes individual student responses. Sample student comments include:

- “Adults pay attention to students individually and take the time out to talk with them and not only discuss their personal problems, but also how they can work together to fix it.” (AASC female student)

- “Talk to you, ask how you are, really try to get a sense of who you are personally.”  
(AASC male student)
- “They ask me about myself and genuinely care about what's going on in my life. They remember things about me and follow up on things to see how I'm doing.”  
(SDC female student)
- “Many of them try to build a personal relationship with their students, so they know more about them than just their grade in the class. Many pick up on cues about your mood, and try to counsel you or figure out what's wrong and comfort you. They all encourage us to do as well as we can in everything we do.” (SDC female student)

*Table 17. Synthesis of Student Responses When Asked, “What Do Adults in This School Do to Make Students Like You Feel Cared about and Supported” (n=31)*

<b>Staff Behaviors</b>	<b>Number of Times Mentioned</b>
<i>Theme 1: Communicating with and developing personal connections with students</i>	
Build positive relationships; get to know students individually; meet students where they are; show genuine interest in them	19
Talk with students; engage them in conversation about their lives	14
Listen; take time to understand	7
Ask them how they are feeling	4
Catch up with students in the hall	1
Joke around with students	1
<i>Theme 2: Supporting student needs, learning, interests, and development</i>	
Give advice; provide a supportive environment; offer opportunities to get help; make themselves available and offer supports for students to do well and succeed	13
Encourage students to work hard and seek out ways to help them develop their skills/talents and grow	3
Support programs/activities students are involved in	1
<i>Theme 3: Accepting, respecting, and valuing students</i>	
Value students; show they care; treat students well	6
Display equality stickers	1
Respect students	1

*Note.* In a few cases, respondents listed multiple reasons that fell into the same category; these responses are not double counted.

**4.4.1.3. Personnel capacity to support students.** Extracurricular High carries out four strategies to build staff-based capacity to create a safe, supportive environment. These include (a) funding particular staff positions, (b) team meetings to facilitate communication between administration and the counseling department, (c) professional development and leadership opportunities, and (d) staff recruitment approaches. Each of these strategies contributed in various ways to providing personnel-based supports for students.

Foremost, in addition to administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors, some interviewees pointed to the practices of other school staff when asked about how the school supports students. This included a social worker who is in the school four days each week to provide various supports to students with the most intensive needs or with mental health concerns as well as peer mediation to address student conflicts through a problem-solving approach. The social worker also facilitates various groups for students, focusing on social skills and the needs of students with emotional disturbance and at risk for not graduating. Another staff support includes a specialist who teaches health at the school and is responsible for the drug and alcohol prevention and intervention programs at the school and district wide. As Administrator1 shared, “I think saying those roles are important and keeping those people on staff makes a statement.”

Additionally, the school has two security staff including a uniformed officer provided by the local police department. A plain-clothed security guard monitors students arriving in the morning, to ensure they arrive in a friendly, safe manner, and then secures the building by checking all exterior doors after the arrival period. He then patrols the halls during the day including a hallway not near classrooms, where teachers are not

typically present during the day, as well as the cafeteria during lunch periods. At the end of the school day, the security guard patrols the school grounds as buses arrive and students depart to ensure this is orderly. The uniformed security officer is in classrooms delivering DARE curriculum to students and monitors hallways and school grounds as well.

Second, the administration and counseling department meet as a whole team twice monthly for approximately 60 to 90 minutes to facilitate communication in the school. This team includes all six guidance counselors as well as the social worker, school psychologist, and prevention coordinator. The school's prior principal put this practice in place. The school had "a lot of people working in silos," and this change helped the walls "to melt away" and staff to begin "working together for the success of the school" (District leader). The meetings have a standing agenda, including reviewing calendars and priority items discussed separately among the administrative team and within the counseling department. The team also continues a practice started by the school's previous principal, called a "hot topic," that allows each participant to bring up an issue "that the collective group can weigh in on and provide feedback" at the end of the meeting (Administrator5). As this administrator also commented, this team served as:

A bridge between guidance, which provides more of the social emotional aspect, and us, who provide more of the policy piece and how we can bridge the two and create situations in the building here that are conducive to learning ... helping students feel safe and connected.

Third and not unexpectedly, professional development is another strategy for building teacher capacity to improve student outcomes. The school provides professional

development one morning each week along with a few days during the school year when students were out of school. Teachers are also required to annually review and sign off on various training videos including a 20-minute one on identifying and intervening when bullying occurs. Another teacher noted that around the holidays, guidance staff facilitate a staff meeting session on depression and remind staff about warning signs and how to address them. The school's improvement plan addresses school priorities and needs as perceived by school administrators. The plan, which was put in place in 2010, includes three areas needing action, including one about non-teaching staff participating in a continuous program of professional development and another on expanding staff leadership opportunities.

Only a few interviewees commented about the quality of professional development. Two teachers shared that the professional development is helpful and has included topics such as poverty and education as well as developing positive teacher-student relationships. In contrast, one teacher shared that the professional development is too focused on data and that although the district does "a very good job of ensuring programs are implemented that show we learned how to use data" but that "as far as student needs, socially and for their well-being, there is no professional development."

Finally, to develop school capacity to support students, the administration is committed to recruitment efforts that brought in teachers and staff that fit with the school's culture and aligned with its values. Administrator perspectives included the following:

- "When you interview here, we look for caring people. We look for real people.

That is all I can say. Around students you have to be vulnerable, you have to still

maintain that distance, but still let them know you are a real person and that your heart is always open to them" (Administrator1).

- "It is a district that hires the very best people they can get a hold of and they set high expectations, and again not just academic expectations but how do you teach the whole child from the get go.... I think you can learn to be a good teacher, but I think it is much harder to learn to really like kids and appreciate differences and have that be a core value. So I think that when we hire, we don't just hire people who have good grades from college or come from good jobs. We want to hire someone who is going to be about the kid first, student centered. This is part of the culture" (Administrator2).
- "When I look at hiring people, I put a lot of stock in attitude, communication, and a person who can establish a relationship pretty quickly. I put a lot of stock in attitude and character over the direct content.... You are going to have to learn on the job no matter what, and I look for people who are willing to learn. ... I want someone who is willing to grow and learn versus they think they know it, they think they already know it and they are the experts. I think we have a lot of people in this building with that mindset, and it is really refreshing" (Administrator3).

A former principal at the school and current district leader, when at the school, pushed it to improve the quality of staff every time a member of the school staff left, which helped to enhance school culture and recruit staff more committed and more skilled in supporting students. Hiring is also a team process in the building. Multiple staff will interview candidates, perhaps looking for different skills, and need to

agree before offering a position at the school. Administrator1 also noted that staff recruitment efforts benefited from high demand to work in the school given its quality and reputation for excellence:

It is a great hive, and the bees are just attracted to the great hive. I think it has always been this way. I think, you know, most people want to gravitate toward something that is valuable in their eyes. And so I think, we always have lots of people who want to work here. I think just a long time ago it started with the original school, and the momentum, the value system has continued and it has attracted people who want people to be successful here and safe. So, I don't think it is necessarily professional development. It is something we all support each other with. We do that with our staff too.

**4.4.1.4. Behavioral expectations and procedures.** Relative to behavioral expectations and procedures, anti-bullying is a focus in the school and a major theme in the qualitative data. It was the primary policy and set of practices they many interviewees pointed to when asked about school approaches to creating a safe, supportive school. In fact, all 28 school staff interviewees mentioned the anti-bullying policy or related efforts when asked about the school's approach to creating a safe, supportive environment. For example, when asked about this, one interviewee responded that "the first thing that comes to mind is the bullying policy and the consequences that are in place for that" (Teacher10). The school follows the district's "strong" anti-bullying policy, which is described further in the section on district policies and "has become much more intense" given recent school violence in other parts of the country (Administrator3). A counselor noted that "all adults in the building are familiar with the bullying policy" as well as

students, who receive information on this at the beginning of the school year through guidance office presentations on healthy relationships (Counselor2). Teacher10 shared that staff have to report issues, but are “not expected to solve the problems” on their own. Other interviewees noted that guidance staff have encouraged both students (through the district’s anti-bullying curriculum) and staff to intervene when they see inappropriate student behavior.

Numerous interviewees pointed to the principal as important to setting and communicating these behavioral expectations in the school. As Counselor6 shared, “the principal sets the stage right away that this is to be a safe school for everyone, and if not, you know these are the ways in which one can get support.” School staff also know to “go to the principal” if they see anyone being bullied or harassed (Other4). To improve student behavior, the principal reviews the school’s expectations for students at the beginning of the year during large assemblies for each grade. During these convenings, the principal summarizes the rules in the code of conduct and emphasizes that the school needs to be a place where every student can come, be safe, and learn. The school administration also provides guidance to coaches for its various teams to ensure members are safe, including addressing issues such as hazing. Another school staff interviewee commented the bullying conversations with students provide an “opportunity to have those conversations about how any one person might be mistreated for who they are, religion, race, sex, sexual orientation, special needs, whatever the case might be” (Other1).

Several other practices support the school’s anti-bullying focus. This includes providing printed resources for students, such as a flyer on 10 ways to be an “upstander”

that was available near the guidance department. This included practices such as stopping untrue or harmful messages from spreading and respecting others' differences. It also included information on a school anti-bullying video contest that illustrated what it means to be an upstander (although no interviewees mentioned this activity). A pamphlet on bullying and dating abuse was another printed resource available to students. The pamphlet describes the school's values, defines "bullying," provides tips for addressing bullying (e.g., befriending the victim and helping them walk away), what to do if students are being bullied, and the benefits of kindness (e.g., it is powerful, empowers students, and leave a legacy). These resources illustrate school practices to improve student interactions with and support of each other.

Also, at the beginning of the school year, the counselors address bullying and respect with each of the school's grades during student assemblies. Based on a written outline of the counselor presentations, they were organized around six areas: an introduction and icebreaker, being respectful, choosing to be an upstander rather than a bystander when bullying occurs, compassion for and embracing differences (e.g., recognizing how these enhance the school), kindness to self and others, and service to the school and community. This presentation reviews the school's values in depth, with each section focusing on a different school value and short videos. Notably, the portion on differences included references to the school's GSA, AASC, and SDC. It also included a discussion of how student differences enhance the school.

Several challenges with the anti-bullying policy and related practices emerged in some interviews. A common issue was not identified, although two interviewees commented that older students may "act like they don't care" about the anti-bullying

policy, but still tend to take it seriously (Teacher7). One counselor commented about students not wanting to report issues because of fear of retribution. A teacher also raised a concern about an “over-zealous” student who misidentified other student efforts to perform better in a student organization as bullying (Teacher5). This means teachers sometimes need to investigate the circumstances surrounding a reported concern to ensure they have all of the facts. Another teacher noted that in the past an administrator reacted negatively when a teacher used the online system to report a concern, but that this yielded “a faster response out of administration than if I just say ‘hey there is this problem.’” Several staff interviewees noted that some students felt nothing happened when a report was filed, but attributed this to students not learning about the action the administration takes. Finally, a district leader also noted that approximately one third of bullying reports are pranks.

Beyond the anti-bullying policy, the school has a “zero tolerance” policy for drugs, fighting, and weapons and a code of conduct. The code of conduct includes disciplinary procedures, which the school’s attendance officer handled. An interviewee noted that the school’s athletes and club organization members are:

Held accountable for [the code of conduct], and that includes a character piece.

So maybe you didn’t get caught drinking, but you got caught posting nasty things on a website. That is the character piece and you could use season, captain, leadership roles within our organization because you violated the code of conduct (Counselor3).

The disciplinary procedures include a graduated ladder based on the severity and frequency of infractions, ranging from a 15-minute detention to Saturday school, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and then expulsion.

Disciplinary approaches are intended to hold students accountable, but in a positive manner. They are no intended to put students down or make them feel bad about themselves, but rather to encourage learning from the experience and improved behavior in the future. As one interviewee shared:

Our administrators give every kid a chance; tomorrow is a new day. You have a new day to start fresh. We have made mistakes, but it is what are you going to do tomorrow after that, and I think our staff has really embraced that concept as well, but they are still kids, they are still learning, but if we can get in the middle of negative behavior, rude behavior, bullying type behavior then that is just going to help the climate in general (Counselor3).

Several administrators also talked about handling behavioral issues in ways that ensured students receive appropriate consequences, but still feel that adults care about them. One shared:

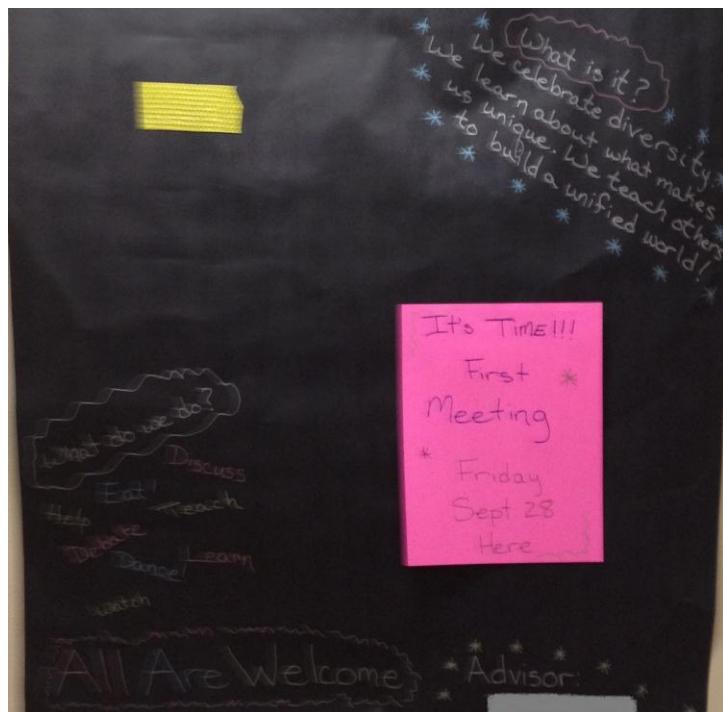
To me, it is not just, assign them to Saturday school and get out, but why, let's dig a little bit deeper and I think they sense that. ... I think they believe we have their best interests at heart when we are talking with them and working with them as students (Administrator5).

Finally, the administration has a positive behavioral support system, although only one non-administrative interviewee also mentioned this as a practice in the school. With a name that included the school's logo, as part of the system "teachers can write up

any kid, what they did,” and turn it into the principal (Administrator3). Each month, the principal then calls down a group of students, congratulates them for their positive behavior, and gives each a reward. One interviewee also noted an annual award of excellence that the school offers “for any student who has shown academic achievement, or strong character, or for service. . . . It just has to be a student who has shown huge leadership” (Other6). The school holds a recognition ceremony, which the interviewee thought was “definitely a great way for the students to feel recognized by the staff.”

**4.4.1.5. *Extracurricular opportunity.*** Student clubs, including the school’s GSA as discussed earlier in this chapter, are considered critical aspects of the school’s approach to supporting students. Based on an official school list of 2012–13 school year clubs, the school offered 47 clubs of varying types in addition to the GSA. These include 8 academically focused clubs (e.g., National Honors Society), 6 art/literary clubs, 6 sports groups, 9 language/culture-based clubs, 5 profession-based clubs (e.g., related to technology), 7 social justice/service/leadership clubs (e.g., Habitat for Humanity), and 6 other types of clubs including a performing arts group and a game-based club. The school distributes information on extracurricular clubs and talks about these opportunities with students, including as part of freshman orientation. The focus on extracurricular opportunities also aligns with a priority in the school improvement plan (providing more opportunities for students to lead). During the 2012–13 school year, approximately half of the school’s students were involved in at least one of its more than 20 athletic teams that included a range of sports such as baseball, basketball, football, golf, gymnastics, lacrosse, soccer, and volleyball. Furthermore, another 20% of students were involved in the school’s marching band. One staff interviewee emphasized that the school has

“significant student leadership” opportunities including its athletics, student council, various clubs, and drug-free student leadership program (Other1). Administrators and other staff discussed how students are encouraged to join student groups when they first enter the school. Several interviewees shared that students “are encouraged as freshmen to get involved in as many clubs as possible” (Teacher2). In addition to interview and survey data, observations found club-related signs and announcements throughout the school building. Figure 18 displays an example of an announcement for the school’s multicultural club.



**Figure 18.** Student club announcement outside of a classroom

Many interviewees noted extensive student involvement in extracurricular clubs and the ease of beginning clubs based on student interest. For example, interviewees noted the following:

- “We support kids when they come and want to create a club. We do everything we can. Our goal is not to find a way not to do it so we don’t have to do the work behind it, our goal is to find a way to make it work with the system we have and guide them through the policies and all of the things they need to do. We try not to be a roadblock for them” (Administrator3).
- “At the building level we work really hard in terms of, from a clubs and activities standpoint, to be as inclusive as possible. ... We push kids, we have a lot of kids that are involved in different activities” (Teacher1).
- “The administration just wants students to get involved somewhere, anywhere, and if that is with a club, a sport, whatever the case may be, they just want to see involvement. They want to see you connect in some way and I think they are very good about, ‘you have an idea, it works, go for it’” (Teacher7).
- “I know we have a lot of clubs and we encourage everybody to get involved” (Teacher11).
- “We have a huge number of student clubs and activities that have large memberships” (Teacher12).
- “We try to offer a variety of different clubs and organizations. We encourage students to find at least one group to connect with, clubs, organizations, sports team. And if they find something that a group of their peers are interested in and it doesn’t exist as a formal club, let’s help you get that started” (Counselor3).

- “I can’t even keep track of how many clubs I continue to hear about. … Just from the students who have started clubs, they talk about how easy it was to establish that. In other schools that I have been in, it has been a little more difficult in getting clubs started” (Counselor6).
- “We give them lots of choices. If they want to be involved, there is a club for them” (Other2).

Other staff echoed these perspectives. For example, one shared that students “have a lot of clubs that they can join so there is a place for everybody if they want to reach out. … There is a lot of opportunity for them to get to know each other, to get involved” (Teacher3). Another commented that “sometimes I am blown away by how many organizations we have. Some of the kids are involved in five clubs” (Teacher12).

Most interviewees, including both students and staff, pointed to this breadth of available student organizations as an exemplar of how the school supports students. For example, when asked about what the school does to support students and make them feel welcomed, one student interviewee commented about “a lot of clubs dedicated for this purpose, like [the Student with Disabilities Club (SDC)]” (Student4). Another shared that the school has “so many different clubs and that we are encouraged to join different things and embrace different things and diversity being one of them” (Student1); and a third commented that the school’s many groups allow students to feel connected to the school. Also, on the student survey, a student involved with the SDC shared that:

I like the fact that [Extracurricular High] has so many clubs for everyone. [Extracurricular High] is a big melting pot. We got everything. So the fact we have so many clubs helps all the different students here at [Extracurricular High]

to help them feel comfortable knowing their [sic] a part of [Extracurricular High] in some way.

Multiple staff perspectives about why extracurricular opportunities are important in the school were evident. For example, one staff interviewee noted that the SDC and its program in the school “have done a phenomenal job in embracing, in particular, special needs students” (Other1). Some interviewees commented that clubs provide opportunities for students to talk with an adult if they have an issue or would like some support. For example, a teacher noted that the school’s marching band provides many opportunities for students to develop positive relationships with adults in the school because of the various adults involved in the group. Other staff stated that student clubs support student acceptance, belonging, and connection with peers. The school’s administration was especially unified on this point about the importance of student clubs to student well-being. Sample staff comments reflecting these areas include the following:

- “We try and have lots of diverse activities, extracurriculars [sic] for students to find their creativity, their niche, and expression of self with others. . . .

Students to better at school if they feel a sense of belonging to something that is positive here. I think it is important for them to be with their peers and be accepted, in a way, while doing something they enjoy doing”  
(Administrator1).

- “We all believe if a kid can be connected to another kid or another adult, they are going to feel safer.” (Administrator2).
- “One of our goals, before they even walk in the door, is we want kids to have a connection and we want kids to have a sense of belonging in this school.

We use our clubs, organizations, our sports, to help build that connection with kids to the school. Every one of our organizations or clubs has an adult supervisor, and it has to by board policy, so that gives them an adult connection, which I think is important" (Administrator3).

- "They get involved in Fall sports and they have friends automatically. A football player has 60 friends right off of the bat. So I think the clubs are an extension of that, even if you are talking 3 or 4 people. ... You might have two best friends, I mean really, really friends and that's all we're looking for, for kids to have best friends and then maybe have some kids they can go to and they feel involved and they don't feel alone" (Administrator4).
- "Being involved and really, one of our things is the idea of authentic community, this school being kind of a hub for them no matter what they might be dealing with at home, in their own personal life, but for this to always be a place they can feel safe, be involved before, during, and after school. That is kind of a big part of what we strive to be" (Teacher1).
- "[Student] involvement in clubs gives them the ability to foster relationships with other students while there is still adult presence there just to make sure things are legit and they are doing what they are supposed to be doing. ... Without the clubs, then school social interaction is limited somewhat to hallways, down time in classes, and lunch time, and ... they may or may not foster an actual friendship [during those limited time periods]" (Teacher10).
- "A lot of kids students are willing to be part of the [athletics] program because they want to be part of something. They can belong to the baseball team, they

can belong to the football team, they can belong to some of these organizations that shrink the school down a little bit" (Teacher12).

- "Sometimes students feel like there aren't as many people out there that are having the same problems or concerns, and when they become part of these clubs it becomes this open forum to have discussions about things that are more taboo in a typical school day" (Counselor5).

A counselor, when asked about whether student clubs are part of the school's efforts to support students replied, "oh, absolutely. I think it goes back to the sense of belonging, so I feel like if students have a sense of belonging, they are giving back to the school. That just creates that culture" (Counselor4). Also, a respondent on the teacher survey (who was not interviewed) further echoed perspectives about the importance of these opportunities: "I believe that all the clubs and organizations at this high school contribute to the formation of students becoming young adults and significant and successful members of the community."

As another example of school efforts to provide students with leadership opportunities, based on information in its updated improvement plan, the school repurposed its principal advisory council to include student leaders representing multiple areas: athletics, band, multicultural, and spirit. This group of student leaders meets with the principal monthly to discuss positive initiatives for the student body. For example, they created a "free compliments day" when students positioned themselves around the school to compliment students and faculty as they passed. The school's athletic council also seeks opportunities for students to lead in the community, such as by reading to elementary students and packaging dinners for families in need. As this section

demonstrates, interviewees considered extracurricular opportunities critical aspects of Extracurricular High's approach to involving and supporting students.

**4.4.1.6. Targeted supports to particular groups of students.** Extracurricular High also has a number of practices in place to create a more supportive environment for particular groups of students including freshmen and other students new to the school, students with disabilities or other special needs, and students at risk for school failure. The school has several supports directed to freshmen. This includes an orientation and a “house” structure as part of a freshman academy. When freshmen enter the school, they are placed into one of these houses, which “gives them a little environment, a little home,” as Teacher3 shared, by staying with the same group of teachers and approximately 125 students for four core classes. This teacher went on to share that this approach facilitates teacher-teacher connection because they are more effectively able to monitor student progress and identify supports that may be needed.

The core team of teachers in each house meet daily to discuss concerns or needs they are seeing among their students. An administrator participates to monitor student progress and address needs teachers had. Also, each week teachers select seven students to provide more direct attention to, such as through conversations in hallways “even if it is just for a few minutes” (Teacher8) As part of this model, one interviewee noted a freshman mentoring program that “puts some of our best students in the classroom with freshmen” a couple times a year (Teacher5), although another noted that this mentoring component was happening less frequently currently due to scheduling changes. To additionally support freshmen, as part of orientation, freshmen come to the school a week

before classes start for a morning and meet their homeroom teacher, meet with older students who give them a tour of the school, and meet with administrators.

The house structure was established under the prior principal at a time when another high school in the district opened and skimmed off some upperclassmen at Extracurricular High, leading to a lot more freshmen compared to other grades. As a district leader noted, this was a concern because of the imbalance it created since “freshmen are immature,” which contributed to increased behavioral issues. A teacher noted that this house structure was put in place because the school had “found that when kids start to have issues academically or socially, they crop up freshman year, so this was put in place to ensure no one falls through the cracks” (Teacher1). A second teacher commented the freshman houses “are probably the very best example” of school efforts to establish relationships with students and a third that the house system “really, really helps” freshmen transition to the school given its size (Teacher8, Teacher11). The district leader noted that this change has contributed to decreases in behavioral incidents and improved academics and attendance at the school.

Interviewees pointed to other programs in the school as well when asked about how the school creates a safe, supportive environment. This included a volunteer program to connect current students with new students to the building. The current students link new students with others in the school including activities. There is also a group that meets monthly during the school year. One student interviewee pointed to this as an example of how the school works to support students: “I moved before and that can be rough. ... I think that is a brilliant idea ... [and] ... that is a good show of them trying to be welcoming” (Student5). The Students with Disabilities Club and its associated

program in the school, which has been described previously, was another practice cited by six interviewees.

Finally, attendance was an observed need and challenge among the school's students on free and reduced price lunch. Hence, one of the assistant principals is responsible for monitoring school attendance of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. This was put in place because as one administrator shared, "obviously research shows if you are here in school, you are going to be successful" (Administrator5).

**4.4.1.7. *School physical plant.*** To enhance physical safety, most classrooms have "red panic buttons" that teachers could use during an emergency, which would set a light off in the office leading to an immediate response from administrators and security staff. The school was also remodeled a few years earlier and part of the redesign helped to improve safety from one teacher's perspective:

I think the other thing that helped is about two years ago, they remodeled parts of the building and they moved the offices right there by the cafeteria. The year before they moved the offices, that was the year we were having all that violence, and they were so far from the cafeteria and almost every morning there was a fight in the cafeteria and it would take a while for administration to respond.

Since they moved the office, two administrators are in the cafeteria just about every morning.

**4.4.1.8. *Positive school-home connections.*** Finally, the school also has several practices to develop positive relationships with parents/caregivers of students. As one administrator shared:

We really hold ourselves accountable about being aware and watching things, watching students, trying to extend ourselves to families. If we know a family is in crisis, whether it be financially or emotionally or whatever they are going through, we try to walk with them" (Administrator1).

As part of freshman orientation, administrators and teachers meet with parents. As one teacher noted, this is an opportunity to encourage parents to be involved. Another administrator noted that the event also helps to make parents comfortable: "it sets the tone from the beginning that this is a good place to be, your kid is going to be taken care of" in the school (Administrator2). Administrators were also seen as facilitating this positive school-home connection through their relationship building with students and families:

I think the administration really does a great job of trying to know students by name, trying to really know families, getting involved in activities so they know how students are connected relative to the activities and their family environment (Counselor6).

Furthermore, teachers also talk with parents about how the school works to support students.

The school also has an active PTO that meets monthly. The PTO's purpose is multidimensional and includes a focus on promoting appropriate social activities for students and facilitating home-school communication. I was unable to obtain notes from PTO meetings that occurred during the 2011–12 school year, but according to an administrator the standing agenda includes updates from the principal and guidance staff, among other items. One interviewee commented that this provides an opportunity for the

school to connect with parents in meaningful ways. Beyond standard officer roles (e.g., president), the PTO also has more than 20 committees. Although none of these seemed to relate directly to issues of school climate, such as safety and student connectedness, the scope of the PTO's organization suggests a potentially active parent community.

Another priority in the school's improvement plan focuses on developing formal channels to communicate with non-English-speaking parents (although the population is small in the school). The school's recent updates to its improvement plan note its progress and that these efforts allowed the school to look deeper into areas that were integral to its overall academic success. The update notes the following:

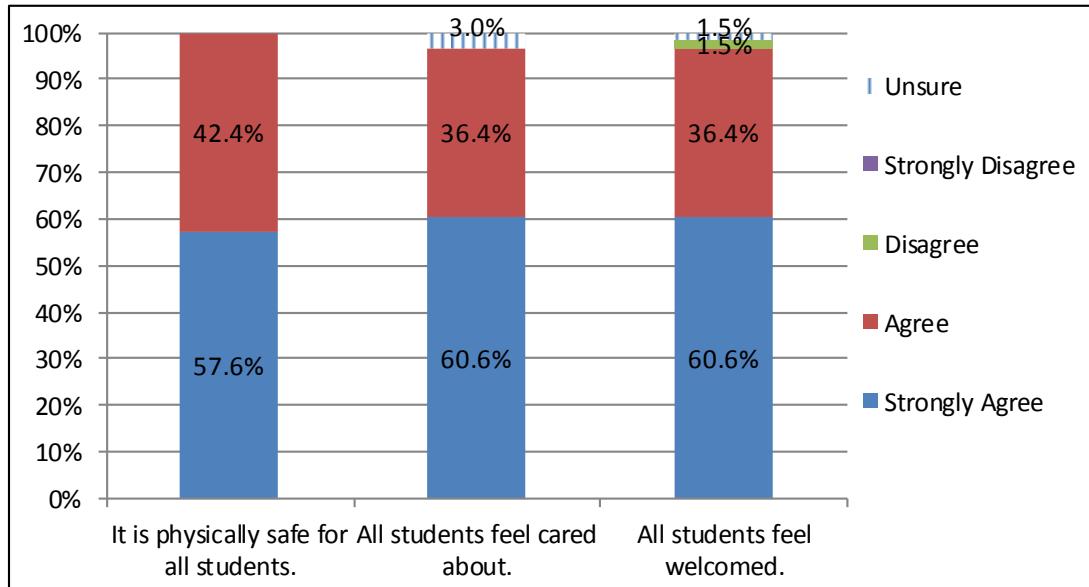
We now believe our communication with parents has improved, our non-teaching staff have been given a plethora of opportunities to continue their growth as professionals, and our students and teachers now have multiple avenues to assume leadership roles which ultimately benefit the entire high school.

For example, the non-teaching staff have attended professional development sessions to understand other cultures and how to best support their needs when interacting with people from those cultures. In addition, the school's monthly newsletters are distributed in English, Spanish, and Arabic and the school was looking to expand the translation to Chinese, Japanese, and other languages.

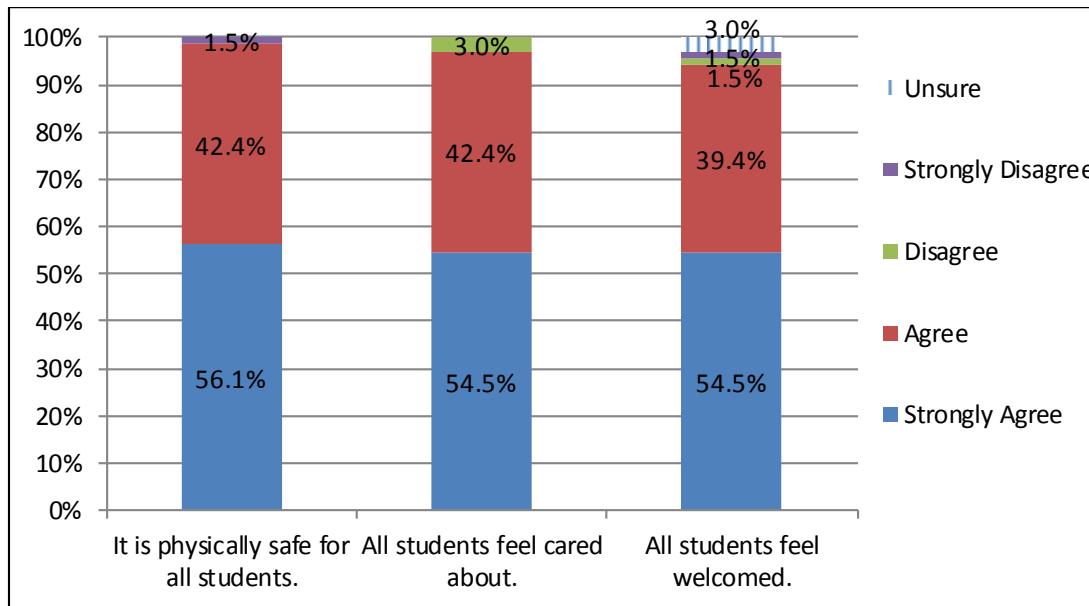
#### ***4.4.1.9. Teacher survey findings: Attitudes toward school policies and practices.***

In addition the interview data integrated throughout this section, teacher perspectives on school efforts were also positive on the survey they completed. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the school had effective policies/programs in the three areas the survey asked about: physical safety, students feeling cared about, and students feeling

welcomed (see Figure 19). Teachers also overwhelmingly agreed that the school did enough in these three areas (see Figure 20). Now that school policies and practices have been described, the following section addresses district-level policies and practices.



**Figure 19.** Teacher survey results: Teacher agreement that the school has effective policies/programs to ensure ... (n=69).



**Figure 20.** Teacher survey results: Teacher agreement that the school does enough to ensure ... (n=66).

**4.4.2. School district policies and practices.** Given the positive perspectives about school policies and practices just described, the school's district influence on school policy and practices is now explored. This section synthesizes findings about school district policies and practices that influenced Extracurricular High in several ways. Before the current district administration, the district had several superintendents "in rapid succession" and the central office was fragmented, which provided an opportunity for the school to try different strategies (District Leader). The current district administration was focusing on consistency across buildings. The current superintendent was also student-centered. According to one interviewee, "if you talk to him for more than 30 seconds ... very soon he starts talking about kids" (District Leader). This included being visible at school events. One interviewee noted that "the superintendent is at so many events. He is visible, and he is positive when he is out there, so it is clear from the top" (Administrator2). Another commented that the superintendent was "very invested in the schools, very aware, you see him in a lot of activities which I think any type of things where you can value kids, whether they are activities, being around, or just walking around the school" (Administrator1).

Central office policy and practice were only a minor theme emerging from the interviews. The data suggest that the district's schools have a great deal of autonomy, but as one administrator shared, Extracurricular High receives support from the central office when needed. Central office influence on safety and support is largely evident in district policy on bullying and nondiscrimination. The district's goals for the 2011–12 school year focused on three areas: developing department-level strategic plans, creating an online learning model, and comparing district practice and achievement to international

benchmarks. Also, a review of the district's board of education minutes from January 2012 to September 2013 found that board meetings generally focused on the following core areas: (a) awards and recognitions of staff; (b) business affairs and finance; (c) general board reports on topics such as human resources (e.g., certificated employment, retirements) and technology; (d) learning and teaching, including approval of courses; and (e) public comments. The meetings also included superintendent's reports, which focused on issues such as central office restructuring, course offerings, new/revised policies, the school calendar, and strategic planning. Minutes from these meetings reflected district commitment to honoring staff and student accomplishments. They did not provide information about board or superintendent expectations or vision for safe, supportive schools.

Several district practices addressing safety and support in Extracurricular High were evident based on interviews and available documents.<sup>59</sup> These included practices related to (a) values and vision for school practice; (b) committing funding for staff positions in schools that address safety and support; (c) staff recruitment and development including recognition of excellence; (d) communication between middle and high schools to support student needs; and (e) supporting positive school climate, including an anti-bullying upstander curriculum. This section begins with a summary of relevant policies and then describes these practices.

**4.4.2.1. District policies to create physically safe, welcoming schools.** Several district policies are of direct relevance to the larger context in which the GSA and its school exist, including those related to nondiscrimination, multicultural education, and

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<sup>59</sup> The district did not have an improvement plan, so data was not available from documents.

harassment/bullying. This information comes from a review of Board policies as well as staff interviews. The district's 2012–13 handbook for high school parents and students summarizes district policies about attendance, bullying and harassment, dress code, driving, grades, and sportsmanship. The document also lays out information about the district's mission, philosophy, and values. Sexual orientation and gender identity/expression were not enumerated in these various policies.

*4.4.2.1.1. Non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies.* Foremost, although the school district's nondiscrimination policy acknowledges that "any form of discrimination or harassment can be devastating to an individual's academic progress, social relationship and/or personal sense of self-worth," it does not include sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression in its list of protected categories for educational programs/activities and employment policies/practices. This equal educational opportunity policy is laid out in the district's student handbooks and in School Board policy statements.

Similarly, the district's board of education anti-harassment policy prohibits harassment based on "sex, race, color, national origin, religion, disability, genetic information, or any other unlawful basis."<sup>60</sup> These categories reflect those same groups protected by U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) laws including Title I of the American with Disabilities Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). The district does not go beyond these required protections, although it seemingly values multicultural identity and

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<sup>60</sup> The district's board of education policy statement is not cited to protect the school and district identity.

does state that it strives to provide an equal opportunity for all students including based on their social/economic background.

Several staff interviewees raised questions about the district's nondiscrimination and harassments policies. Although the school itself was not a place where discrimination was considered a concern, one school staff interviewee worried about other schools in the district:

I do fear, I think that we live in a building that is supportive, but I don't know about the other buildings. ... Why isn't sexual orientation in our policies... . It is not listed for harassment; I have not seen it anywhere. ... Not having it written in our policies, not having the word "sexual orientation" as a protected group, doesn't make sense to me. I don't know why. I think some people wonder why, and others people don't think it is a big deal. I think it is.

A review of board of education policy revealed several written expectations for how district leadership was expecting the school system to work toward equal educational opportunity for all students. District policy specifies that the superintendent should review current and proposed courses of study and textbooks to detect any bias based on particular groups including "culture" (which is not defined further in this statement, but "pluralism" is defined in the multicultural statement described in the next paragraph). The policy also directs the superintendent to ensure (a) equal student access to programs, activities, facilities, and practices; (b) delivery of school staff professional development addressing the statements of nondiscrimination and equality educational opportunity; (c) unbiased student evaluation; and (d) similar levels of support for district-level programs.

Another district policy defines harassment, intimidation, and bullying as “any intentional written, verbal, electronic, or physical act that a student or group of students exhibits toward another particular student(s) more than once and the behavior both causes mental or physical harm to the other student(s) and is sufficiently severe, persistent, or pervasive that it creates an intimidating, threatening, or abusive educational environment for the other student(s)” as well as date-related violence. All school staff are required to complete an online training about bullying at the beginning of each school year. The district has an online reporting portal for raising bullying concerns to school leadership’s attention. Each submitted report is emailed to the school principal and other administrators as well as district leaders including the superintendent. The concern is supposed to be reviewed and addressed within 24 hours of the report being submitted.

Estimates for how long the policy has been in place varied, but several staff interviewees indicated for at least seven years. The district had a website as well as a phone number for anyone to anonymously report a bullying-related concern. To facilitate prompt follow-up, concerns reported through the online system are emailed to the approximately five central office staff including the superintendent as well as all school administrators and a school secretary. The district’s policy was also expanded recently based on state-level policy changes that broadened bullying and harassment to include issues outside of the including social media (e.g., Facebook). As Counselor3 shared, social media provides “an opportunity for students to hide and say some nasty things. Those things are going to impact students from a mental health perspective” as well as their learning.

This state-level change has given district's jurisdiction to address harassment and bullying issues outside of school that are brought to the school's attention. This allows the school to make these behavioral incidents outside of school disciplinary issues (e.g., students can be prevented from participating in part of the sports season). Furthermore, the district's zero tolerance policy for weapons in schools is rooted in state policy that mandates punishments for such infractions.

*4.4.2.1.2. Multicultural inclusion policy.* Additionally, the board has a multicultural inclusion policy statement that reflects a commitment to diversity and inclusion, while not explicitly identifying LGBT identity or students in it. This statement provides a multi-paragraph description of the importance to pluralism and how the district values it. The statement indicates that the school curriculum and all instructional materials should reflect an "inclusionary perspective." The board notes that multicultural education is important to the personal development of students and staff as well as "harmony within our community." The policy statement further delineates that the district's curriculum will "promote acceptance, understanding, cooperation, and appreciation of diverse groups of people," and "accept and affirm" pluralism. The statement parenthetically defines "diversity" as ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender differences. The district's multicultural statement does not mention sexual orientation/identity or students from different family backgrounds (e.g., same-sex parents).

*4.4.2.1.3. Parent and family involvement policy.* Finally, the board of education has a policy statement on parent and family involvement. The policy states several areas of focus to cultivate partnerships with families and the community, such as developing

schools that are welcoming, student-centered, and supportive and effective communication between schools and families. The policy also specifies that the superintendent will develop a plan to partner with parents, families, and community members to support each student's academic achievement as well as ongoing school and district improvement.

**4.4.2.2. *Values and vision for school practice.*** In addition to policies as a source of information reflecting the district's values, interviews and documents shed some additional light on this area. The New Suburb School District website has limited information on the district's vision and values, but it does state a commitment to excellence and equity. The district's mission focuses on maximizing learning opportunities. This includes a focus on schools establishing high standards and providing supports for students not achieving them as well as exceeding them.

Importantly, the district's high school student handbooks for the 2013–14 and prior two school years list eight district beliefs. One states that the district believes a safe, positive, and challenging learning environment enhances the development of all students. Another belief especially relevant to the previously described school findings focuses on students feeling pride in their schools. Other beliefs address the ability of all students to learn, compassionate and dedicated staff, development of character, meaningful educational experiences and lifelong learning, strong relationships with the community, and celebration of success.

**4.4.2.3. *Support personnel.*** The district funds school-level, non-instructional staff positions intended to foster safe, supportive schools. Although the district lost a levy a few years before this study and "had to cut millions from the budget," the superintendent

was committed and maintained a counselor-student ratio of approximately 1 to 300 in the high schools (District Leader). The district also provided the uniformed, armed security officers from the local police department. This was for “not just keeping the peace, but also giving kids someone to talk with” in the school and “to see police in a different light” (District Leader).

**4.4.2.4. Staff recruitment, development, and recognition.** To support recruitment of staff who are able to effectively develop relationships with students, the district uses a tool, the Perceiver, to screen applicants for their student centeredness and ability to communicate and collaborate. So, Extracurricular High administrators receive candidates for its review that pass this initial screening. For current staff, the district provides a voluntary leadership academy, a two-day professional development opportunity, in August of each school year. In describing the academy, a teacher shared that:

I know [the superintendent] has been very supportive of keeping it going. I think we have had it now for maybe 10 years now since before I came to the district. A big message every year at the leadership academy is making those connections with students, really trying to facilitate the affect side of teaching in addition to the content aspect of it. ... And all of the administrators from central office attend, our principals attend part of it as well, so it is definitely supported by administration. The message throughout it from [the superintendent] to principals to the various facilitators of breakout sessions is making those connections with kids, letting them know that it is a safe environment to be themselves, and really encouraging that individuality. There is a lot of brainstorming as well at the

academy about how can we find out more about those individualities and how can we foster them with kids (Teacher8).

Approximately half of the district's teachers participated in the district's academy in August 2012.

In the area of staff performance, the district's evaluation system for teachers includes an assessment of teacher ability to build relationships with students. According to an administrator, teacher evaluation includes observational data (e.g., classroom interactions with students) as well as teacher communication strategies and quality with students (i.e., is feedback framed positively). Administrator3 commented that "I think our evaluation system really supports our staff." A review of the rubric for teacher evaluation in New Suburb School District found that it includes seven domains each with expected practices—34 in total that mostly pertain to instruction and learning. These larger areas include:

1. Understanding student learning and development, and respecting the diversity of students.
2. Understanding the content area for which they are responsible.
3. Understanding and using assessments to monitor student learning.
4. Planning and delivering effective instruction.
5. Creating learning environments that promote high levels of achievement.
6. Collaborating and communicating with others (e.g., parents, the community) to support students.
7. Assuming responsibility for professional growth.

The first domain includes a practice focused on modeling “respect for students’ diverse cultures, language skills, and experiences.” To be “distinguished” in this practice, teachers need to “challenge disrespectful attitudes by modeling behavior for others and working to ensure that all students are recognized and valued. Two other practices under domain five address safety and respect. These include treating all students fairly and establishing an environment that is “respectful, supportive, and caring” as well as creating “an environment that is physically and emotionally safe.”

Moreover, to reinforce strong staff performance, the district provides an award of excellence to two school staff each month. The individual is nominated by staff, students, and (or) parents, who describe why the person is extraordinary. If selected for the award, the school board honors the recipients, a local grocery store puts up their photos, and a local newspaper writes about it. The central office also brings a cake and refreshments to the school for its staff meeting. Extracurricular High’s principal received this award during the month of one of my visits to the school and I had an opportunity to observe the celebratory activities. Administrators and staff I spoke with were proud of the award.

**4.4.2.5. *Communication about student needs.*** In addition to these staff recruitment and development efforts, the district has a system in place for middle school counselors to share information with high school counselors about student needs. A teacher noted that she receives a folder with extensive detail on each student’s background. Teachers also meet with counselors about particular students who have more intensive needs when they come to the school.

**4.4.2.6. *School climate efforts.*** Finally, interviewees also talked about two district practices affecting school climate. The district starts “at a young age” to work with

students “to be vocal about addressing” bullying (Teacher3), using an upstander curriculum that the guidance staff at all three school levels. The counselors use this to get into classrooms and empower students to be a voice for students experiencing harassment so that the “bully just looks out of place” (Teacher3). Additionally, the district also surveys seniors through an exit survey and periodically all students in the school about not only academics, but also how they feel about the school and their teachers,

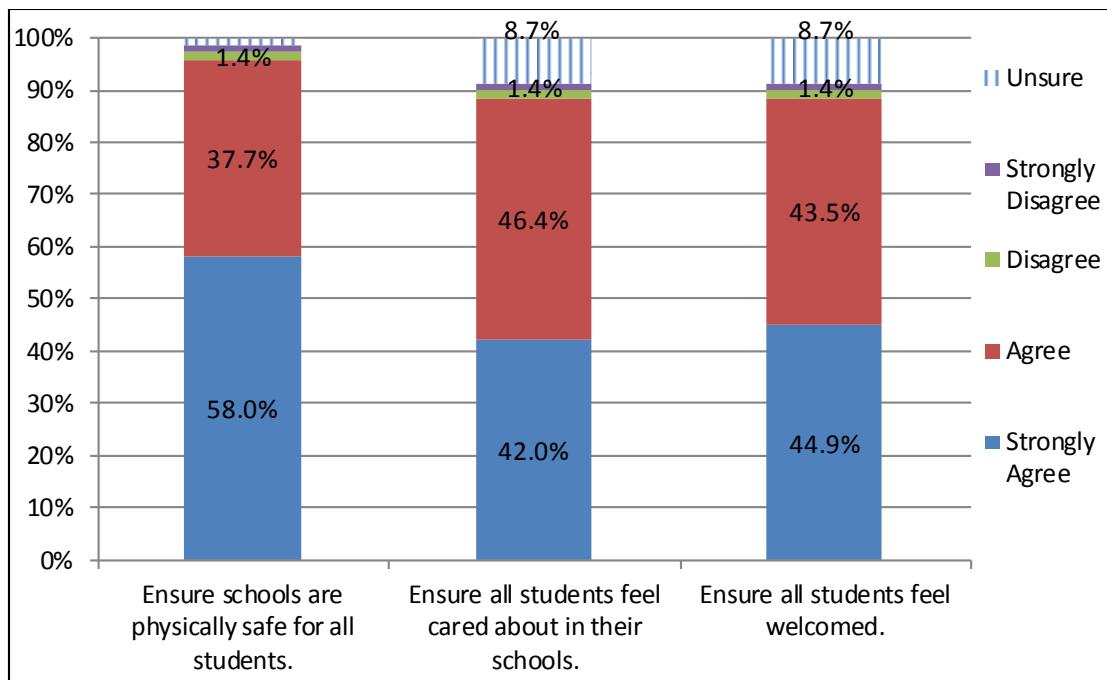
**4.4.2.7. Attitudes toward district policy and practice.** Interviewees did not think the district had a major influence on school-level practice, aside from the anti-bullying policy, but the teacher survey found overall favorable attitudes toward district policies and practice. Some non-administrative school interviewees noted limited interaction with and visibility of central office staff. Many other non-administrative interviewees did not discuss direct supports they received from the central office staff. However, one administrator commented that “I think the central office is very much about the holistic child. . . I do think they promote involvement with groups. It is not policy, but it’s what I would call best practices” (Administrator1). However, a teacher raised a general concern about politics interfering in the efforts of central office staff:

I think people higher up, they have a little distance from students and interacting with students, so they think of everything in terms of politics and whether it looks good or bad for the school to do anything. That’s what I think. How you actually get to meeting the needs of kids, truly, you have to work with those adults who are working with kids on the front line. . . I have gotten to know the kids and I know the staff are generally about helping students becoming successful, happy adults in whatever they choose to do in life. Whereas, when higher up and not as

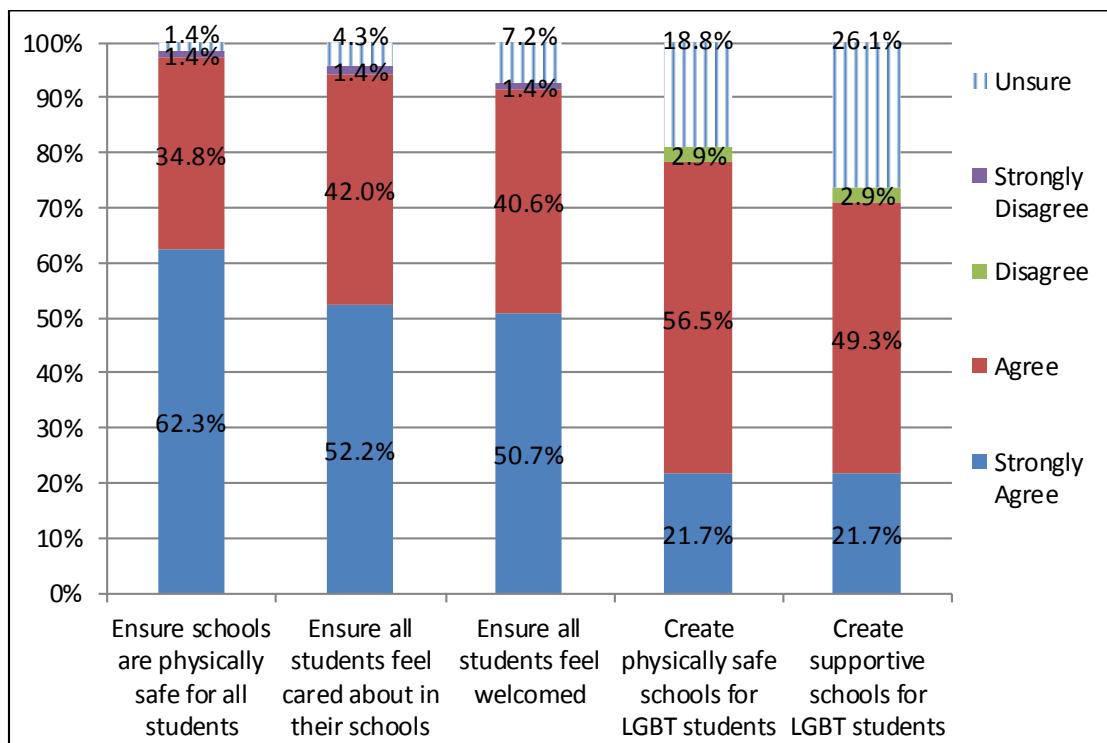
close to the kids, other interests and agendas get in the way, and others' opinions factor into their decisions.

Another school interviewee shared that the district's approach to addressing student needs has historically been "one size fits all" across its schools. However, this person noted that the district has increasingly tried to become more individualized in its approach to serving students by looking at the "educational process they require" and providing the necessary supports.

Despite these minor concerns from the qualitative data, the teacher survey I administered found favorable teacher perceptions of district policies/programs and efforts related to school safety and support for all students. Respondents viewed district policies/programs effectively favorably, agreeing that they ensured schools were physically safe, students felt cared about, and students felt welcomed (see Figure 21). Respondents were more uncertain, though, about whether these policies created physically safe and supportive schools for LGBT students in the district: approximately 20% to 30% were unsure about this, respectively. Moreover, teachers were less than half as likely to strongly agree with these related statements on the survey. Teacher agreement about the district doing enough to create safe, supportive schools was strong with little variation (see Figure 22).



**Figure 21.** Teacher survey results: Teacher agreement that New Suburb School District had effective policies/programs to ... (n=69).



**Figure 22.** Teacher survey results: Teacher agreement that New Suburb School District leadership and central office did enough to ... (n=69).

#### **4.3. Comparison of attitudes toward school and district policy and practice.**

In comparing teacher attitudes toward school and district policies and practices, some similarities and differences are evident. Results are similar in the area of physical safety. However, results for school practices were more favorable relative to ensuring all students feel cared about and welcomed, though. A higher proportion of teachers “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the *school* does enough to ensure all students feel cared about (97%) compared to the *district* (86%), including a larger percentage strongly agreeing (55% versus 42%). Results were similar when teachers were asked about whether the school or district did enough to ensure all students feel welcomed. Relative to effective policies/programs, results more similar for both district and school policy although a slightly larger percentage “strongly agreed” when asked about school policy. Therefore, it appears that while both district and school policies create a supportive environment for all students, school-level policies and practices were more important to creating a positive environment for LGBT students. These issues are examined more fully in the final, concluding chapter that reviews and discusses major themes and their implications for policy, practice, and research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **5.1. Overview**

This final chapter begins with a brief overview of the study, including its purpose, methods, and core findings. Following this is a discussion of six major themes emerging from the findings. Next, challenges in carrying out the research and limitations of the findings are reviewed. Study implications for policy, practice, research, and theory are then explored.

### **5.2. Study Summary**

Research and other literature have identified essential school conditions that contribute to student learning and success. Three conditions for learning include physical safety (e.g., an orderly environment free of violence and weapons), emotional safety (e.g., feeling respected and a sense of belonging), and student support (e.g., meaningful connection to adults). These are an important foundation for this study because students who are LGBT, or are perceived to be, may experience bias, violence, and other challenges because of their sexual orientation and (or) gender expression. These issues create unwelcoming, negative conditions in schools for LGBT students and can impact their learning and well-being. At the same time, a growing literature has drawn increasing attention to GSAs and other strategies for creating more supportive, inclusive schools for LGBT students.

With this literature in mind, the primary objective of this research was to contribute to the education and the LGBT youth fields' understanding of how a GSA was carried out in its context. This exploration included a focus on GSA challenges and enablers, and the overall experiences of LGBT students in the larger school environment.

With an understanding that GSAs do not exist independent from their larger community setting, I sought to understand more about the GSA's larger context. This included the school's and its district's policies, along with practices, intended to create a safe, supportive school environment for all students including those who are LGBT. I expected, based on related literature, that school and district factors would influence not only the GSA, but also student experiences and outcomes.

Importantly, the model at the end of chapter 2, which I developed based on the literature, is the study's conceptual foundation. As the model illustrates, clubs like GSAs can be interventions that contribute to more welcoming, supportive school conditions and improve outcomes for participating students. Research has shown that GSAs influence emotional and physical safety in schools, such as by fostering more positive connections among students and school staff. This is especially important because literature on conditions for learning links safety and support to student outcomes such as achievement and well-being.

The conceptual model depicts how GSAs can influence school communities and students' school experiences and their ability to learn and thrive in three important ways. First, by simply existing and being available, GSAs can provide opportunities for students to have more positive experiences through ongoing meetings and relationships developed among participating students. Second, GSAs can directly influence participating students' sense of empowerment and their development of a positive identity. Third, through GSA events and activities, these groups can help to raise awareness about LGBT-related concerns in their larger school environments. These advocacy and awareness activities can influence the larger school context, including

school leadership and policy along with the attitudes and behavior of school staff and GSA students' peers. Hence, the model links GSA supports including meetings and events to more positive experiences of LGBT students in schools, such as the extent to which anti-LGBT language and behavior occur and how they are addressed.

The conceptual model also illustrates how GSAs interact with their school and district environments, which can influence GSAs (and vice versa). Such environmental factors include, for example, district/school leadership willingness to allow the GSA to exist and support its activities, including its ability to host meetings and carry out meaningful school-wide events. Other influences may include the attitudes and behaviors of school staff who may positively reinforce and support—or stifle—GSA efforts. Also, the attitudes and actions of students, including their willingness to be involved in GSA activities and receptivity to the GSA in the school, can affect GSA implementation. This model framed what I set out to explore, informing the study's research questions, design, analyses, and reporting.

Working from this conceptual grounding, I studied a midwestern high school's GSA. I compared it to two other student organizations intended to create a safe, supportive school environment for particular groups of students who might otherwise feel isolated or "different." The evidence gathered—36 in-depth interviews including six with students involved with the GSA, multiple school and two GSA meeting observations, 69 teacher surveys, 31 student surveys, and artifacts/documents—comes together to elucidate important findings and themes that address the study's questions.

First, the study examined why, when, and how the GSA was implemented. Key informants identified various purposes of the GSA, but commonly pointed to one:

providing a safe and welcoming space for all ideas and people. During the current school year, the GSA had approximately 15 members who participated in meetings regularly. They were largely white, female students. Other students were involved in GSA activities, in particular when it participated in GLSEN's Day of Silence. Aside from this annual event, the GSA carried out a few other activities in the school and was focusing on building awareness about the GSA in the school. Among staff familiar with the GSA, attitudes toward it were quite favorable. However, GSA student interviewees reported mixed support for the GSA from their peers. Finally, important factors affecting the GSA's implementation at Extracurricular High included (a) faculty and administrative support, (b) GSA visibility in the school, (c) GSA student leadership, (d) recruitment and participation of GSA members, and (e) the quality of GSA meetings.

Second, the study asked whether the GSA affected the experiences and perception of safety and support in the school, and if so, how. To assess this, the study examined current conditions at Extracurricular High in three areas—physical safety, emotional safety, and student support. The findings suggest that the school was widely considered physical safe. Supports for adults for students were also quite strong. Although some challenges were evident, including LGBT students feeling welcome and respected by their peers and some staff, student-student relationships were generally positive. The GSA's greatest benefits to students were in the areas of emotional safety, support, and empowerment. This finding was similar for the two comparison clubs, the African American Students Club (AASC) and the Students with Disabilities Club (SDC), as well as services clubs based on data from some teacher survey respondents.

Finally, the study synthesized school and district policies/practices intended to create safe, supportive learning environments for students. The GSA is in a school with numerous practices intended to foster a safe, supportive learning environment. These practices clustered around eight areas: (a) school values and spirit; (b) strong, supportive student-adult relationships; (c) funding of support personnel positions; (d) behavioral expectations and procedures; (e) extracurricular opportunity; (f) school physical plant; and (g) positive school-home connections. Furthermore, the district had a strong anti-bullying policy, influenced by state policy, and practices in the areas of (a) values and vision for school practice; (b) funding for staff positions in schools that address safety and support; (c) staff recruitment, development, and recognition of excellence; (d) communication between middle and high schools to support student needs; and (e) positive school climate, including an anti-bullying curriculum. The next section discusses the salient themes that emerged from these findings.

### **5.3. Interpretation**

Six core themes are evident in the findings. First, LGBT students and identity were somewhat invisible—and the GSA itself has struggled with being visible in the school. Second, despite Extracurricular High having an array of practices and strategies in place to create a safe, supportive school, a GSA was still considered to be an essential resource for LGBT students and their allies in the school. Similar to prior research on GSAs, it is also evident in the findings that student clubs benefit from strong advisors and administrative support for the groups. Fourth, large school size is a barrier to not only student connection at Extracurricular High, but also to GSA implementation. Furthermore, staff recruitment strategies are important to the school's efforts to provide a

supportive climate for students. A final theme pertains to the district's role at Extracurricular High. Specifically, the district's influence is primarily around physical safety, with less of a role in emotional safety and student support. The discussion that follows examines these major themes.

**5.3.1. Theme one: LGBT and gay-straight alliance *invisibility*.** Although the GSA brings some visibility to LGBT students and their allies in Extracurricular High, LGBT identity and the GSA—or at least its LGBT focus—is somewhat invisible in the school. In particular, the GSA deemphasizes its LGBT focus. This was evident in several ways including key informants' comments about how the GSA's name, which did not reference "GSA" or "LGBT," was selected. Also, the GSA did not seem to address two areas that would have brought more visibility to LGBT identity in the school: providing LGBT-related resources and addressing heterosexism and transprejudice to make the school and the community safer.

Rather, the GSA's school outreach focused on general anti-bullying. The group did not seem to be formally reaching out in the school to educate students about and to address anti-LGBT bias—and GSA students themselves largely did not mention advocacy when describing the GSA's purpose. The GSA celebrated GLSEN's Day of Silence, which was an important schoolwide event with some students in most classes participating in it. Yet, in the data it was unclear how the GSA communicated to the broader school community the purpose of this event and its significance for LGBT students and other community members.

These issues around visibility likely slowed down the GSA's progress in the school. For example, the GSA's early challenges with recruiting new members may have

been exacerbated by the lack of awareness about the GSA, in particular among younger students. This led to a largely upperclassmen membership during the GSA's initial two years. Consequently, the GSA was recreating itself each year as seniors graduated.

This theme of invisibility is also evident in teacher awareness about the GSA. For example, a sizable proportion of respondents were not at all aware or had only very little awareness of the GSA on this study's teacher survey. Since the GSA is the school's primary voice of LGBT-related issues, this further demonstrates the lack of LGBT visibility within the broader school community.

Beyond the GSA itself, LGBT identity and expression seemed invisible in the larger school environment in several distinct ways. This invisibility included the curriculum, which some GSA students noted did not cover LGBT topics in their classes (e.g., gay-related themes in literature). The curriculum was not a focus of this study, but based on the data collected, the socially conservative community environment may have influenced whether and how LGBT identity was represented in the school's curriculum. Second, GSA students were concerned about how some school staff ignored LGBT-biased student behavior, while at the same time addressing other forms of bias. This is especially problematic because, as noted in the findings, one student shared that anti-gay language in the school "is just as harmful as physical threats." Third, the school lacked LGBT-related information, such as in the guidance counselor offices as well as in the classroom where the GSA was meeting. Finally, as the findings note, even with at least one ally and GSA supporter at the administrative level, some key informants thought that the school should not draw attention to LGBT identity or expression. It is possible,

perhaps even likely, that other key informants thought this way too and were not comfortable enough to openly express this perspective.

Despite these limitations, the GSA and LGBT identity were not completely invisible at Extracurricular High. In particular, a sizable proportion of interviewees, unlike the survey respondents, knew about the GSA. They also expressed strong support for it. The GSA also had broader support from students who were not able to regularly participate in its meetings. Furthermore, the GSA and LGBT topics were covered in periodic issues of the school's literary magazine. This coverage clearly involved some risks, such as potential pushback from the larger community, and also demonstrated commitment and willingness in the school to broaden awareness about and bring visibility to these topics. Still, the larger theme of invisibility outweighed these instances of visibility. This suggests that although Extracurricular High had a strong culture, in terms of its values, and climate in some areas, the climate was more neutral when it came to LGBT students.

**5.3.2. Theme two: Significance of a gay-straight alliance—even in a physically safe, highly supportive high school.** The findings suggest that Extracurricular High is widely considered a physically safe environment where adults in the school proactively supported students in myriad ways. Emotional safety, including a respectful climate, is a strength in the school as well—in particular in the case of how adults treat students. Some opportunities to enhance emotional safety for LGBT students and students from particular cultural groups were evident, but even for the LGBT student interviewees the school was still largely considered a welcoming environment where students found a niche and felt like they belonged.

Despite this, for the students participating in the GSA at Extracurricular High and the staff familiar with it, this student group was considered critical to students involved in it. While I thought some students might participate in the GSA because of physical safety issues in the school, this was not a reason. Rather, the GSA seemed to fill a different and important need: providing a space for all students to express their true identity and experience emotional support from their peers. Extracurricular High's GSA seemed to provide this critical support to participating students in two important ways. First, several students were struggling with family responses to LGBT identity. Second, several students were questioning or struggling with understanding their identity and the GSA was an important support for them.

Extracurricular High also had a substantial range of student organizations available, from athletics, to a sizable marching band, to a range of clubs and a culture where students were encouraged to initiate groups that interested them and be involved in the school. GSA students were part of other groups too, in particular the school's drama club. Despite the tremendous opportunity for students to find a niche in the school, the GSA was nonetheless an important support and was gaining momentum in its third year. This reinforces the notion that GSAs serve important roles even in schools that are largely physically safe and welcoming, with caring adults and largely supportive peers with wide-ranging opportunities for involvement in the school community. This is an important framing for discussions about the relevance of GSAs for schools such as Extracurricular High that are neither physically unsafe nor highly rejecting environments for LGBT students. In these schools, GSAs can still add to their schools' climate by fostering more positive conditions for learning.

### **5.3.3. Theme three: Strong advisors and administrative support benefit**

**student groups.** The findings show how administrative support and strong club advisors are important to successful student clubs. The GSA, as well as the AASC and SDC, each benefited from school staff that championed the groups in various ways. They also have strong administrative support, which for the GSA was a historic challenge under school leadership in the past. However, the group progressed with support from the current and previous principal and assistant principals who supported the group in various ways, from helping to initiate it to participating in GSA meetings. A guidance counselor and later an administrator who saw a need for the AASC in the school helped to create it. The GSA also has a well-liked advisor who has expanded staff involvement in GSA events in her school department. While students have moved these groups forward, school staff have also had pivotal roles in initiating and supporting the groups. This faculty support was important to the groups' life cycles, which evolved based on various other factors as well including student characteristics and experiences in the school.

### **5.3.4. Theme four: School size and its influence on student connection and**

**gay-straight alliance visibility.** The school's size was another important theme in the findings. Numerous interviewees talked about challenges in creating a safe, supportive school—and how the school's size contributed to students feeling lost and not having a sense of belonging in the school. Issues associated with and concerns about school size and student connection also led to various strategies in the school to foster student-student and student-adult relationships and connection, such as the AASC, multicultural club, freshman academy and, most notably, the strong commitment to and support of extracurricular opportunities.

School size was a particular concern for groups of students who were less represented in the student body and could not easily connect with students with similar cultural or other backgrounds, even if 50 other students in the school were like them, as one counselor noted. Based on interviewee perspectives, a decreased sense of “differentness” contributed to the diminished need for the AASC because as the number of African American/Black students in the school increased, student interest in meeting as a group decreased. However, this raises questions about how students with less-visible differences, whether they are socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, or related to sexual orientation, need group-based supports to feel more connection to their school community.

Moreover, even with many other supporting conditions in place, school size also potentially hindered GSA outreach at Extracurricular High. For example, the school’s large size led to GSA strategies to reach freshmen, who were underrepresented in the group. The school’s size seemed to contribute to a seemingly isolated GSA at the school, with low membership—less than 0.01 percent of students were regularly involved in GSA meetings. Awareness about the GSA was a challenge in the school, although this issue seemed also partly associated with the vast amount of extracurricular opportunities at the school. Also, the GSA’s isolation in the school could have been a function of the relative newness of the group and that it was still establishing itself in the school. In contrast, the AASC had been established in the school for many years and, although it was not meeting regularly during the 2012–13 school year, it had a sizable participation rate among the school’s African American/Black students during the prior school year.

### **5.3.5. Theme five: Staff recruitment and school climate in the “bee hive.”**

Given the significance of physically safe, respectful, and supportive learning environments, this study aimed to understand these conditions within the GSA’s larger school setting and in what ways they may have influenced the group. I still have vivid memories of my observations and interviews at Extracurricular High. These were consistently positive experiences—students and staff seemed largely friendly and caring, and the environment felt welcoming despite being a large school.

Staff interviewees were quick to note that the school was a safe, supportive one, despite some concerns in particular for groups of students such as the school’s African American/Black student population. As part of my probing during interviewees, though, I asked informants to try and describe what had led to this school having such a supportive climate. For example, when talking about a school staff that so consistently cares about students, I sometimes asked interviewees to describe, in specific terms, what contributes to this. I thought I might hear about administrative leadership establishing these priorities and guiding staff on supportive practices, or strategies for professional development and staff recruitment.

As described in the findings, interviewees attributed various factors to the school being safe and supportive, in particular the school’s reputation for excellence. One administrative interviewee referred to the school as a “bee hive” that was attracting the bees. The school had an excellent reputation and documented success based on its student achievement and other school outcomes. This allowed the school to be selective in its hiring process. The school benefited from district support in screening applicants, in particular for their ability to connect with students. The school’s administration further

looked for ways to identify candidates who would come into the school and model its commitment to supporting all students and develop positive relationships with them.

The findings suggest that this approach to recruiting new staff, along with a noteworthy turnover in school staff under a prior administrator, contributed to an important and more positive shift in school climate. The school benefits from a large pool of applicants when positions become vacant, which might allow it the flexibility to follow a selection process that is mindful of how staff will connect with students in positive ways. I anticipate that Extracurricular High's GSA has benefited from these strategies and the school's emphasis on a safe, supportive environment for all students, which might also affect staff attitudes toward the GSA and LGBT students and issues.

**5.3.6. Theme six: Limited district influence on some aspects of school practice.** I entered into the research anticipating that district policy and leadership would have a greater role in creating a safe, supportive school environment than it did at Extracurricular High. Based on the findings, the district's role in developing these conditions at Extracurricular High largely focused on physical safety. This was evident in the bullying policy, as well as district investment in security personnel and infrastructure such as panic buttons in the schools and the other procedures the district was launching in Fall 2013 such as a new visitor sign-in process.

Unexpectedly, formal district policy and district-driven practice are not major influences on the school. I wondered if some district policy, such as the school board's multicultural statement, informed school practice. Given that the district is so high achieving, I also anticipated hearing about a larger central office role in informing school practice beyond instruction, even if school leaders had a large degree of autonomy to

decide how to address district priorities in their schools. Surprisingly, beyond the bullying policy, school interviewees rarely mentioned a district role, such as particular central office staff that interact with the school to implement particular strategies or address areas of need. In several important ways, though, Extracurricular High is ahead of its district practice (and policy) because of its commitment to supporting its LGBT students (and those questioning their sexual/gender identity). This would be problematic if the opposite were true, though.

Hence, the lack of district influence is a final major theme in the findings. The school had great autonomy, although this was beginning to change under the current district leadership to enhance consistency in school practice. This decentralized approach may have been rooted in the district's relative newness and fast growth over the last 20 years, which may have left the central office without the capacity to consistently monitor and guide school-level practice.

It is worth reiterating, too, that the study's teacher survey found some contrasting perceptions of school and district efforts around safety and support. A slightly higher percentage of respondents at least "agreed" the *school* does enough to ensure all students feel cared about and are welcomed than they did when asked about the *district*. Also, when asked about whether the district's policies and programs create physically safe and supportive schools for LGBT students, agreement was lower than when respondents were asked about other areas of district practice. This suggests that although Extracurricular High was working to support students, some teachers saw potential for the district to have a larger role around serving LGBT students—or were unsure about whether current district strategies were adequate for this population of students.

#### **5.4. Challenges and Limitations**

This section addresses challenges experienced when carrying out this research and limitations of the findings. Overall, the research proceeded with only a few challenges. I was fortunate that my university institutional review board and the school approved student interviews and surveys. As noted in prior dissertations, this could have been a barrier to accessing the school to collect data given the “sensitivity” of the topics covered. I thought that was the greatest hurdle, although I also expected some challenges recruiting students given the need to obtain parental consent (even though the consent form did not mention the GSA, but rather talked about the group as a “club” in general terms). Although the GSA advisors worked with me to ask students to participate in interviews and the survey (both during their GSA meetings and via their group’s Facebook page)—and although students “met” me during a GSA meeting observation in Fall 2012—I was unable to attain the level of student participation in the data collection as I had hoped. Fortunately, after several follow-ups through the GSA advisors, the number of student interviewees increased to six. While not substantial, this was almost half of the group’s regular membership.

Parents and district leaders were also difficult to recruit. I was unable to recruit parent interviewees, which would have been a valuable additional perspective to inform the findings. It was unclear, though, whether parents were asked about participating or students did not approach their parents about participating in interviews for this study. Finally, I was able to recruit only one district leader given apparent lack of interest and, in some cases, confirmation that district staff including the superintendent were

unavailable to meet. This limited the breadth of perspective I was able to collect on the GSA and its district context.

I also expected that some participants would be uncomfortable talking about LGBT issues and student experiences relative to school safety and support, which would have affected the quality of data collected or the types of individuals consenting to participate. Although some teachers opted not to complete my survey, only one person at the school declined to participate in an interview. Also, building trust among study participants was not as challenging as I initially anticipated, at least based on my perception of my interactions with staff and students. All interviewees seemed interested in meeting with me and answering the questions I asked.

Relative to my role as researcher, I was not detached from my own life and experiences. I continued my journey in addressing my internalized stigma in talking about “gay” issues. In many ways, it is much easier for me to talk about transgender issues as an ally because I am not transgender. Talking about “gay” issues with individuals I was meeting for the first time, who I contacted and asked to meet with whose attitudes toward LGBT issues I did not know, forced me to try and keep in check my own periodic discomfort with talking about my research and interviewing participants (specifically males) in the school. Internalized stigma may have also limited the quality of data collected from students and even staff as well.

Another challenge pertained to GSA meeting observations. My efforts to remain a passive participant observer of the GSA meetings limited the data I was able to collect. For example, I wanted to walk around and look at the notes students were writing on the stick-it notes. While I anticipate this would have had little influence on what the students

wrote, it could have biased their subsequent actions or comments in even subtle ways. So, although I was unable to obtain greater detail in some cases, it was important to minimize my influence on the GSA meetings so that I could observe the convenings as they naturally occurred.

Furthermore, the study design and methods, like any research, had inherent limitations. In particular, given the single case studied, the findings are not generalizable to other schools and GSAs. Although generalization was never the purpose of this research, it is a limitation of the findings nonetheless. Also, six teacher interviewees were recruited using a random selection process, but their perspectives may not have represented those of others in the school given its size. Teacher surveys provided complementary data representing perspectives of a larger number of staff in the school. It is unknown, though, whether the perspectives of the school staff, as well as the students completing surveys and participating in interviews, were similar to or different from others in the school.

Additionally, both interviewees and survey respondents may have shared socially desirable responses to questions they were asked. A case study approach and the use of multiple methods, which this study used, is one of the best strategies for addressing social desirability. Nonetheless, the potential that respondents masked more negative attitudes toward the GSA and LGBT identity is worth noting.

Finally, I began my research in the school in September 2012, at the beginning of the school year. Although all interviewees had been working at the school for multiple years, in some cases this may have limited the quality of information respondents shared if they could not easily recall policies and practices in place during the prior school year.

In addition, given that the AASC was not active in Fall 2012, students completing the survey were asked to think about their involvement during the previous school year. Lastly, the student survey did not gather perspectives from freshmen, who may have been experiencing school climate differently than their older peers. These factors limited the quality of data I was able to collect. Despite these challenges and limitations, the richness of data collected and related findings make an important contribution to the literature as well as educational practice.

## **5.5. Implications**

Studying GSA implementation and school-related climate issues for LGBT students was important on several levels. This includes implications for policy, practice, research, and theory. This section begins with policy implications.

**5.5.1. Policy implications.** Foremost, the study informs the field at the policy level, including district/school policy makers and decision makers. Bullying is a significant focus within education policy circles—and it should be. It is insufficient, though. Additional protections are needed given the ongoing challenges that LGBT students experienced at Extracurricular High.

The district's strong anti-bullying policy, which key informants consistently pointed to, may have influenced the positive conditions at Extracurricular High, particularly in terms of physical safety. It would be inappropriate to infer causality given the design and methods. However, the findings show that LGBT students were still experiencing challenges due to anti-LGBT bias rather than to bullying per se. While the strong anti-bullying policy may be benefiting LGBT students in some ways, it addresses issues that I believe are the tip of the iceberg. Bullying, as defined in New Suburb School

District's online reporting tool, must be intentional, persistent, and repetitive. The anti-LGBT bias students reported experiencing in many cases was not directed at them and did not meet this requirement, but was harmful nonetheless and created unwelcoming conditions that could negatively affect students in the school. The lack of a comprehensive policy signals to students that these biased behaviors are acceptable—and are unacceptable only if it meets the definition of "bullying."

It is important that school districts and schools have comprehensive discrimination and harassment policies that enumerate sexual orientation and gender expression. These policies should then be the basis for proactive professional development to develop the cultural competence of staff. Additionally, these policies should guide outreach to students to build awareness, reduce bias, and foster more positive learning environments for all students. The next section describes this latter point further.

Furthermore, Federal and state policy should have a role in influencing local policy and practice. As was the case with the bullying policy in New Suburb School District, which state-level regulations influenced, state policies should require school districts to implement inclusive nondiscrimination and anti-bullying policies. Federal and state policy should also require districts to implement policies and practices that go further than bullying and address language and behaviors that may not meet the standard of "bullying," but nonetheless negatively affect emotional safety and support in schools. Such policies would push schools to more proactively address anti-LGBT bias in schools. This implication is consistent with what other researchers have recommended who have noted that "policies aimed simply at reducing bullying may not be effective in bringing

LGBTQ youth to the level of their heterosexual peers in terms of psychological and educational outcomes" (Robinson, & Espelage, 2012, p. 309).

**5.5.2. Practice implications.** This study's findings have several implications for practice. Foremost, GSAs are necessary supports and should be available even in schools where physical safety is not a concern and LGBT students feel positive connections with their school. Whereas in some schools GSAs may be a bastion of physical and emotional safety in a largely unfriendly and biased, if not also violent, school environment, this was not the case at Extracurricular High. The school had challenges for its LGBT students (and those perceived to be), but many related strengths were evident. This included a larger school environment with numerous practices in place to support students.

**5.5.2.1. A three-tiered approach.** Foremost, at Extracurricular High student belonging was important on many levels. It was a significant priority for administrators and staff. It was also valued by students themselves. The school had a three-tiered approach in place for supporting students, including their academic success and social-emotional well-being. This included school-wide supports, such as its anti-bullying efforts and a well-staffed counseling department; more intensive supports for groups of students, such as the AASC and programs for freshmen and new students; and intensive supports for students with the greatest needs (e.g., school social worker). Although a singular factor cannot be pointed to as primary influence on positive conditions in the school, the findings illustrate that many resources and approaches may be necessary to fully support students—even in schools like Extracurricular High in wealthy communities. This includes GSAs, which should be part of school strategies to foster student belonging and connectedness.

**5.5.2.2. Principal accountability.** Second, understanding how this GSA was implemented within its local context contributes to not only the literature on these school supports, but also informs practice as well. At Extracurricular High, a past unsupportive principal limited the GSA's ability to form and meet. In contrast, the current principal and administrative team largely supported it—with one member of the team even participating in GSA events. School leadership was a significant factor affecting the GSA's development in the school, as contrasted with faculty under the previous administrator being “afraid” to step up and advise a GSA in the school.

This raises important questions about how principals are held accountable (or not) for creating school environments where GSAs are allowed to form (despite being protected under the Equal Access Act), with faculty not fearing repercussions from advising these groups. For Extracurricular High, the GSA benefited from strong allies at the administrative level and within the faculty. Students in other schools may not be so fortunate, however. Although this was unnecessary in New Suburb School District, the history of this GSA illustrates how important it is for district leaders to more actively set a tone of support for GSAs in their schools—and to hold principals accountable for ensuring GSAs can form and meet without retribution.

**5.5.2.3. Importance of advisors.** Turning to GSA faculty leadership, the GSA was student led, but benefited from a passionate and well-liked advisor. I still vividly remember my first day at the school. The GSA advisor met me in the front office at 7:15 AM on a Monday morning. As we walked to her class, she energetically introduced me to administrators and talked passionately about how great her “kiddos” were. In the hall, a student approached her for help with a class assignment. I anticipated then that if the

advisor's positive interaction with the student was an indication of her overall commitment to students and support to the GSA, that her role in the GSA's implementation would be an important one. Although the advisors were not actively guiding GSA students when they met, they were the caring adults whose presence supported the GSA's implementation. GSA implementation may be enhanced by the presence of well-liked and energetic faculty advisors.

**5.5.2.4. *Involvement of student allies.*** Additionally, this GSA also strongly encouraged—and benefited from—involvement of non-LGBT students. The presence of allies in the group was seen as beneficial to not only those students who were participating as allies, but also to those students who were LGBT and turning to the GSA for positive peer support and connection. GSAs should continue to encourage involvement of allies in proactive ways, and ensure that group activities are of interest to ally students as well so that they feel welcomed and engaged in the group. This seemed to be an important piece of how the GSA at Extracurricular High approached its implementation. As discussed further under research implications, engagement of male student allies may have to contend with challenges associated with how masculinity is defined and reinforced in schools.

**5.5.2.5. *Gay-straight alliance group names.*** Next, GSAs that are just beginning may want to avoid overly creative group names that do not easily communicate their purpose in some clear way. The GSA's unique name, a singular word that did not indicate it was LGBT-related, potentially limited its reach and contributed to its challenges with visibility in the school. On the one hand, this was a student-led decision

that was intended to reflect the purpose of the club. This was important to the organization's genesis.

On the other hand, as an outsider I question whether the ambiguity of the GSA's name contributed to its difficulty engaging students and faculty in such a large school with so many competing social opportunities. No doubt, the name's ambiguity was appealing to some students and de-emphasized the "us" versus "them" language that may come with groups named "Gay-Straight Alliance." From an implementation perspective, the lack of a club name that more clearly suggested the group's focus on LGBT-related efforts in the school was a potential challenge impacting awareness about it. The more creative name may work well in smaller schools. However, in large school settings it seems important to select a name that will be part of the group's social marketing efforts, to avoid having a name that is a barrier to understanding what the group is about.

**5.5.2.6. Access and use of outside resources.** GSAs should also leverage resources in their local community and not exist in silos. This GSA was only minimally connected with its local LGBT youth organization and not connected with GLSEN or the GSA Network. During the 2011–12 school year, GSA students reached out to the local LGBT organization for resources, although this outreach was inconsistent, which one student attributed to the distance of the organization from the school and the cost of driving and parking there. After some students reached out to the local organization, it provided "a lot of information" for the GSA and influenced its publicity and activities. Moreover, national organizations could have provided the GSA with additional resources to guide its activities and help it function more efficiently in the school (e.g., by not recreating existing resources). The lack of connection to other LGBT organizations may

have limited the GSA's ability to efficiently hold relevant events and their meetings. For example, one GSA student leader noted that the group was not aware of National Coming Out Day until a school administrator mentioned it while attending a GSA meeting, which coincidentally occurred on the day of this national event.

Connections to external organizations may be even more important as young people express their LGBT identity more openly and at younger ages, and schools become generally more welcoming and supportive of LGBT identity. In turn, more students may be turning to GSAs for support with issues associated with their identity and family reactions to their identity or expression. GSAs as well as schools may be ill equipped to support students and their families in important ways, and engaging local LGBT organizations and allies in the community can help build school capacity in these critical ways. Community organizations may also provide valuable supports for large schools that have particular challenges with GSA implementation—and it is important for these organizations and national groups such as GLSEN to have tailored supports for large schools trying to implement GSAs.

***5.5.2.7. School capacity to support students with their sexual orientation and gender identity.*** Finally, school efforts to support student well-being are not carried out in isolation from what students are experiencing at home—and there is only so much schools can do to address major family-related challenges. Given the challenges a number of GSA students raised about family and community attitudes toward their LGBT identity, it seems important that schools are prepared and committed to working with families around these issues. For example, they should have LGBT-related resources available for both students and families. Moreover, staff should be capable of facilitating

difficult conversations about LGBT identity and expression, including supporting students who are struggling with LGBT-related stigma or who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Schools also could benefit from being well connected to local LGBT-related organizations, such as youth centers, and LGBT-affirming supports (e.g., mental health counselors) to connect students and families with and ensure more seamless access to affirming these external resources. Extracurricular High modeled this in several ways, including the example of a counselor and teacher who were going to be in the same room when a student came out to her mother. The school did not, however, have written resources for students, which was surprising given its size and its number of students.

**5.5.3. Research implications.** This study also has implications for research. These range from methodological considerations to suggested areas for future research on GSAs, schools, and conditions for learning. Importantly, this section also addresses how future research might examine how growing LGBT acceptance along with gender expectations might affect GSAs.

**5.5.3.1. Methodological approach.** From a methodological perspective, a case study was a valuable approach to studying the GSA and its larger environment. The integration of multiple methods and perspectives through interviews, surveys, and observations (along with document review) yielded rich data and a depth of perspective that would have been missed if only one of these methods had been used. For example, the concerns about race relations and students from particular cultural groups struggling with feeling connected in the school would have been missed through survey methods only. Future researchers should consider replicating this approach, with an aim toward

ensuring adequate participation from district leaders and parents/caregivers of LGBT students and allies involved in GSAs. The inclusion of qualitative data is critical to this area of research—surveys alone cannot yield the nuance and depth that qualitative strategies can.

**5.5.3.2. *Studying conditions for learning.*** Second, this study adds to our understanding of the importance of conditions for learning. For future research addressing this area of study, it is important to clarify with informants what they mean by words like “safe” and “safety.” Although the study’s protocols specified physical versus emotional safety, respondents sometimes talked about safety generally during interviews. To enhance the interpretive validity of analyses, it is important to clarify this construct with key informants.

**5.5.3.3. *Literature on LGBT youth.*** In addition to building on and adding to a rich literature on conditions for learning, this study also contributes to the evolution of LGBT youth research. As described in chapter 2, this area of study is moving from a focus on the vulnerability of these youth—a victimization discourse that often permeates related literature—to emphasizing the factors that create safe, supportive environments for them (Horn, Kosciw, & Russell, 2009; Russell, 2010b). The study’s findings note some vulnerability of LGBT students in the school, including challenges with understanding or expressing their identity and associated family responses. However, it adds to the literature a case study of a GSA and its school where LGBT students largely experienced a safe, supportive environment, somewhat of an “oasis” of support—albeit with some concerns about LGBT bias.

Additionally, it would be valuable to explore further why this GSA had a predominantly female student membership. For example, is male student involvement in GSAs associated with how masculinity is constructed and reinforced within schools? If so, in what ways, and how do expectations for “masculinity” affect GSAs and gay or bisexual male students in schools? In what ways do students and school staff reinforce expectations for gender expression, and how does interact with GSA activities? Research has found, for example, that masculine ideals regulate school life, influencing and constraining male student behavior in schools (Heinrich, 2013). Similarly, how do schools create and reinforce heterosexual and LGB identities, and how does this affect GSAs and students who do and do not participate in them?

**5.5.3.4. *Gay-straight alliance implementation supports.*** Furthermore, the study adds to the research on how GSAs function, related barriers and supports, and how GSAs can be proactive approaches to affirming LGBT youth identity. By studying a GSA’s implementation and local context in a midwestern suburban, socially conservative community, but in a fairly accepting school environment, this study responds to recommendations that future research explore the student GSA experiences across different types of communities (e.g., Lee). The findings add to our understanding of how a particular GSA was being implemented within its local setting, a relative gap in the research literature.

**5.5.3.5. *Future research on gay-straight alliances.*** Future research on GSAs may want to explore the differential role of advisors and the extent to which GSAs take on different priorities or are more visible in schools, in particular large ones, based on advisor involvement in the groups. For example, despite needing to be student led, are

advisors involved in driving efforts to address anti-LGBT bias in their schools and bring visibility to the groups? How so? What are successful strategies in large high schools, such as Extracurricular High, which had more than 2,000 students?

Future studies like this one should study how increased social acceptance of LGBT identity affects the purpose, activities, sustainability, and benefits of GSAs. As LGBT identity becomes more open and accepted, or at least discussed publicly, the social context for LGBT youth research is evolving. Broader social support and legalization of same-sex marriage, which several staff and students mentioned, is likely facilitating this discourse about LGBT identity. This might make it more difficult to sustain GSAs if staff and students do not see them as “necessary” because of broader social support for LGBT youth. How are GSAs responding to this social shift, in particular in progressive communities and schools?

Despite this progress and increased “normalization” of LGBT identity, or at least LGB identity since society is further behind in its understanding and acceptance of transgender identity, some students may still come from families that are less accepting or even highly rejecting. Will their challenges and needs be overlooked in highly progressive communities where GSAs may seem less relevant? Or, despite not having GSAs or highly active groups, will highly accepting school environments protect LGBT youth from the risks associated with negative family reactions? The negative outcomes associated with family rejection of LGBT identity, including higher rates of suicide attempts, use of illegal drugs, and depressive symptoms among youth experiencing higher levels of rejection, is increasingly studied and documented (for example, Mustanski & Liu, 2013; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010).

Moreover, future research on LGBT students may want to increasingly study school settings where LGBT identity seems to be widely accepted and supported to better understand the function of GSAs in these schools. Multiple school staff interviewees mentioned how anti-LGBT bias had decreased in the school and acceptance of LGBT identity and expression had expanded over the previous decade. While Extracurricular High was not free of bias, it was also not a place LGBT students dreaded coming; rather, the opposite was true. Despite this, the GSA still provided an important support given concerns such as family and some peer responses to LGBT expression. Future research should examine how highly accepting school environments address these needs (e.g., through counselors that are an intermediary supports for students and families, as was the case at Extracurricular High). For these students, support from school staff will be especially important to their well-being and academic success—and the field needs more information about strategies and successes in this area.

Additionally, future research should study school staff attitudes toward GSAs and how these correspond to their knowledge of these groups and their relationships with students involved in GSAs. This study found that teachers who were not familiar with the GSA were more likely to be unsure when asked survey questions about the group's benefits for students, even after the teacher survey provided a definition of what GSAs typically do to support students. This finding suggests that adults in schools may need to be familiar with GSA activities, or students involved with GSAs, to consider them beneficial. School staff who do not view GSAs as beneficial are, conceivably, less likely to support having GSAs available for students (assuming that teachers would only support school activities that have some benefit for the school community). If this were

true, then this would also have implications for practice. Specifically, this would suggest that to foster broader faculty buy-in of GSAs, staff need to experience GSAs (e.g., attending meetings) and understand from GSA-involved students how these groups are benefitting them. Future research should explore these issues further.

Finally, as previously described, school size was a theme in the findings with key informants pointing to it as a barrier to student connection and support in the school. Large school size brings trade-offs, though. Larger schools have more resources that allow them to provide more course, club, and sport offerings, for example. It would be valuable to study GSAs in schools of varying size (both physical size and total enrollment) to better understand how this influences GSA implementation including their priorities.

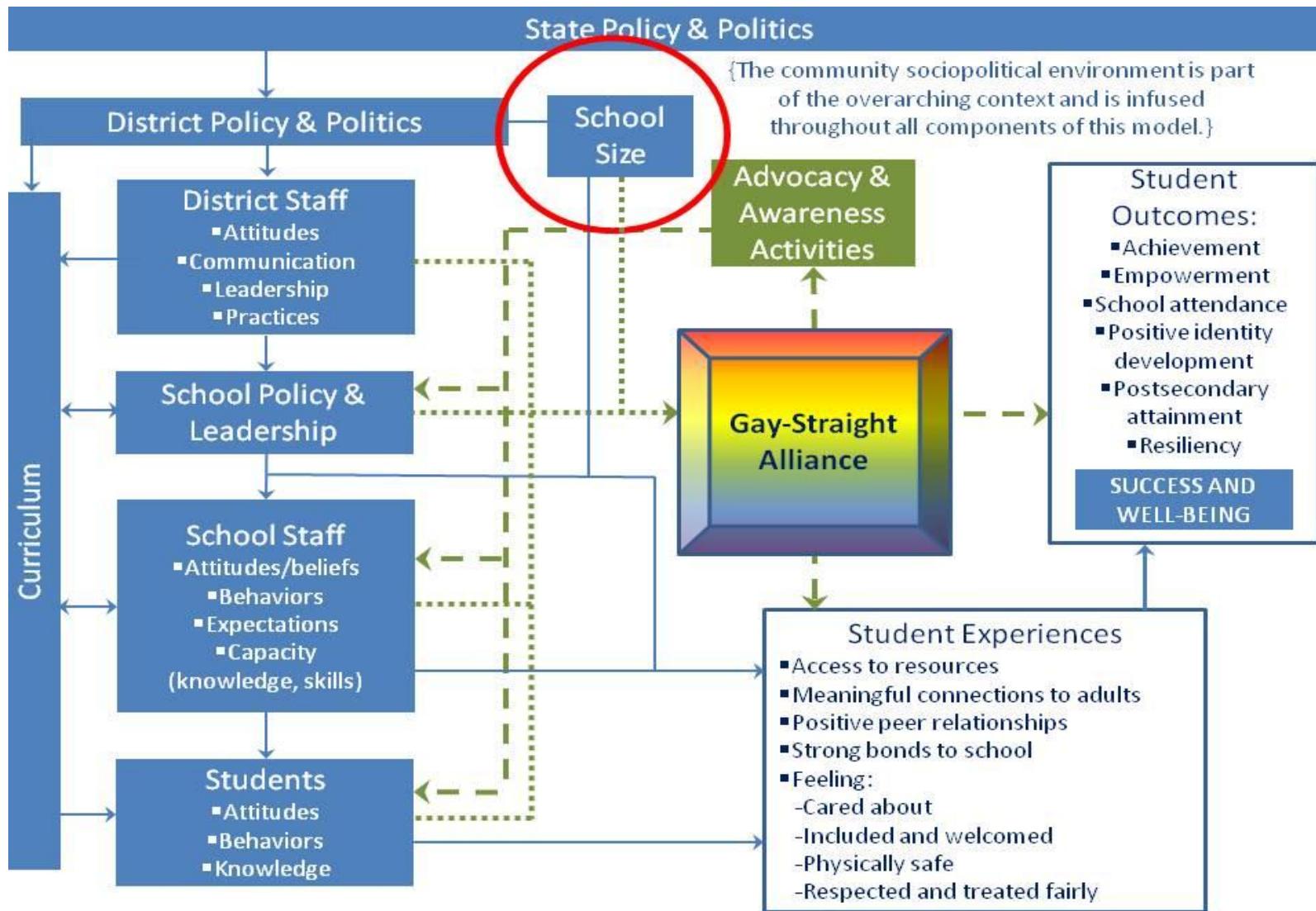
**5.5.4. Theoretical implications.** Overall, the conceptual model in chapter 2 adequately reflects how the GSA was nested and influenced by (and influenced) its larger school context and students. State policy emerged as an important influence on the district's anti-bullying policy, which in turn affected school practice although the district's focus on bullying preceded state efforts. The district was not a major influence on the GSA, but it approved creating the GSA and did not interfere with it. Furthermore, school leadership and staff, including the teacher advising the GSA from its inception, were important influences on the group. Student attitudes also affected both student involvement in the GSA (e.g., students who were allies) and how students responded to the GSA and its activities.

As reflected in the model, the study examined whether the GSA benefited its school community. Specifically, in three core ways: (a) by being available for students

and providing an opportunity for students to have more positive experiences through its ongoing GSA meetings and relationships developed among participating students; (b) by directly influencing participating students' sense of empowerment and positive identity; and (c) by raising awareness about LGBT-related concerns in the larger school environment (e.g., through GSA events/activities). The GSA at Extracurricular High addressed all three of these areas, but in particular the first two.

However, the model is missing a factor that should be added. As this research found, school size can create a physical barrier that has consequences for emotional safety and supports for students. Larger schools may make it more difficult for students to feel a sense of belonging to their schools. Student connection with peers and adults may be more challenging in large schools. At Extracurricular High, concerns about the school's size led to several efforts to foster smaller communities in it, most notably through the school's freshman academy. This study also found that school size can be a barrier to GSA outreach and student involvement. Regardless of how much school administrators and faculty support GSAs, large schools create structural challenges for building awareness of GSAs. As was the case at Extracurricular High, large schools may also offer more opportunities competing for student attention and involvement that may detract from a GSA's momentum in a school.

The study's conceptual model should be amended, as shown in Figure 23, to account for school size given its importance in the findings. The model includes policy, practice, and behaviors of district/school staff and students as factors influencing student experiences and GSA implementation. In the modified conceptual model, school size



**Figure 233.** A modified conceptual mode of the GSA and its larger sociopolitical environment.

(circled in red) is included as a separate factor with lines indicating how it can affect GSAs and student experiences. As with the original conceptual model, arrows in the model show the direction of relationships displayed. The solid lines show the school-related factors contributing to positive student experiences and outcomes. The dotted lines show factors influencing the GSA and the dashed lines show how the GSA influences school practice and student outcomes.

### **5.6. Summary**

Schools are richly diverse communities, with particular strengths, needs, capacities, and approaches to fostering safe, supportive learning environments. Importantly, this dissertation examined issues relevant to the school experiences of LGBT students by conducting a case study of a GSA. As part of this, the study explored related policies, practices, and school conditions in the areas of physical safety, emotional safety, and student support. This case study of a GSA at a midwestern, suburban high school contributes to the field's understanding of these student groups.

Coincidentally, at my dissertation proposal review the committee sagely advised that it would be valuable to explore a GSA in a school where LGBT students were *not* experiencing pervasive rejection and bias. While I did not know with certainty that Extracurricular High would meet this criterion, I think I was fortunate that it did. By doing so, the findings contribute to the field's understanding of the relevance of a GSA in a largely safe, supportive school. This is an important framing for discussions about GSAs, which reinforces their relevance for all types of schools—not just those where students are experiencing pervasive rejection and bullying.

The previous section addresses six major themes that emerged from a review of the study's findings. Probably most significant is the relevance of GSAs to schools such as Extracurricular High. Although the school was seen as physically safe with significant support from adults and moderately strong support from peers, the school's GSA was still considered important to students involved in it. The GSA filled an important need: providing a space for all students to express their true identity and experience emotional support from their peers, in particular for students worried about or experienced negative family reactions to their LGBT identity.

GSAs, including the contexts in which they function, are important school and social supports to study. As the Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Iowa Pride Network and mobilizer of GSAs throughout Iowa noted in his speech at the 2011 Federal LGBT Youth Summit, student voice is important to improving public policy (Roemerman). Students and their GSAs can be the basis for and drive social change, including improved school climate for LGBT students. The GSA at Extracurricular High carried out some advocacy efforts, although these were largely focused on addressing and reducing all types of bullying in the school. Increasingly, the advocacy function of GSAs may need to focus on their larger contexts to address concerns beyond school climate, such as family and community responses to LGBT identity and expression. Much was learned from how this school approaches creating a safe, supportive learning environment for its students—including how student organizations significantly factor into these efforts. Together, the findings and themes can inform future efforts to study and implement GSAs, while offering valuable insights to inform current discourse about school policy and practice.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol Questions

### A1. School and District Staff Interview Question Matrix

Questions	Administrators		Teacher/ Counselor	Club Advisors	
	District	School		GSA	AASC and SDC
<i>I. Introduction</i>					
Can you please briefly describe your current role and key responsibilities in the district/school? How long have you been in the district and this school?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>II. District and School Practices</i>					
From your perspective, what are key district and school policies, including aspects of the curriculum, which help to create safe, supportive schools for students? For example, what policies help students feel welcomed and develop positive relationships with adults and peers?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For each policy: how has the policy been implemented in this school?</li> <li>Have there been any challenges to implementing these policies? What has helped?</li> <li>What has influenced implementation of district policy? How about central office leadership and school leadership?</li> </ul> Student, family, or community support?	✓	✓	✓		
Has state policy influenced implementation of district policy	✓				
What does the district do beyond policies to foster safe, supportive schools, such as programs and other supports from central office and leadership (i.e., its practices)?		✓			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For each practice: when, why, and how did it come about?</li> </ul>					
What does your school do beyond policies to foster safe, supportive learning environments, such as programs and other supports from	✓	✓	✓	✓	

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Administrators</b>		<b>Teacher/ Counselor</b>	<b>Club Advisors</b>	
	District	School	GSA	AASC and SDC	
central office and leadership (i.e., its practices)?			✓	✓	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For each practice: when, why, and how did it come about?</li> <li>Has the central office and district leadership been involved in supporting your school in implementing these practices? How so? [if yes: What is your sense of why the district has been involved?]</li> <li>Have any conditions or factors particularly influenced what your school is doing to create a safe, supportive learning environment? (e.g., school leadership, teacher buy-in)</li> </ul>		✓	✓	✓	✓
What are your thoughts about these policies and practices, how helpful are they? In what ways, if any, do you think they are important for students?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Do they help to create safe, supportive schools? How so?	✓				
In what ways are LGBT students part of the district's or your school's strategies to support students? How so? Are there particular policies, programs, and practices that you think help include and affirm the identity of LGBT students in the district or in this school?		✓			
Please describe if so.					
How are state and district policies and expected practices communicated to you and the school? (e.g., school meetings, through communication from the superintendent)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Do you think that district policies or programs support LGBT students? How so? Are there particular policies or programs that you think help include and affirm the identity of LGBT students? If so, please describe.	✓				
<i>III. New Suburb School District Conditions</i>					
How would you describe general conditions related to physical safety for students in the district? How about emotional safety?	✓				

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Administrators</b>		<b>Teacher/ Counselor</b>	<b>Club Advisors</b>	
	<b>District</b>	<b>School</b>		<b>GSA</b>	<b>AASC and SDC</b>
Is the support students receive from adults in the district's schools generally adequate?		✓			
How would you describe the typical school experiences of the district's LGBT students compared to non-LGBT students? In particular, relative to their physical safety and the extent to which they are supported by adults in their schools. How about the experiences of students who are perceived to be, but may not identify as, LGBT?		✓			
Thinking about Extracurricular High, how would you describe school conditions related to emotional and physical safety, as well as student support? What are some related key strengths in the school? Challenges?		✓			
Has the central office and district leadership been involved in supporting Extracurricular High in implementing policies, programs, or practices to enhance safety and support? If yes, how so?		✓			
<i>IV. Extracurricular High School Conditions</i>					
How would you describe conditions related to physical safety in this school?		✓	✓	✓	✓
How would you describe the level of support students in your school receive from adults, such as teachers, school psychologists, and social workers? For example, how adults make students feel welcomed, respected, and cared about.		✓	✓	✓	✓
How would you describe the school experiences of LGBT students compared to non-LGBT students here? In particular, relative to their physical safety and the extent to which they are supported by adults in the school. How about students who are perceived to be, but may not identify as, LGBT?		✓	✓	✓	✓

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Administrators</b>		<b>Teacher/ Counselor</b>	<b>Club Advisors</b>	
	<b>District</b>	<b>School</b>		<b>GSA</b>	<b>AASC and SDC</b>
<i>V. Student Clubs and the Gay-Straight Alliance</i>					
Are student clubs part of district/school efforts to support students and create safe learning environments? How so? Why or why not?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
What are the student clubs in this school that are most important for supporting student well-being? What types of supports and activities do they provide?		✓			
[Follow-up about 2 or 3 specific clubs.] What types of supports and activities do they provide? If you have a sense of why and how these clubs were implemented, please describe. What has supported or hindered their implementation? What has been necessary to sustain these clubs?		✓	✓		
How about Gay-Straight Alliances, or GSAs, are you familiar with those? [if not, describe for interviewee; if yes, ask them to describe their purpose] What are your thoughts about GSAs? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What types of resources and opportunities have the GSAs in your district provided this year? Are these similar or different to previous years? How so?</li> <li>• Do you think they influence the experiences of students? Why or why not? How so? Do you think the GSAs affect students' experiences of physical safety? How about feeling welcomed? What about their academic success? Their self-empowerment? Why and how?</li> <li>• Do you think GSAs support the curriculum, or are entirely separate from it? How so?</li> </ul>	✓				
How about the Gay-Straight Alliance, or GSA, are you familiar with that club in your school? [if not, describe for interviewee; if yes, ask them to describe its purpose] What are your thoughts about having a GSA in this school?	✓	✓		✓	

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Administrators</b>		<b>Teacher/ Counselor</b>	<b>Club Advisors</b>	
	District	School	GSA	AASC and SDC	
• Thinking about the GSA, how familiar are you with its history here at this school?				✓	
• From your perspective, when and why was the GSA created? Who tends to participate?		✓	✓	✓	
• Approximately when was the GSA established? How long have you been involved in the GSA? Were any external resources, such as GLSEN’s GSA Jumpstart Guide, used to establish the GSA?				✓	
• How would you describe the level of student interest in the GSA this year? Who tends to participate? How about in past years? How do students become involved in the GSA?				✓	
• How helpful of a support do you think it is? How important is a GSA for students in your school?	✓	✓		✓	
• What types of activities and opportunities has the GSA provided this year? Are these similar or different to previous years? How so? What types of resources does it provide?	✓	✓	✓		
• In what other ways, if any, do you think the GSA can make, or is making, positive contributions to students in this school?	✓	✓	✓		
• Do you think the GSA affects students’ experiences of physical safety? How so and why? How about feeling welcomed? What about their academic success? Their self-empowerment? How so and why?	✓	✓	✓	✓	
• Do you think the GSA supports the curriculum, or is entirely separate from it? How so?	✓	✓			
• Can you describe your efforts to sustain the GSA? What have been some successes or challenges? Have any external			✓		

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Administrators</b>		<b>Teacher/ Counselor</b>	<b>Club Advisors</b>	
	<b>District</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>GSA</b>	<b>AASC and SDC</b>	
resources been used to sustain the GSA? If so, can you describe them.					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How would you describe support for the GSA from your colleagues here at this school? The principal? From students not involved in the GSA? How about at the district level, such as the school board? Within the broader community? Has there been any external opposition or support for the GSA?</li> </ul>			✓		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you involve LGBT organizations or other schools in GSA activities? If yes, how so?</li> </ul>			✓		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Would you say that the school leadership thinks the GSA supports the curriculum, or is entirely separate from it? How so?</li> </ul>			✓		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are there any other factors that have supported or hindered sustaining the GSA?</li> </ul>			✓		
What has been necessary to sustain the GSA (e.g., student involvement, community support, district leadership)?		✓			
Thinking about [name of club], how familiar are you with its history here at this school?				✓	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Approximately when was the club established?</li> <li>Do you have a sense of why it was created? Who tends to participate? How do students become involved in it?</li> <li>Do you think it is a helpful support? Why or why not? How important is [name of club] for students in your school?</li> <li>What types of resources and opportunities has the [name of club] provided this year? Are these similar or different to previous years? How so?</li> </ul>					

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Administrators</b>		<b>Teacher/ Counselor</b>	<b>Club Advisors</b>	
	<b>District</b>	<b>School</b>		<b>GSA</b>	<b>AASC and SDC</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what other ways, if any, do you think [name of club] can make, or is making, positive contributions to students in this school?</li> <li>• Do you think [name of club] affects students' experiences of physical safety? How so and why? How about feeling welcomed? What about their academic success? Their self-empowerment? How so and why?</li> <li>• Would you say that the school leadership thinks [name of club] supports the curriculum, or is entirely separate from it? How so?</li> </ul>					
<i>VI. Conclusion</i>					
Is there any other information you would like to share about how the district/school are supporting students and creating safe learning environments, in particular for LGBT students?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

## A2. Gay-Straight Alliance Student Interview Protocol

<b>I. Introduction</b>
1. What is your current grade? How long have you been at this school? 2. Did you attend elementary and middle school in this district? 3. What are your favorite classes here? What do you like about them? 4. In addition to the GSA, what student clubs are you involved in?
<b>II. School Policies, Practices, and Conditions Related to Safety and Support</b>
5. How would you describe conditions related to safety in this school? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In your opinion, what does the school do to create a physically safe school for students? Does the school do enough to create a physically safe school? Why or why not?</li></ul> 6. What does the school do to support students and to help them feel welcomed and develop positive relationships with adults and peers? 7. How would you describe the level of support students in your school receive from adults, such as teachers, school psychologists, and social workers? Do you think adults in the school do enough to support students? Why or why not? 8. How would you describe the school experiences of LGBT students compared to non-LGBT students here? In particular, relative to their physical safety and the extent to which they are supported by adults in the school. Are they similar or different? How so? How about students who are perceived to be, but may not identify as, LGBT?
<b>III. GSA Experiences and Perspectives</b>
9. Thinking about the GSA, in your opinion, what is its purpose? If you were describing it to someone who knew nothing about it, what would you want them to know about the GSA? 10. How long have you been involved in the GSA? How did you become involved in the GSA? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do other students typically become involved in it? Who tends to participate?</li></ul> 11. What do you like most about the GSA? Anything you dislike about it? 12. How important is the GSA to you? Why? In what ways, if any, is the GSA beneficial to you? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How important is the GSA for students in your school?</li></ul> 13. What types of activities and opportunities has the GSA provided this year? [if student has been in the school for at least 2 years, ask:] Are these similar or different to previous years? How so? What types of resources does it provide? 14. Does the GSA make you feel more empowered? For example, do you feel more able to make a difference in this school or in your community? How so? 15. What resources does the GSA provide to students? 16. Are there any other important benefits you have experienced from participating in the GSA? How about benefits for other students who participate? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Does it make you feel physical safe? How so and why?</li><li>• Do you think it makes you and other LGBT students feel more welcomed</li></ul>

- in the school? How so and why?
- Any other benefits from participating in the GSA?
17. How would you describe support for the GSA from teachers and staff here at the school? How about support from students not involved in the GSA?
  18. Have you experienced any challenges as a result of participating in the GSA? What kind? How about the GSA, have there been any challenges that have limited its activities?
  19. If you were to compare the GSA to the other clubs you are involved in, how is it similar? How is it different?

**IV. Conclusion**

20. Is there anything more you would like your school to do to support LGBT students?
21. Is there any other information you would like to share about your GSA?

## **Appendix B: Observation Protocols**

### **B1. School Observation Protocol**

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Start Time:** \_\_\_\_\_ **End Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**School:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Space Observed (e.g., front office, hallways):** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **I. LGBT Resources and Supports**

What LGBT resources are present? What types of images are on the walls (e.g., same-sex couples, rainbow flags)? Is there evidence of the GSA in non-classroom spaces? Any evidence of safe zones/safe spaces?

#### **II. Physical Safety**

What are observations related to the school's efforts to create a physically safe environment?

**III. Emotional Safety and Support**

What are observations related to the school's efforts to create a school environment where students are cared about, supported, respected, and welcomed??

**IV. Evidence Collected (e.g., documents, pictures of signage)**

## **B2. Gay-Straight Alliance Observation Protocol**

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Start Time:** \_\_\_\_\_ **End Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**School:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Number of Student Participants:** \_\_\_\_\_

By grade: 9 \_\_\_\_\_ 10 \_\_\_\_\_ 11 \_\_\_\_\_ 12 \_\_\_\_\_ Unsure \_\_\_\_\_

By gender pronoun preferred/used: Feminine \_\_\_\_\_ Masculine \_\_\_\_\_ Nongender \_\_\_\_\_ Unsure \_\_\_\_\_

**Number of Adult Participants:** \_\_\_\_\_

### **V. GSA Meeting Space**

How is the room organized? What resources are available? What types of information and images are on the walls (e.g., same-sex couples, rainbow flags)?

### **VI. GSA Session Facilitation**

How is the GSA session facilitated (e.g., who sets the agenda, who manages the agenda)?

### **VII. GSA Session Content**

Activities (e.g., planning an event, large group discussion, informal conversation) and Descriptions	Role of GSA Advisor	Role of Students	Amount of Time Spent on Activity
<b>Activity 1</b>			
<b>Activity 2</b>			
<b>Activity 3</b>			
<b>Activity 4</b>			

## **VIII. Observed Implementation Successes/Challenges**

Observations	
Successes  (What went well? How might the session be beneficial for students?)	
Challenges	

## **IX. Other Session Observations**

## **X. Evidence Collected (e.g., documents, pictures of space)**

## **Appendix C: Survey Instruments**

### **C1. Teacher Survey**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

You are invited to take part in a doctoral research study being conducted by Jeffrey Poirier, PhD candidate, M.A., The George Washington University (GWU), Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration.

You are asked to take part in this survey because of your school district or school role. Taking part is completely voluntary and you can quit at any time. Your employment status will not be affected in any way should you choose not to complete the survey (or to stop completing it at any time).

#### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to understand what your district/school is doing to create safe, supportive learning environments for students. Your perspective is important to the study. The survey asks some background questions about you and questions about district and school policies and practices to enhance safety and support for students. You will be asked about a student club you are familiar with as well as your school's Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). You will also be asked questions about students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).

#### **PROCEDURES**

You will be asked various questions as part of a survey that will last approximately 20 minutes. If you are interested and willing, you will receive a summary of the findings for your school upon request.

#### **RISKS AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

There could be some mild emotional discomfort when answering questions about the experiences of students and issues related to safety and support. This should be minimal. Also, as noted in the introduction, participation is voluntary and questions can be skipped if you do not want to answer them. You can also stop the survey at any time.

All information collected as a result of this survey will be carefully secured during and following data collection. You are receiving a unique link to the survey so that the researcher can contact non-respondents. Although it is possible to link your responses with your identity, the researcher will not access or review the information in this way. Instead, your information will be analyzed without any identifying information (name or email address) unless you include this voluntarily.

Your responses will be stored on the Survey Monkey website in a password protected account until the survey is closed, at which point your individual responses will be deleted from Survey Monkey. Survey responses will also be stored on a computer with password

security. This information will not include your name or email address. Any printed files will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. There is no plan to destroy the unidentified survey results at this time.

The records of this study will be kept private. In the dissertation and any published articles or presentations, the researcher will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject. In some cases, your position may be identified (e.g., teacher), as long as you are not the only participant with this position.

## **BENEFITS**

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this survey. You will have the opportunity, however, to share your opinions and experience. You will also support the researcher's efforts to improve our understanding of your district's and school's efforts to support students and create safe learning environments.

## **QUESTIONS**

If you have questions about this survey or the study, please contact the researcher at [poirierj@gwu.edu](mailto:poirierj@gwu.edu) or 202.329.5440. You can also contact the Principal Investigator for this study, Donna Infeld, Ph.D., at [dlind@gwu.edu](mailto:dlind@gwu.edu) or 202.994.3960. For questions about your rights as a participant in this research, please call the GWU Office of Human Research at 202.994.2715.

## **DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT**

Please indicate your willingness to participate in this survey.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Do you agree to participate in this survey?

                    
No                           Yes

## **Part I. About You**

1. What is your role at [Extracurricular High]?

---

2. What year did you begin working in this school?

---

3. What year did you begin working in this school district?

---

4. What grades of students do you work with (select all that apply)?

9

10

11

12

5. What is your gender?

Female

Male

## **Part II. About [New Suburb School District]**

For the following questions, please think about your school district.

6. How much do you agree with the following statements about your school district?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
6a This school district has effective <u>policies/programs</u> to ensure schools are physically safe for all students.	<input type="radio"/>				
6b. The <u>school district leadership and central office</u> do enough to ensure schools are physically safe for all students	<input type="radio"/>				
6c. This school district has effective policies/programs to ensure all students feel cared about in their schools.	<input type="radio"/>				

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
6d.	The <u>school district leadership and central office</u> do enough <b>to ensure all students feel cared about in their schools</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				
6e.	This school district has effective <u>policies/programs</u> <b>to ensure all students feel welcomed</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				
6f.	The <u>school district leadership and central office</u> do enough <b>to ensure all students feel welcomed</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				
6g.	The school district's policies and programs create <b>physically safe schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) students</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				
6h.	The school district's policies/programs create <b>supportive schools for LGBT students</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				

### Part III. About [Extracurricular High]

For the following questions, please think about your school.

7. How much do you agree with the following statements about your school?

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
7a.	This school has effective <u>policies/programs</u> <b>to ensure it is physically safe for all students</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				
7b.	This school does enough <b>to ensure it is physically safe for students</b>	<input type="radio"/>				
7c.	This school has effective <u>policies/programs</u> <b>to ensure all students feel cared about</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				
7d.	This school does enough <b>to ensure all students feel cared about</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				
7e.	This school has effective <u>policies/programs</u> <b>to ensure all students feel welcomed</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				
7f.	This school does enough <b>to ensure all students feel welcomed</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
7g.	I worry about <b>my physical safety</b> at school.	<input type="radio"/>				
7h.	Students in this school are often <b>teased or picked on.</b>	<input type="radio"/>				
7i.	I feel <b>cared about</b> as a member of the school community	<input type="radio"/>				
7j.	Students in this school are often <b>threatened.</b>	<input type="radio"/>				
7k.	Teachers and other adults in the school <b>really care about students.</b>	<input type="radio"/>				
7l.	Students have at least <b>one adult in the school they can talk to</b> about problems they experience.	<input type="radio"/>				
7m.	Most <b>students</b> in this school <b>care</b> about each other.	<input type="radio"/>				
7n.	Most <b>students</b> in this school treat each other with <b>respect.</b>	<input type="radio"/>				
7o.	Students sometimes <b>stay home from school</b> because they don't feel safe here.	<input type="radio"/>				
7k.	Male students are bullied or teased if they don't act " <b>masculine enough.</b> "	<input type="radio"/>				
7l.	Female students are bullied or teased if they don't act " <b>feminine enough.</b> "	<input type="radio"/>				
7m.	LGBT students in this school are often <b>bullied or teased.</b>	<input type="radio"/>				
7n.	<b>LGBT students and non-LGBT students</b> are treated similarly by adults in the school.	<input type="radio"/>				
7o.	<b>LGBT students and non-LGBT students</b> are treated similarly by their peers in the school.	<input type="radio"/>				

8. What are the most important things adults in this school do to make students feel cared about and supported?

#### Part IV. About Your School's Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA)

9. How familiar are you with your school's GSA, including its activities and resources for students?

<b>Not at all</b>	<b>Very little</b>	<b>Somewhat</b>	<b>Very much</b>
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

[Note: If "not at all," survey skipped to question 12]

10. From your perspective, what are the top three reasons students participate in the GSA?

11. How much do you agree with the follow statements about your school's GSA?

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Unsure</b>
11a. It helps students feel physically safer at school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11b. It provides students with important information and resources.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11c. Students participate in it so they can spend time with a caring adult.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11d. Students participate in it so they can spend time with students who support them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
11e.	It helps to make this school safer.	<input type="radio"/>				
11f.	It is important to students' school experience.	<input type="radio"/>				
11g.	It helps students do better academically in school.	<input type="radio"/>				
11h.	It is important because it helps students to meet other students like them.	<input type="radio"/>				
11i.	It helps students to feel more comfortable about who they are.	<input type="radio"/>				
11j.	It is important because it helps students to feel like they belong in this school.	<input type="radio"/>				
11k.	It makes students feel happy.	<input type="radio"/>				
11l.	It helps students feel more pride about who they are.	<input type="radio"/>				
11m.	It helps students to address challenges they experience in school.	<input type="radio"/>				
11n.	It provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in their community.	<input type="radio"/>				
11o.	It provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in the world.	<input type="radio"/>				
11p.	It provides students with leadership opportunities.	<input type="radio"/>				
11q.	Its advisor(s) is (are) an important role model(s) for students.	<input type="radio"/>				
11r.	The GSA is just a social opportunity and is not different than other student clubs/organizations.	<input type="radio"/>				
11s.	It is very important for all high schools to provide GSAs for students.	<input type="radio"/>				

[Note: Skip to question 13]

12. A GSA is a student organization that is intended to provide a safe, supportive environment for LGBT students. GSAs provide opportunities for LGBT students to

meet with each other and a caring adult, as well as non-LGBT students who support them (i.e., “allies”). GSAs are supposed to provide a welcoming space for students regardless of their sexual orientation or gender expression. For the following questions, please share how much you agree with the following statements about GSAs based on this description.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
12a. GSAs can help students feel physically safer at school.	<input type="radio"/>				
12b. GSAs can provide students with important information and resources.	<input type="radio"/>				
12c. Students would participate in GSAs so they can spend time with a caring adult.	<input type="radio"/>				
12d. Students would participate in GSAs so they can spend time with students who support them.	<input type="radio"/>				
12e. GSAs can make schools safer.	<input type="radio"/>				
12f. GSAs would help students do better academically in school.	<input type="radio"/>				
12g. GSAs would help students meet other students like them.	<input type="radio"/>				
12h. GSAs would help students to feel more comfortable about who they are.	<input type="radio"/>				
12i. GSAs would help students to feel like they belong in this school.	<input type="radio"/>				
12j. GSAs would make students feel happy.	<input type="radio"/>				
12k. GSAs would help students feel more pride about who they are.	<input type="radio"/>				
12l. GSAs would help students to address challenges they experience in school.	<input type="radio"/>				
12m. GSAs would provide an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in their community.	<input type="radio"/>				
12n. GSAs would provide an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in the world.	<input type="radio"/>				

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
12o. GSAs would provide students with leadership opportunities.	<input type="radio"/>				
12p. GSAs would just be a social opportunity and are not different than other student clubs/organizations.	<input type="radio"/>				
12q. It is very important for all high schools to provide GSAs for students.	<input type="radio"/>				

#### Part V. About Another Student Club/Organization in Your School

13. Please pick a student club/organization in your school that you are most familiar with, and enter the name of it here:

---

Not familiar with any student clubs/organizations [Note: Survey ended if this response selected.]

14. How much do you agree with the follow statements about the club/organization you just identified in question 13?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
14a. It makes students feel physically safer at school.	<input type="radio"/>				
14b. It provides students with important information and resources.	<input type="radio"/>				
14c. Students participate in it so they can spend time with a caring adult.	<input type="radio"/>				
14d. Students participate in it so they can spend time with students who support them.	<input type="radio"/>				
14e. It helps to make this school safer.	<input type="radio"/>				
14f. It is important to students' school experience.	<input type="radio"/>				

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
14g.	It helps students do better academically in school.	<input type="radio"/>				
14h.	It is important because it helps students to meet other students like them.	<input type="radio"/>				
14i.	It helps students to feel more comfortable about who they are.	<input type="radio"/>				
14j.	It is important because it helps students to feel like they belong in this school.	<input type="radio"/>				
14k.	It makes students feel happy.	<input type="radio"/>				
14l.	It helps students feel more pride about who they are.	<input type="radio"/>				
14m.	It helps students to address challenges they experience in school.	<input type="radio"/>				
14n.	It provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in their community.	<input type="radio"/>				
14o.	It provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in the world.	<input type="radio"/>				
14p.	It provides students with leadership opportunities.	<input type="radio"/>				
14q.	Its advisor(s) is (are) an important role model(s) for students.	<input type="radio"/>				
14r.	It is important because it provides a safe place for students.	<input type="radio"/>				
14s.	It is very important for all high schools to provide this club/organization for students.	<input type="radio"/>				

**Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your input is greatly appreciated!**

Please share any additional comments you would like to about your school or student clubs/organizations, in particular your school's GSA.

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for the respondent to write additional comments.

## **C2. Student Survey**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Approximately 50 students at [Extracurricular High] are invited to take part in a survey being conducted by Jeffrey Poirier, PhD candidate, M.A., The George Washington University (GWU), Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration.

You are asked to take part in this survey because you participate in a student club at your school. Please read this form and feel free to contact the researcher with any questions that will help you decide if you want to participate in the survey. Taking part is completely voluntary and you can quit at any time. There will be no penalty if you do not take part in, or stop, the survey at any time.

### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this survey is to understand your experiences at [Extracurricular High]. The survey asks questions about school safety and how students are treated. You will also be asked to share their opinions about a student club you participate in.

### **PROCEDURES**

You will be asked various questions as part of a survey that will last approximately 20 minutes.

### **RISKS AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

There could be some mild emotional discomfort when answering questions about the experiences of students and issues related to safety and support. This should be minimal. Also, as noted in the introduction, participation is voluntary and questions can be skipped if you do not want to answer them. You can also stop the survey at any time.

There is a small chance that someone could see how you respond to the survey. The following steps are being taken to reduce this risk. Please do not write your name anywhere on this survey. After completing the survey, fold it in half and place it in the envelope provided by your student club advisor or another member of the school staff. School staff have been asked to not look at survey responses at any time and to store the surveys in a secure place until the researchers can pick them up.

### **BENEFITS**

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this activity. You will have the opportunity, however, to share your experiences and opinions about [name of school]. You will also be able to share your opinions about a student club you participate in.

### **QUESTIONS**

If you have questions about this survey, please contact the researcher listed on this form at [poirierj@gwmail.gwu.edu](mailto:poirierj@gwmail.gwu.edu) or 202.329.5440. You can contact the Principal Investigator for this study, Donna Infeld, Ph.D., at [dlind@gwu.edu](mailto:dlind@gwu.edu) or 202.994.3960. For questions

about students' rights as participants in this research, please call the GWU Office of Human Research at 202.994.2715.

### **WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE**

If you agree to participate, please complete the survey. If you do not want to participate, please fold the survey in half and place it in the envelope provided. Thank you for your time and consideration! The researchers are also arranging a pizza party (or a similar activity) as an appreciation for your time.

#### **Part I. About You**

1. What grade are you in?

- 9       10       11       12       Unsure

2. What year did you begin taking classes at this school?

- 2012       2011       2010       2009       2008 or earlier       Unsure

3. What is your race/ethnicity (check all that apply)?

- American Indian       Asian or Pacific Islander       Black or African American       Hispanic or Latino       White       Other or Unsure

4. What is your gender?

- Female       Male       Other (please describe):  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. What student clubs and organizations have you participated in this school year?

6. Which of the clubs you participate in is your favorite?

<p>Why is it your favorite? Please be as specific as you can and print clearly.</p>
<p>In approximately what month and year did you start participating in [name of club]?</p>
<p>Month _____ Year _____</p>

## **Part II. About [Extracurricular High School]**

For the following questions, please think about your school.

7. How much do you agree with the following statements about your school?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
7a. I worry about my <b>physical safety</b> at school.	<input type="radio"/>				
7b. Students in this school are often <b>teased or picked on</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				
7c. I am often <b>teased or picked on</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				
7d. Students in this school are often <b>threatened</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				
7e. My <b>teachers really care</b> about me.	<input type="radio"/>				
7f. I have at least <b>one adult in the school I can talk to</b> about any problems I experience.	<input type="radio"/>				
7g. Most <b>students</b> in this school <b>care</b> about each other.	<input type="radio"/>				
7h. Most <b>students</b> in this school treat each other with <b>respect</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				
7i. I sometimes <b>stay home from school</b> because I don't feel safe here.	<input type="radio"/>				
7j. Male students are bullied or teased <b>if they don't act "masculine enough."</b>	<input type="radio"/>				
7k. Female students are bullied or teased <b>if they don't act "feminine enough."</b>	<input type="radio"/>				
7l. Lesbian, gay, or bisexual students in this school are often <b>bullied or teased</b> .	<input type="radio"/>				

What do adults in this school do to make students like you feel cared about and supported?

### **Part III. About the [name of club]**

8. What are the top three reasons you are participating in the [name of club] this year?

9. Which statement best describes your involvement in the [name of club] during this school year (2011–12):

- I participated in all/most of its activities.
- I participated in some of its activities.
- I participated in only a few of its activities.

10. How much do you agree with the follow statements about [name of club]?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
10a. It helps me feel physically safer at school.	<input type="radio"/>				
10b. It provides me with important information and resources.	<input type="radio"/>				
10c. I participate in it so I can spend time with a caring adult.	<input type="radio"/>				
10d. I participate in it so I can spend time with students who support me.	<input type="radio"/>				
10e. It helps to make this school safer.	<input type="radio"/>				
10f. It is important to my school experience.	<input type="radio"/>				
10g. It has helped me do better academically in school.	<input type="radio"/>				
10h. It is important because it helps me to meet	<input type="radio"/>				

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
	other students like me.					
10i.	It helps me to feel more comfortable about who I am.	<input type="radio"/>				
10j.	It is important because it helps me to feel like I belong in this school.	<input type="radio"/>				
10k.	It makes me feel happy.	<input type="radio"/>				
10l.	It helps me feel more pride about who I am.	<input type="radio"/>				
10m.	It helps me to address challenges I experience in school.	<input type="radio"/>				
10n.	It provides an opportunity for me to feel like I can make a difference in my community.	<input type="radio"/>				
10o.	It provides an opportunity for me to feel like I can make a difference in the world.	<input type="radio"/>				
10p.	It provides me with leadership opportunities.	<input type="radio"/>				
10q.	Its advisor(s) is (are) an important role model(s) for me.	<input type="radio"/>				
10r.	It is important because it provides a safe place for me.	<input type="radio"/>				
10s.	It is very important for all schools to provide students clubs like this one.	<input type="radio"/>				

11. How did you become involved in the [name of club]?

12. What are the most important opportunities the [name of club] has offered to you? Please describe the most important activities, resources, and supports it has provided.

13. Do you seek leadership opportunities at school? If so, please describe what these are and why you seek them.

**Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey! Your input is greatly appreciated!**

Please share any additional comments you would like to about [Extracurricular High School] or student clubs.

## **Appendix D: Summaries of Gay-Straight Alliance Meeting Observations**

### **D1. Summary of Gay-Straight Alliance Meeting Observation One, November 2012**

The first meeting observation occurred shortly after the Fall 2012 presidential election and gay marriage ballot wins in Maine, Maryland, and Washington states. The classroom was set up in lecture style, with seats in rows facing the front of the classroom. Students trickled into the classroom in the minutes before and after the meeting's start up, talking and getting settled in their seats. Students were energetic and seemingly excited to see each other and attend the meeting, engaging in various small-group conversations at the beginning of the meeting and sometimes during it. Various snacks such as chips, apples, candy, and cupcakes were available at the meeting. Before it began, one student shared with the group that she brought Whoopie Pies because they reminded her of Maine, which was a way of celebrating that it was one of the states that just legalized gay marriage. As students arrived, one of the GSA advisors and officers took care of an administrative task: handing out forms for GSA t-shirts and collecting club dues.

The meeting officially began with the GSA officers giving a short welcoming to everyone and then initiating the first of two planned activities. The GSA officers handed out stick-it notes, asking students to write down positive messages that GSA members would then post on mirrors of bathrooms and other places such as student lockers in the school. One of the officers advised, "don't be too specific or personal, be positive. We want people to be more confident in themselves." Each student took several stick-it notes and began writing down messages. The GSA president then told the participants that they could work on the messages as two of the officers began their "super cool LGBT history thing."

The GSA president and vice president then facilitated a second activity, a 17-slide LGBT history PowerPoint presentation that the GSA officers had created. They stood in front of the room as they talked through the slides, but emphasized that it wasn't a lecture and instead was "intended for fun." During the presentation they managed student behavior periodically, asking some students to quiet down when side conversations emerged or the group became too loud (which occurred only a few times).

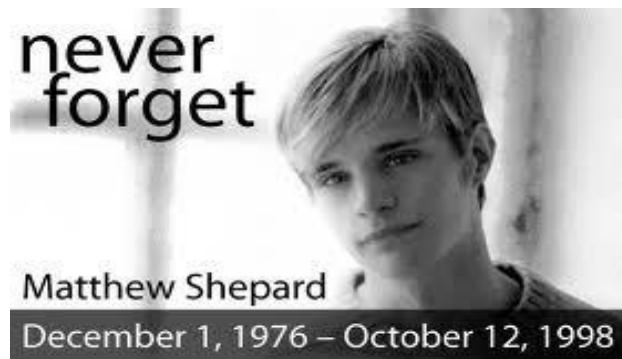
The presentation included information and various media (images and videos). They began by reviewing various facts (e.g., New York having the largest number of same-sex couples, the average age of gay and lesbian youth coming out), asking which were most surprising to students. They then summarized "events to know,"<sup>61</sup> including the Stonewall Riots, Don't Ask Don't Tell policy, and President Obama's endorsement of same-sex marriage (see Figure D1 for a related presentation image). They shared that the Stonewall Riots highlighted the "brutalization of gay people" and "kick started the 1970s gay movement." Next, they discussed "people to know," including Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard (see Figure D2 for a related image) as well as the Laramie Project, a play based on reactions to Shepard's murder. They also talked about Alan Turing, a computer scientist in the United Kingdom (UK) who identified as gay and was chemically castrated by the UK government before killing himself in 1954.

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<sup>61</sup> Here and throughout this section on the GSA presentation, some quoted text is not italicized because it reflects titles of the PowerPoint slides rather than direct quotes from the meeting.



**Figure D1.** Image from Gay-Straight Alliance Presentation



**Figure D2.** Image from Gay-Straight Alliance Presentation

The GSA officers then explained that the conversation was about to become “depressing,” but they were “starting low” and then “going up” (while making a hand gesture of an upward slope). They continued to talk about the “devastating truth” of challenges LGBT people experience. They shared statistics related to LGBT suicide, including a 1998 study that found 58% of LGBT adults had suicidal thoughts as teenagers. They noted to the group: “if you feel like you are in the 58%, talk to us and reach out.” They then went on to talk about the bias and crimes against gays and lesbians. They mentioned that “it used to be that if you were gay, you would need to be treated.” One student then shared how a recent episode of a television show, American Horror Story, focused on a gay person being treated

in an asylum because of their sexual identity and that this bothered her. They also talked about the “that’s so gay” saying that is common in schools being “annoying.” The two officers also discussed how later in the year they wanted the GSA to focus on bullying generally, “not just for LGBT, because this is a big thing we are about.”

Next, the two officers described examples of hate crimes. The presentation included information about these assaults. For example, one slide described how “two gay men were kidnapped by a homophobic gang, sodomized by foreign objects including a plunger and baseball bat, burned with cigarettes, and tortured for hours.” The subsequent slide included four graphic images of the faces of males who presumably were victims of gay hate crimes, with swollen eyes and other facial injuries from being assaulted. Figure D3 provides an example of a gay soldier who was the victim of a hate crime (Badash, 2009).<sup>62</sup>



**Figure D3.** Image from Gay-Straight Alliance Presentation

This discussion was followed by two slides with various images depicting anti-gay bias. These included images of the side of a house spray painted with “all gays go to hell,” a

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<sup>62</sup> I was able to locate all four images from this slide online using Google’s image search engine. One of the other three images was of the perpetrator of a gay hate crime and another was not LGBT related. The third was a victim of an attack because he was wearing pink shoe laces.

black t-shirt printed with “I kill gays for fun” in white letters and red blotches of red, and a hand-written poster about “the solution to gay marriage” with a Bible quotation from Leviticus 20:13 and drawings of two nooses. The slide also included an image of children wearing “God hates fags” t-shirts or holding up similarly biased signs, similar to those used by the Westboro Baptist Church (see Figure D4 for an example).<sup>63</sup>



**Figure D4.** Image from Gay-Straight Alliance Presentation

The group then watched a deeply touching video about the story of two men, Shane and Tom, and their relationship. In the words of one of the GSA officers:

The fact that we come once a month, means we are giving support to people. It is a long video, but I implore all of you to read and pay attention. It is 10 minutes, I almost didn't show it because of the length, but I think it is something we should watch. We are going to put you into the pits of despair and then bring you back up.

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<sup>63</sup> According to its website, the church “engages in daily peaceful sidewalk demonstrations opposing the homosexual lifestyle of soul-damning, nation-destroying filth. We display large, colorful signs containing Bible words and sentiments, including: God hates fags … fags doom nations … [and] God hates America” (Westboro Baptist Church, 2013, para. 2).

The video was a story of the special love and relationship Shane and Tom shared. It was a story of how Tom’s family rejected him because of his sexual orientation and how he killed himself. The story also described how Tom’s family further rejected Shane following this tragic series of events. Many students were visibly moved by the video, wiping away tears after it ended.<sup>64</sup> The GSA officers talked about how the video demonstrated why it was important for students to come to the GSA meetings.

The presentation then turned to the more positive portion of the content, the “good stuff,” beginning with statistics and images of supportive celebrities. One statistic the two officers shared on the slide focused on the benefits of GSAs: “reports include hearing fewer homophobic remarks, less victimization because of sexual orientation and gender expression, etc.” They also addressed the benefits of supportive school staff, which they noted were critical to the GSA’s presence in the school: “the club wouldn’t exist without them.” They noted all students are welcome at the club, even if they are socially conservative.

The remaining presentation slides and related discussion focused on the then-recent voting results and expanded gay marriage equality and related advocacy. They highlighted recent gay marriage wins (see Figure D5). This also included a discussion of national and local LGBT organizations such as Equality Ohio, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, and GLSEN. The presentation also included advocacy-themed images (see Figures D6 and D7 for examples). They also talked about the LGBT youth-serving organization in a nearby city, which was “a safe house.”

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<sup>64</sup> The video is available on YouTube at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR9gyloyOjM&list=FLUp39rQxC\\_ie86Zic96Drjg&index=1&feature=plpp\\_video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR9gyloyOjM&list=FLUp39rQxC_ie86Zic96Drjg&index=1&feature=plpp_video)



**Figure D5.** Image from Gay-Straight Alliance Presentation



**Figure D6.** Image from Gay-Straight Alliance Presentation



**Figure D7.** Image from Gay-Straight Alliance Presentation

The GSA meeting concluded with a final You Tube video clip. The video featured nine mostly younger gay males talking about being gay and their likes and dislikes. The video seemed intended to challenge assumptions that all gay males are alike and have similar

interests (e.g., fashion).<sup>65</sup> It was humorous at times, with students laughing at different portions of the video and clapping at the end. The GSA president concluded the meeting by encouraging students to get involved, stating that she hoped students enjoyed the meeting, and that the officers wanted to hear their suggestions for what to do at the club. Two of the GSA officers also enthusiastically encouraged students to join the GSA's Facebook page. The meeting then concluded and students slowly dispersed from the room, handing in their stick-it notes from the first activity and sometimes taking and eating additional snacks. I overheard one student saying, "I am still depressed because of that video" (I assumed this was pertaining to the video about Shane and Tom, when multiple students were visibly saddened by it). Overall, students seemed engaged throughout the GSA meeting, attentive to the facilitators, their presentation slides, and the videos they showed.

## **D2. Summary of Gay-Straight Alliance Meeting Observation Two, May 2013**

A second GSA meeting observation occurred in May 2013, near the end of the school year. The meeting convened in the same classroom as the first meeting. Like the first meeting, various snacks were available for students. Unlike the first observation, when GSA student officers facilitated an exercise and then an informational presentation, this session consisted of a guest from a local university. Students arranged the seats in a circle at the front of the classroom. During the meeting, students shared deeply powerful perspectives on their experiences: stories of personal identity struggles, of questioning faith, of worrying about family and peer acceptance, and of understanding and support. Some examples are included here, but related observations are also woven into findings in chapter 4. The initial three

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<sup>65</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsjOlsG9ZG4&list=PLtk2pY\\_\\_-gUxeR9FtqsXZLvKklfmkJV-D&index=16&feature=plpp\\_video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsjOlsG9ZG4&list=PLtk2pY__-gUxeR9FtqsXZLvKklfmkJV-D&index=16&feature=plpp_video)

minutes of the meeting began with one of the GSA advisors mentioning the GSA booth for freshman orientation at the beginning of the next school year. One of the GSA officers then briefly mentioned the guest, explaining that she (the student) was tired from an exam that day, and welcomed everyone to the GSA's last meeting of the year.

Following this brief introduction, the guest speaker then introduced herself as a trans person, emphasizing that she could be a resource for the GSA. The guest then suggested that the session begin with an icebreaker, by students introducing themselves, describing why they became involved in the GSA, and how they heard about it. For the next 20 minutes, approximately, each student shared their experience, providing a range of perspectives. For example, some students talked about wanting to attend because they "like to see people grow," "it is a great place to be," and "enjoy the people."<sup>66</sup> Another student shared that it was the second GSA meeting they participated in and loved everyone and another talked about being bisexual and being excited because she liked gay people (which spurred some laughter among the group). The GSA advisors shared their perspectives as well, including for one the GSA having a "special place" in her heart because of past involvement with GSA efforts. Section 4.2.2 provides additional detail about comments students shared about how they became involved in the GSA and section 4.3.3 provides more information about the GSA's benefits for students.

After this sharing, a lull in conversation and a striking silence in the room followed. To encourage the group to talk, one of the GSA advisors then stepped in and suggested that students talk about what the group had discussed during the year. A couple students

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<sup>66</sup> Each of these comments is from a different student.

commented that the group was missing two of their most chatty members, which was followed by laughter among the group.

For the next 40 minutes, students continued sharing their personal stories and making connections to the GSA's activities and discussions during the year. Several talked about struggles with family attitudes and acceptance. For example, one talked about her parents who are very religious and think that being LGBT is a sin. She went on to talk about how she was worried about how her coming out would affect her relationship with her family. A second student discussed being interested in the origin and psychology of hate and prejudice recently. She described her interest in understanding the impact of parental ideology and how her liberal family members were raised in conservative families and vice versa. Another talked about a GSA meeting during which the group discussed gender queer and transgender identity, and how it "provided a lot of good information" and that she "really liked the discussion of the significance of labels."

Other students and the guest speaker then continued to share various perspectives about the GSA's meetings and their experiences. A fourth student shared a deeply powerful story that completely changed the dynamics of the room from upbeat and energetic to sullen and absolutely quiet. This student began by explaining that some days she enjoys putting make-up on and being a girl, and other days she looks down at her body and hates what she sees. She then began to cry, with intermittent sobs, talking about being afraid of disappointing her mother, losing her boyfriend, and losing friends at the school because of her struggles with her gender identity and sexual orientation. She shared concerns about

wanting to date a girl and be brought home without a girlfriend's parents rejecting her. In response to this student's story, another student hugged her and another brought her tissues.

The guest also shared a supportive, eloquent response, talking about how there is "no right way to be and if society says that, we haven't come far enough." The guest then shared her personal experience of being transgender and how it is difficult to talk about that in a room of people you don't know. Most other students also shared their perspectives on personal struggles and challenges, as well as aspects of the GSA they valued. Section 4.3.3 provides further detail about comments students made that suggested the GSA was a safe space of emotional support for them. Toward the end of this portion of the meeting, approximately six students trickled out for rides and other obligations including a senior awards ceremony and a driving exam (which students mentioned as they were leaving the room and saying good bye to other students). This included one of the GSA officers who began the meeting.

In the meeting's final eight minutes, multiple conversations began and grew loud and energetic before it concluded with announcements from one of the GSA officers. After a few minutes, one of the GSA officers started to speak up to share a few final announcements. She also apologized for recent communication challenges among the officers because of drama club activities, senior exams, and other commitments that prevented them from being able to discuss GSA social events. She advised members to check the group's Facebook page for information on future GSA social events, though. She then mentioned that a local community-based LGBT prom was coming up and scheduled for the same evening as Extracurricular High's theatre banquet. She talked positively about the prom, describing how

students were “skeptical” about it last year, but thought it was a great experience after they attended it. The meeting concluded with the guest offering to be available to come back to GSA meetings in the future and be available as a resource to students.

## Appendix E: Teacher Survey Results

Table E1. *Teacher Survey Results: How Much Respondents Agreed with Statements about Their High School (N=66)*

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Unsure</b>
<i><b>Physical Safety</b></i>					
This school has effective policies/programs to ensure it is physically safe for all students.	—	—	42.4%	57.6%	—
This school does enough to ensure it is physically safe for students	1.5%	—	42.4%	56.1%	—
I worry about my physical safety at school.	68.2%	30.3%	—	1.5%	—
Students in this school are often threatened.	33.3%	54.5%	3.0%	—	9.1%
Students sometimes stay home from school because they don't feel safe here.	13.6%	50.0%	10.6%	1.5%	24.2%
<i><b>Emotional Safety</b></i>					
This school has effective policies/programs to ensure all students feel cared about.	—	—	36.4%	60.6%	3.0%
This school does enough to ensure all students feel cared about.	—	3.0%	42.4%	54.5%	—
This school has effective policies/programs to ensure all students feel welcomed.	—	1.5%	36.4%	60.6%	1.5%
This school does enough to ensure all students feel welcomed.	1.5%	1.5%	39.4%	54.5%	3.0%
Students in this school are often teased or picked on.	22.7%	53.0%	18.2%	—	6.1%
I feel cared about as a member of the school community.	1.5%	1.5%	39.4%	53.0%	4.5%
Teachers and other adults in the school really care about students.	3.0%	—	18.2%	77.3%	1.5%
Students have at least one adult in the school they can talk to about problems they experience.	1.5%	—	33.3%	59.1%	6.1%
Most students in this school care about each other.	—	3.0%	62.1%	28.8%	6.1%

Most students in this school treat each other with respect.	—	6.1%	69.7%	21.2%	3.0%
Male students are bullied or teased if they don't act "masculine enough."	10.6%	48.5%	15.2%	—	25.8%
Female students are bullied or teased if they don't act "feminine enough."	10.6%	54.5%	6.1%	—	28.8%
LGBT students in this school are often bullied or teased.	9.1%	45.5%	6.1%	3.0%	36.4%
LGBT students and non-LGBT students are treated similarly by adults in the school.	4.5%	3.0%	36.4%	37.9%	18.2%

Table E2. Teacher Survey Results: How Much Respondents Agreed with Statements about Their School District (N=69)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
<i>Physical Safety</i>					
This school district has effective policies/programs to ensure schools are physically safe for all students.	1.4%	—	34.8%	62.3%	1.4%
The school district leadership and central office do enough to ensure schools are physically safe for all students	1.4%	1.4%	37.7%	58.0%	1.4%
<i>Emotional Safety</i>					
This school district has effective policies/programs to ensure all students feel cared about in their schools.	1.4%	—	42.0%	52.2%	4.3%
The school district leadership and central office do enough to ensure all students feel cared about in their schools.	1.4%	1.4%	46.4%	42.0%	8.7%
This school district has effective policies/programs to ensure all students feel welcomed.	1.4%	—	40.6%	50.7%	7.2%
The school district leadership and central office do enough to ensure all students feel welcomed.	1.4%	1.4%	43.5%	44.9%	8.7%
The school district's policies and programs create physically safe schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) students.	—	2.9%	56.5%	21.7%	18.8%
The school district's policies/programs create supportive schools for LGBT students.	—	2.9%	49.3%	21.7%	26.1%

Table E3. Respondent Perspectives on the Most Important Supports the School Provides to Make Students Feel Cared About (N=66)

Reason	Number of Times Mentioned
<b><i>Supporting students—staff behaviors</i></b>	
Accepting, respecting, and valuing students	
Value students/show they care/treat them well	17
Accept students, do not judge them	7
Respect students	2
Communicating with parents about student needs	1
Communicating with and developing personal connections with students	
Build positive, individualized relationships/ meet students where they are	21
Talk with students, engage them in conversation about their lives	13
Listen	11
Embrace their needs/ask them how they are feeling	3
Catch up with former students in the hall	1
Supporting student development, interests, learning, and needs	
Provide a supportive environment/offer opportunities to get help/make themselves available and offer supports/give advice	9
Seek out appropriate staff to support students with their needs/provide interventions when necessary	5
Encourage students to work hard/find ways to develop their talents and grow	3
Get students involved in the school/extracurricular activities	3
Reach out to students who are struggling/having a challenge	3
Make themselves available for academic support	2
Support programs/activities students are involved in	2
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>103</b>
<b><i>School/staff characteristics</i></b>	
Behavior management and expectations for school climate	
Address bullying and hateful/biased behavior	6
Create a welcoming and safe school environment	4
Lead by example	2
Maintain a fair and non-threatening classroom environment	1
Staff have an open door policy/teachers are approachable	4
School works to ensure each student has at least one adult they can trust/confide in	3
Administration is highly respected/valued	1
Good communication in the school	1
Provide numerous clubs for students	1
Staff are committed to growth and success of every student	1
Staff are flexible	1

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Number of Times Mentioned</b>
Staff demonstrate respect/collegiality within a diverse faculty	1
Staff try to understand what is going on in the school	1
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>27</b>

*Note.* In a few cases, respondents listed multiple reasons that fell into the same category; these responses are not double counted.

Table E4. Respondent Perspectives on Top Three Reasons Students Participate in the Gay-Straight Alliance (N=48)

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Number of Times Mentioned</b>
<b><i>Benefits to students</i></b>	
<b><i>Support</i></b>	
To increase a sense of belonging and acceptance/feel valued/not feel alone/be with others like themselves	23
To find a supportive community/feel supported/support each other	10
To share similar interests, similar values/beliefs	8
To feel respected, to belong to a group where they won't be judged	3
To seek advice/have someone to listen to them	2
To feel understood/have a place to talk	2
To feel better about themselves/feel comfortable	2
For mental security/emotional support	2
For encouragement	1
They care about LGBT issues; are politically minded; to get involved in issues they care about; to be an advocate; promote peace; promote tolerance	8
To meet friends/socialize	3
To get involved in the school, to be part of a club	3
To feel safe at school	2
Awareness	1
Do not fit into mainstream	1
For fun	1
It will look good on college applications	1
They are LGBT	1
They care about people	1
To be aware of what is happening in the school	1
To explore sexuality	1
To learn more about the GSA	1
To participate in GSA activities	1
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>79</b>
<b><i>Benefits to the school/community</i></b>	
To support LGBT friends and ensure they are safe in the school	6
To help others feel welcomed-supported/valued	6
To create a positive environment at the school that reflects their values; to create a safe school	3
For community outreach	1
To support diversity of choices within the school	1

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Number of Times Mentioned</b>
	<b>Subtotal</b>
<b>17</b>	
<b><i>Other</i></b>	
Because it is anti-establishment	1
Because they have labeled themselves as gay or lesbian	1
Did not know the school had an active GSA	1
	<b>Subtotal</b>
	<b>3</b>

*Note.* This question was asked before the question in Table E5, to avoiding biasing responses to it.

Table E5. Teacher Survey Results: How Much Respondents at Least a Little Familiar with the Gay-Straight Alliance Agreed with Statements about It (N=48)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
<i>Attitudes</i>					
It is important to students' school experiences.	—	2.1%	47.9%	27.1%	22.9%
It is very important for all high schools to provide GSAs for students.	4.2%	4.2%	27.1%	45.8%	18.8%
It provides students with important information and resources.	—	—	52.1%	18.8%	29.2%
Its advisors are important role models for students.	—	2.1%	54.2%	25.0%	18.8%
The GSA is just a social opportunity and is not different than other student clubs/organizations.	10.4%	41.7%	8.3%	2.1%	37.5%
<i>Physical Safety</i>					
It helps students feel physically safer at school.	—	—	54.2%	12.5%	33.3%
It helps to make [Extracurricular High] safer.	—	4.2%	39.6%	22.9%	33.3%
<i>Emotional Safety and Support</i>					
It is important because it helps students to feel like they belong in this school.	—	2.1%	43.8%	37.5%	16.7%
Students participate in it so they can spend time with a caring adult.	—	6.3%	54.2%	6.3%	33.3%
Students participate in it so they can spend time with students who support them.	—	—	43.8%	37.5%	18.8%
It is important because it helps students to meet other students like them.	—	2.1%	41.7%	35.4%	20.8%
<i>Student Well-Being</i>					
It helps students do better academically in school.	—	2.1%	35.4%	10.4%	52.1%
It helps students to feel more comfortable about who they are.	—	2.1%	43.8%	37.5%	16.7%
It makes students feel happy.	—	—	43.8%	20.8%	35.4%

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Unsure</b>
It helps students feel more pride about who they are.	—	—	43.8%	29.2%	27.1%
<i>Student Empowerment</i>					
It helps students to address challenges they experience in school.	—	—	47.9%	31.3%	20.8%
It provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in their community.	—	—	43.8%	22.9%	33.3%
It provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in the world.	—	—	41.7%	18.8%	39.6%
It provides students with leadership opportunities.	—	—	45.8%	25.0%	29.2%

*Note.* The survey had a built-in skip pattern, so respondents who indicated they were “not at all” familiar with the GSA were not asked to answer these questions, but were instead asked to answer the questions in Table E6.

Table E6. Teacher Survey Results: How Much Respondents Not Familiar with the Gay-Straight Alliance Agreed with Statements about Gay-Straight Alliances Generally (N=15)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
<i>Attitudes</i>					
It is very important for all high schools to provide GSAs for students.	—	6.7%	26.7%	13.3%	53.3%
GSAs can provide students with important information and resources.	—	—	40.0%	33.3%	26.7%
GSAs would just be a social opportunity and are not different than other student clubs/organizations.	—	26.7%	26.7%	—	46.7%
<i>Physical Safety</i>					
GSAs can help students feel physically safer at school.	—	—	46.7%	26.7%	26.7%
GSAs can make schools safer.	—	6.7%	53.3%	20.0%	20.0%
<i>Emotional Safety and Support</i>					
GSAs would help students to feel like they belong in this school.	—	6.7%	40.0%	26.7%	26.7%
Students would participate in GSAs so they can spend time with a caring adult.	—	6.7%	53.3%	13.3%	26.7%
Students would participate in GSAs so they can spend time with students who support them.	—	—	46.7%	26.7%	26.7%
GSAs would help students meet other students like them.	—	—	53.3%	26.7%	20.0%
<i>Student Well-Being</i>					
GSAs would help students do better academically in school.	—	6.7%	46.7%	20.0%	26.7%
GSAs would help students to feel more comfortable about who they are.	—	6.7%	40.0%	26.7%	26.7%
GSAs would make students feel happy.	—	6.7%	53.3%	6.7%	33.3%
GSAs would help students feel more pride about who they are.	—	6.7%	60.0%	6.7%	26.7%
<i>Student Empowerment</i>					
GSAs would help students to	—	—	40.0%	26.7%	33.3%

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
address challenges they experience in school.					
GSAs would provide an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in their community.	—	6.7%	46.7%	13.3%	33.3%
GSAs would provide an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in the world.	—	6.7%	53.3%	6.7%	33.3%
GSAs would provide students with leadership opportunities.	—	—	46.7%	13.3%	40.0%

*Note.* The survey had a built-in skip pattern, so only respondents who indicated they were “not at all” familiar with the GSA were asked to answer these questions.

Table E7. Teacher Survey Results: Student Clubs about Which Respondents Were Most Familiar (N=51)

Name or Type of Club	Frequency Identified
Academic-related clubs (e.g., literary, math, and science clubs; national honor society)	10
Student Council	9
Service clubs (e.g., key club)	7
Sports (e.g., fencing, football, tennis)	7
Other (e.g., environmental club)	5
Students with Disabilities Club	5
Art and performing arts	3
Foreign language clubs	3
African American Students Club	1
Gay-straight alliance	1

Note: Some clubs that teachers identified had unique names of focus areas that could potentially reveal the identity of the school, so these are omitted as examples.

Table E8. Teacher Survey Results: How Much Respondents Agreed with Statements about the Student Club with Which They Were Most Familiar (N=62)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
<i>Attitudes</i>					
It is important to students' school experience.	—	3.2%	50.0%	32.3%	14.5%
It is very important for all high schools to provide this club/organization for students.	—	8.1%	33.9%	38.7%	19.4%
It provides students with important information and resources.	—	9.7%	45.2%	25.8%	19.4%
Its advisor(s) is (are) an important role model(s) for students.	—	—	45.2%	37.1%	17.7%
<i>Physical Safety</i>					
It makes students feel physically safer at school.	—	14.5%	35.5%	11.3%	38.7%
It helps to make [Extracurricular High] safer.	1.6%	14.5%	32.3%	11.3%	40.3%
It is important because it provides a safe place for students.	—	4.8%	45.2%	27.4%	22.6%
<i>Emotional Safety and Support</i>					
It is important because it helps students to feel like they belong in this school.	—	1.6%	48.4%	35.5%	14.5%
Students participate in it so they can spend time with a caring adult.	—	21.0%	38.7%	19.4%	21.0%
Students participate in it so they can spend time with students who support them.	—	4.8%	54.8%	24.2%	16.1%
It is important because it helps students to meet other students like them.	—	1.6%	51.6%	32.3%	14.5%
<i>Student Well-Being</i>					
It helps students do better academically in school.	—	4.8%	43.5%	24.2%	27.4%
It helps students to feel more comfortable about who they are.	—	—	50.0%	25.8%	24.2%
It makes students feel happy.	—	—	50.0%	32.3%	17.7%

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Unsure</b>
It helps students feel more pride about who they are.	—	—	46.8%	32.3%	21.0%
<i>Student Empowerment</i>					
It helps students to address challenges they experience in school.	—	11.3%	40.3%	21.0%	27.4%
It provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in their community.	—	8.1%	37.1%	35.5%	19.4%
It provides an opportunity for students to feel like they can make a difference in the world.	—	8.1%	40.3%	30.6%	21.0%
It provides students with leadership opportunities.	—	—	38.7%	45.2%	16.1%

**Table E9. Open-Ended Comments at End of Survey**

All schools should have GSA – it is about time.
Clubs are formed with the needs of the students in mind. GSA was formed upon the request of the students. That is a sign of how our school wants to make our students feel more welcome and supported and to make it a safer more comfortable place for them.
[Extracurricular High] provides a variety of experiences for their students. A high percentage of our students are involved in some type of extra-curricular clubs or teams and they have much in common with the other members.
I am impressed with the amount of exposure that our school's GSA receives. I think it is a positive thing and needs to be encouraged.
I appreciate the volunteer effort of the group's advisor to provide the club with official, adult support at the school.
I believe that all the clubs and organizations at this high school contribute to the formation of students becoming young adults and significant and successful members of the community.
I feel that a specialized club or organization may do more harm than good by singling students out. I am deeply hopeful that gay students would not be afraid to be who they are without a club, but would, instead feel welcomed into the school community just as any other student.
In my prior school district, the GSAs were extremely helpful in "breaking" the ice to diversity and putting positive, real faces to the nebulous negative stereotypes.
It is none of my business nor appropriate for me to inquire about a student's sexuality. I know of no openly gay or lesbian students in the school, nor should I assume a student is gay.
Just having a club that gives the GSA students a place to listen, share, and learn is a wonderful addition to our school community.
There was initial resistance (read: denial of permission) to starting one, which was disappointing, but that was due to a particularly conservative principal. When he left, an organization was started. That was great. It's unfortunate that the views of a single administrator can make or break the possibility of a GSA. Now that the GSA is active, I sense that it is making good changes among the members. Outside its membership, I don't think most know what it is. The organization is not closeted, per say, but I think it's a little bit under the radar. But I am not the advisor or directly involved with it. I'm just speaking from my impressions.
We are here for the safety, learning, companionship of all our students.

## Appendix F: Student Survey Results

*Table F1. How Much Respondents Agreed with Statements about Extracurricular High, Gay-Straight Alliance Student Survey Results Compared to Two Other Clubs*

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Unsure</b>
<i>Physical Safety</i>					
I worry about my physical safety at school. (n=31)	80.6%	16.1%	—	—	3.2%
GSA (n=5)	80.0%	20.0%	—	—	—
AASC (n=8)	75.0%	12.5%	—	—	12.5%
SDC (n=18)	83.3%	16.7%	—	—	—
Students in this school are often threatened. (n=31)	45.2%	35.5%	3.2%	3.2%	12.9%
GSA (n=5)	20.0%	60.0%	—	—	20.0%
AASC (n=8)	50.0%	37.5%	—	12.5%	—
SDC (n=18)	50.0%	27.8%	5.6%	—	16.7%
I sometimes stay home from school because I don't feel safe here. (n=31)	83.9%	16.1%	—	—	—
GSA (n=5)	60.0%	40.0%	—	—	—
AASC (n=8)	100.0%	—	—	—	—
SDC (n=18)	83.3%	16.7%	—	—	—
<i>Emotional Safety and Support</i>					
My teachers really care about me. (n=31)	—	3.2%	48.4%	48.4%	—
GSA (n=5)	—	—	80.0%	20.0%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	62.5%	37.5%	—
SDC (n=18)	—	5.6%	33.3%	61.1%	—
I have at least one adult in the school I can talk to about any problems I experience. (n=31)	3.2%	—	22.6%	74.2%	—
GSA (n=5)	—	—	20.0%	80.0%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	25.0%	75.0%	—
SDC (n=18)	5.6%	—	22.2%	72.2%	—
Most students in this school care about each other. (n=31)	—	6.5%	77.4%	16.1%	—
GSA (n=5)	—	20.0%	80.0%	—	—
AASC (n=8)	—	12.5%	87.5%	—	—
SDC (n=18)	—	—	72.2%	27.8%	—

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Unsure</b>
Most students in this school treat each other with respect. (n=30)	—	13.3%	60.0%	26.7%	—
GSA (n=4*)	—	—	75.0%	25.0%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	25.0%	50.0%	25.0%	—
SDC (n=18)	—	11.1%	61.1%	27.8%	—
Students in this school are often teased or picked on. (n=31)	3.2%	51.6%	29.0%	9.7%	6.5%
GSA (n=5)	—	20.0%	80.0%	—	—
AASC (n=8)	—	50.0%	37.5%	12.5%	—
SDC (n=18)	5.6%	61.1%	11.1%	11.1%	11.1%
I am often teased or picked on. (n=31)	58.1%	41.9%	—	—	—
GSA (n=5)	40.0%	60.0%	—	—	—
AASC (n=8)	37.5%	62.5%	—	—	—
SDC (n=18)	72.2%	27.8%	—	—	—
Male students are bullied or teased if they don't act "masculine enough." (n=31)	22.6%	54.8%	19.4%	—	3.2%
GSA (n=5)	—	60.0%	40.0%	—	—
AASC (n=8)	25.0%	37.5%	37.5%	—	—
SDC (n=18)	27.8%	61.1%	5.6%	—	—
Female students are bullied or teased if they don't act "feminine enough."(n=31)	29.0%	58.1%	12.9%	—	—
GSA (n=5)	—	60.0%	40.0%	—	—
AASC (n=8)	25.0%	62.5%	12.5%	—	—
SDC (n=18)	38.9%	55.6%	5.6%	—	—
Lesbian, gay, or bisexual students in this school are often bullied or teased. (n=30)	6.7%	50.0%	23.3%	—	20.0%
GSA (n=5)	—	20.0%	60.0%	—	20.0%
AASC (n=7**)	—	62.5%	22.5%	—	12.5%
SDC (n=18)	11.1%	50.0%	16.7%	—	22.2%

\* One student created and filled in a circle between "disagree" and "agree." The percentages exclude this response.

\*\* One student selected both "disagree" and "agree." The percentages exclude this response.

*Note.* The responses reflect completed surveys for 5 GSA members, 18 Students with Disabilities Club members, and 8 African American Students Club members. Two students who completed the survey were involved in the GSA, but answered the survey as part of their involvement in either the African American Students Club or Students with Disabilities Club. I was able to determine their GSA involvement based on the clubs they listed being involved in on the survey. For these questions, I include the GSA-involved student perspectives as part of the GSA student data.

Table F2. *Student Perspectives on the Most Important Supports the School Provides to Make Them Feel Cared About (N=31)*

1) Some have approachable presence, 2) Try to keep you caught up on school work.
1) They don't jump to conclusions about situations, 2) They can relate to us, 3) They are just nice/caring people who want the best for us.
1) They talk to you when they see you in the halls, 2) My teachers always ask if I am doing okay that day, 3) There are always people around you.
Adults ask how life is going and take an interest to know you beyond the classroom (what you are interested in, home life).
Adults pay attention to students individually and take the time out to talk with them and not only discuss their personal problems but also how they can work together to fix it.
Ask me what's wrong, let me talk to them and just cheer me up.
Because they ask how I'm doing and ask how I've been.
Counselors, principal.
Equality stickers on the classroom window, wearing [GSA] t-shirts.
Genuinely talk to you and if you're sad they look worried.
Get to know my personally. Talk to me as an equal, take an interest in what I am doing and assist me with it.
Helping when struggling, asking and listening to you, showing excitement.
Know info. about your personal life and go out of their way to make a connection with you.
Making sure I feel OK when I look sad.
Many of them try to build a personal relationship with their students, so they know more about them than just their grade in the class. Many pick up on cues about your mood, and try to counsel you or figure out what's wrong and comfort you. They all encourage us to do as well as we can in everything we do.
My counselor will randomly call me down to the office just to talk and she supports me by listening to my issues and accommodating me when it comes to scheduling.
Talk to kids and make them feel loved.
Talk to you, ask how you are, really try to get a sense of who you are personally.
The adults here are always letting us know that they are there for us if we need them.
The adults in this school always make their room feel special and warm. The room is special because it is unique and represents the teacher. The adults also offer to help every student and are always kind.
They (at least) my teachers have always created ways for me to succeed in what we are learning.
They always ask me about what I did over the weekends and we talk about things that are not school subjects and they make me feel comfortable.
They are genuinely friends with the students, taking time outside of class if necessary to help. They're funny and compassionate, and make me feel like a good student who can go somewhere.
They ask how I'm doing and help me when I need it
They ask me about myself and genuinely care about what's going on in my life. They remember things about me and follow up on things to see how I'm doing.

---

They don't usually talk to you like an authority figure. They show that they are listening to you.

---

They make it easy to contact them and show interest when they think something is wrong.

---

They offer extra help for activities and they joke around with us no too serious [sic].

---

They offer help and try and get to know you.

---

They talk to students and give students an open door policy.

---

They would do anything the students ask them to do. Also they answer any questions you ask.

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Table F3. *Student Survey Perspectives on Clubs: Gay-Straight Alliance Compared to Two Other Clubs*

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
<i>Attitudes</i>					
It is important to my school experience. (n=3)	—	—	66.7%	—	33.3%
AASC (n=8)	—	—	75.0%	25.0%	—
SDC (n=20)	—	5.0%	25.0%	65.0%	5.0%
It is very important for all schools to provide student clubs like this one. (n=3)	—	—	—	100.0%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	50.0%	50.0%	—
SDC (n=20)	—	—	5.0%	95.0%	—
It provides me with important information and resources. (n=3)	—	—	33.0%	66.7%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	50.0%	50.0%	—
SDC (n=20)	—	—	40.0%	55.0%	5.0%
Its advisor(s) is (are) an important role model(s) for me. (n=3)	—	—	33.3%	66.7%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	50.0%	50.0%	—
SDC (n=20)	—	5.0%	15.0%	75.0%	5.0%
<i>Physical Safety</i>					
It helps me feel physically safer at school. (n=2*)	—	—	100.0%	—	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	62.5%	12.5%	25.0%
SDC (n=20)	5.0%	5.0%	55.0%	15.0%	20.0%
It helps to make this school safer. (n=3)	—	—	100.0%	—	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	25.0%	25.0%	50.0%
SDC (n=20)	—	5.0%	50.0%	35.0%	10.0%
It is important because it provides a safe place for me. (n=3)	—	—	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%
AASC (n=8)	—	—	50.0%	25.0%	25.0%
SDC (n=20)	—	5.0%	30.0%	50.0%	15.0%
<i>Emotional Safety and Support</i>					
It is important because it helps me to feel like I belong in this school. (n=3)	—	—	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Unsure</b>
AASC (n=8)	—	12.5%	25.0%	37.5%	25.0%
SDC (n=20)	—	5.0%	25.0%	65.0%	5.0%
I participate in it so I can spend time with a caring adult. (n=2*)	—	33.3%	33.3%	—	33.3%
AASC (n=8)	—	25.0%	37.5%	12.5%	25.0%
SDC (n=20)	—	30.0%	55.0%	5.0%	10.0%
I participate in it so I can spend time with students who support me. (n=3)	—	—	33.3%	66.7%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	75.0%	25.0%	—
SDC (n=20)	—	5.0%	60.0%	35.0%	—
It is important because it helps me to meet other students like me. (n=3)	—	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	25.0%	75.0%	—	—
SDC (n=20)	—	15.0%	40.0%	35.0%	10.0%
<i>Student Well-Being</i>					
It has helped me do better academically in school. (n=3)	—	66.7%	33.3%	—	—
AASC (n=8)	—	37.5%	12.5%	—	50.0%
SDC (n=20)	—	15.0%	40.0%	25.0%	20.0%
It helps me to feel more comfortable about who I am. (n=3)	—	—	33.3%	66.7%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	5.0%	35.0%	55.0%	5.0%
SDC (n=20)	—	12.5%	37.5%	50.0%	—
It makes me feel happy. (n=3)	—	—	66.7%	33.3%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	75.0%	25.0%	—
SDC (n=20)	—	—	15.0%	80.0%	5.0%
It helps me feel more pride about who I am. (n=3)	—	—	33.3%	66.7%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	12.5%	37.5%	50.0%	—
SDC (n=20)	—	—	35.0%	55.0%	10.0%
<i>Student Empowerment</i>					
It helps me to address challenges I experience in school. (n=3)	—	—	66.7%	33.3%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	62.5%	12.5%	25.0%

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Unsure</b>
SDC (n=20)	—	15.0%	50.0%	25.0%	10.0%
It provides an opportunity for me to feel like I can make a difference in my community. (n=3)	—	—	66.7%	33.3%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	50.0%	50.0%	—
SDC (n=20)	—	—	30.0%	70.0%	—
It provides an opportunity for me to feel like I can make a difference in the world. (n=3)	—	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	62.5%	37.5%	—
SDC (n=20)	—	—	20.0%	80.0%	—
It provides me with leadership opportunities. (n=3)	—	33.3%	66.7%	—	—
AASC (n=8)	—	—	50.0%	50.0%	—
SDC (n=20)	—	—	10.0%	90.0%	—

\* Response missing for one student.

*Note.* The responses reflect completed surveys for 3 GSA members, 20 Students with Disabilities Club members, and 8 African American Students Club members.

Table F4. How Students Became Involved in Clubs

<b>How students became involved in the club...</b>	<b>Gay-Straight Alliance (n=3)</b>	<b>African American Students Club (n=8)</b>	<b>Students with Disabilities Club (n=19)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Friends were involved/told student about it	2	2	5	9
Guidance counselors/teacher		1	4	5
Through/because of a sibling			3	3
Through related school program*			3	3
Went to a meeting or signed up for it		1	2	3
Invitation from current club students		1	1	2
Involved in similar elementary/middle school program			2	2
Received a flyer about it		2		2
Club advisor			1	1
Learned about it through school announcements	1			1
Passion for the students			1	1
Through an older peer		1		1

*Note.* Some students listed multiple reasons, so each reason is counted.

\* This school program is the class-based program of which the SDC was a part.

*Table F5. Student Perspectives on Most Important Activities, Resources, and Supports the Gay-Straight Alliance Has Provided, Compared to Two Other Clubs*

<b>Club</b>	<b>Activities, Resources, and Supports</b>
Gay-Straight Alliance (n=3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An outlet to gain support from others as well as support the LGBT community.</li> <li>• [The GSA] has taught me that people are extremely different and everyone should be respected for who they are. It makes me feel like I can be myself and not be judged.</li> <li>• Pride parade, human rights festival, other activities (open program at a local arts center).</li> </ul>
African American Students Club (n=8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students can be more themselves and learn how to be themselves not just around African Americans but all different types of races; activities and supports include the African American Black scholar awards. This helps African Americans get noticed for their achievements in school and helps give them money for college for doing well in school and getting awards.</li> <li>• Leadership [opportunities]; fun activities in and outside the school.</li> <li>• Getting a chance to meet people.</li> <li>• Get-togethers during lunch.</li> <li>• Helped me support leadership among my peers and myself; lunch meetings and even get-togethers outside of school.</li> <li>• I was surrounded by more people like me.</li> <li>• It has allowed me to feel safer in school knowing there are older students looking out for me.</li> <li>• Participating in the Martin Luther King program and expressing the significance of this holiday; trusting adults, parents at school that encourage me.</li> </ul>

<b>Club</b>	<b>Activities, Resources, and Supports</b>
Students with Disabilities Club (n=17)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of leadership, friendships, role models.</li> <li>• Autism Speaks walk was important because it was my very first walk for a purpose.</li> <li>• Important activities include anything that helps the kids be more social. The adults and other peers are super supportive.</li> <li>• Working with special needs students and being involved in the training.</li> <li>• It has helped me and other students to grow in acceptance [of others]; the advisors are so wonderful and are great friends/teachers.</li> <li>• The experience has been most important because I want to work with kids with special needs; it has opened my eyes to different techniques and resources/technology available.</li> <li>• It helps me with how I go about things with people without disabilities, with my everyday life—my friends and my life.</li> <li>• Leadership activities, problem solving, friendship building activities.</li> <li>• Opportunities for college; it is a great experience for anyone.</li> <li>• Has given me a closer connection with some of the staff at [name of high school]; meet new people who share a passion of mine.</li> <li>• Opportunity to help others and be a leader in the school community.</li> <li>• It has helped me figure out what I want to do with my life and has given me opportunities to practice that (working with special needs in the classroom).</li> <li>• Meeting new friends.</li> <li>• The special needs prom is a great activity; our weekly [Students with Disabilities Club] trips.</li> <li>• Friendships, leadership, accepting [place], viewing the world through someone else's eyes.</li> </ul>

Table F6. *Student Survey Results: Favorite Clubs and Reasons Why (n=31)*

<b>Club</b>	<b>Reason</b>
American Cancer Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I enjoy helping raise money for cancer and it's a fun club to be in.</li> </ul>
Band	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That is where all of my best friends are, I love performing. I love the organization and I love being a part of a 230-member family.</li> </ul>
Drama Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because all of my friends are in it, I have a place to express myself and have fun as well as an emotional outlet</li> <li>• I have loved performing since I was little and I feel most like myself when I am with others who enjoy theatre and performing</li> <li>• I love acting and performing and everyone in the club is different—whether it's religion, race, wealth, or...anything! I love meeting new people who are completely different from me and learning about other people's views.</li> </ul>
Football	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because I've played it my whole life and just love the game and everything about it. The running, workouts, practice, games etc. And the fact that I wanna go to school for it.</li> <li>• I played football since I was young and the team had a really good atmosphere this year.</li> <li>• It is very fun and the coaches are great. Football is a very good experience for anyone. If you play a sport here it will change your outlook on sports for the good.</li> </ul>
Politics Club*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I really enjoy it because it's a great environment to learn about new ideas. It is also a fantastic diverse environment. I've been exposed to a lot of different things and they have really helped me understand more about the world around me.</li> </ul>
Rotary Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm a very religious person and I love everyone who goes. I always look forward to Mondays because of the club.</li> </ul>
Step/Dance Team*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because I love to step and dance and share that passion with others.</li> <li>• It offers more than just a step/dance team. It is a sisterhood and a place that girls can come and feel accepted and appreciated.</li> </ul>
Student Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because the people in the activities are very nice and fun and we get along so well!</li> </ul>

<b>Club</b>	<b>Reason</b>
Students with Disabilities Club*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone does the same thing and we get to meet new people. Also, we come up with fantastic ideas.</li> <li>• Everyone is welcome and everyone is equally the same, it is accepting of everyone.</li> <li>• I enjoy helping the kids and they teach me so much but in a fun way. It is a relaxing time to get to know unique people.</li> <li>• I get to help friends that need assistance and I get to be a role model.</li> <li>• I get to help in ways I wouldn't have the opportunity to help without the club. Volunteering and service make me very happy.</li> <li>• I get to work with the kids and interact with people I don't see all the time, but wish I could.</li> <li>• I love working with the students and it makes me happy to see them having fun.</li> <li>• It connects me with all types of people and I build special relationships. I know that there is no judgment and people accept me for who I am.</li> <li>• It is a great program and there are a lot of fun activities and everyone is awarded for being themselves. It is very accepting.</li> <li>• It's a really fun opportunity and I enjoy working with kids with special needs . . . I want to be a teacher someday, and helping these kids learn is the highlight of my day.</li> <li>• It's really fun. You can help people and make new friends at the same time. Everyone in it is very nice and helpful. They make everyone feel at home.</li> <li>• It's what I love to do and have a passion for and the people involved in it are some of my favorite people in the world. They inspire me and always put a smile on my face.</li> <li>• Serves the most purpose—everyone gains something good from the program.</li> <li>• There is a lot of interaction with lots of students. Working with my special education friends is one of my favorite things about [Extracurricular High]. They are some of my best friends and we get to do really fun activities together and also meet people. I like being able to plan fun activities with the kids and do them with them.</li> <li>• This is my favorite club for a multitude of reasons. Whenever I go, I feel important and needed there. It is a very accepting environment and there is always a positive attitude in everyone. I get the opportunity to interact with others I normally wouldn't. I get to be a role model for special needs kids and it makes me a better person. The kids and peers are so loving, and we always do fun activities.</li> </ul>

\* The official names of these clubs are not included to protect the school's identity.