

October 26, 2015

I am writing to you to provide you with information and insight as well as to advocate for action regarding gender and sexuality alliances - GSAs (also known popularly as gay-straight alliances), and the importance of such a group being in schools across Regina and the province of Saskatchewan. I strongly encourage you to review the private members bill that David Forbes has proposed, [Bill 612 – Respect for Diversity Student Bill of Rights Act](#), and to take a stand and move to support this bill while encouraging all schools to implement GSAs and safe spaces for LGBTQ students.

I myself identify as a lesbian and as a member of the LGBTQ community. I also have my teaching degree and am currently completing a Masters of Education degree at the University of Regina. I strongly believe and advocate for GSAs to be in all schools in the province of Saskatchewan, especially in those that are publicly funded. As well, everyone knows someone, or knows someone who knows someone who is a member of the LGBTQ community. LGBTQ people and students are everywhere and all around us; denying them the right of a GSA, a place where allies and LGBTQ youth can gather in a safe space to talk, share, learn and create a community should no longer be allowed.

Unfortunately, even though progress has been made moving towards acceptance of LGBTQ peoples in society and Canada, there is much work that needs to be done. LGBTQ people are still seen as “*abnormal*”, “*deviant*” and as “*the other*”, through a deficit lens, in a world where heteronormativity is the dominant discourse. LGBTQ people, as people, are the same as heterosexuals in terms of the inherent principles of being a person. The only difference is whom they love, and this is a difference that does not and should not affect anyone.

Schools in Saskatchewan have increasingly adopted a social justice movement where for instance, they have been working to foster acceptance for cultural and linguistic diversity among students, staff and the community. If schools can work towards acceptance and fostering inclusion towards these people (in what appears to be a relatively easy shift), why then can't the same movement be afforded to LGBTQ students and the adoption of GSAs in schools?

After talking personally with educators in both of the Regina School divisions, it has become apparent that GSAs need to be mandated in order for them to be implemented in all elementary and high schools. While the teachers have told me there are no school division policies, they emphasized the fact that they must refer to the directive from the provincial government:

“Currently in Saskatchewan, students’ requests to start a GSA in their school are subject to the approval of its administration. These requests are frequently and repeatedly denied. The reality remains: lesbian, gay and bisexual youth have a four times higher risk of attempting suicide than their straight counterparts. That rate increases significantly for transgender and two-spirit youth.” – [Gender & Sexuality Alliances \(GSAs\) in Saskatchewan](#)

Continuing to look at the provincial directive, if a student is required to “come out” or to explicitly show interest in and ask teachers / administrators for permission and approval for a GSA to be established in their school (regardless of their gender or sexuality or if they are an ally), this is problematic for so many reasons. For a student in elementary school or high school who may be struggling with notions of gender and/or sexuality, it can be problematic if they have to “come out” to staff members. The potential of outing themselves may lead to fear that their parents or friends will

find out. As we know, not all people or families are accepting of LGBT youth and this in itself could cause upset and great distress.

“GSAs provide a safe space for young people during a vulnerable time in their lives as well as safe place(s) to learn about the importance of diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility.” – [www.respectfordiversity.ca](http://www.respectfordiversity.ca)

I would also add *acceptance* to the above quote.

A GSA is not just for LGBTQ students, or those who experience and display gender in non-conforming ways. GSAs benefit all students and work to foster inclusion and acceptance of all people, especially LGBTQ youth through discussions and education.

Another teacher has personally told me that at the high school where she teaches, a staff member has made it known that they will serve as advisor if a GSA is requested and approved. Many students have quietly indicated that they would support a GSA, yet no student has spoken up and made this officially known even though this is the predominant view of the student body; as a result, *no GSA has started*. GSAs should not have to be asked for, they should be a part of all schools and if there is no interest from the student body, this is fine. However, GSAs should be in place in schools regardless of expressed interest or need, in the same right that sports teams and other clubs are a part of schools.

When I was younger, in elementary and high school, I questioned my sexuality and explored my gender expression. I had no one that I could talk to, no peers that supported me, and I was often the outsider being bullied by other students. It was hard not only for me to discover and accept the person I am, but the messages I was receiving from others and the media were quite negative. In high school, it was even worse as factors at home came to impact me at school – I became very depressed and even suicidal; the only benefit that I had was talking with a guidance counselor, but I did not feel safe enough to share and talk about my sexuality. I would have greatly benefited from there being a GSA in the schools that I attended, for a more welcoming and safe school environment and to know that there are people like me out there, and that there are also people and allies who care.

While there are *now* GSAs in Regina Public high schools, they need to also be in elementary schools. Take a look at this article, [“Saskatchewan students call for government legislation”](#) from May 2015. In it, students voice their struggles in asking the administration for a GSA to be started even though they are doing exactly what the province has told them to do.

Chandra McIvor voiced in a [Global News Regina article](#) in May of 2015 the following,

“I know of at least 16 schools right now where it has been articulated ... that they’d like to have a GA, but because of certain factors feeding into that, they have not yet received one.”  
McIvor goes on to state “students have told her about school administrators discouraging and suggesting there are no gay students.”

Like wise, in a March 2015 [article for Global News Regina](#),

“The Regina Catholic School Division said none of its schools have GSAs. A request was made by a student for a GSA a couple of years ago, but alternatives were found.”

“Through great conversation with the student and the staff at the school, we were able to have the student’s interests met.” - Rob Currie, Director of Education, Regina Catholic Schools

Students struggling to have a GSA established, being denied by the administrator, or told to join a different group or club are simply unacceptable. Likewise, if the concern for religious freedom is an issue, Catholics and other religious people(s) must remember for example, the following Bible verses:

*“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” - Matthew 7:12*

*“Do unto others as you would have them do to you” - Luke 6:31*

*“Treat others as you would like to be treated” - The Golden Rule*

In the same way that religious peoples cannot be denied practices in schools, LGBTQ students should not be denied having a GSA formed or a supportive and safe school environment being fostered. Religion *cannot be, nor should it have ever been* a veil to hide behind. How can a religion claim to be accepting of others when LGBTQ youth and students are constantly excluded and have often been mistreated?

The document [\*“Gay-Straight Alliances in Saskatchewan Schools”\*](#) from the Government of Saskatchewan tells of the positive benefits of having GSAs in schools, while highlighting the point of having students advocate and approach school administrators. As previously discussed, this is problematic and it should not rest on the backs of students to put themselves out there. Furthermore, this document omits advice and proposed positive actions administrators can take.

Chandra McIvor has composed a report [\*“Gender & Sexuality Alliances \(GSAs\) in Saskatchewan”\*](#) which outlines Saskatchewan’s current position, advocates for change, and discusses the positions of other provinces and changes that need to happen in order for all students to be happy, healthy, safe and supported within schools. I strongly advise you to review this very informative document and to think about how our schools can be better.

A positive and great example of a school GSA in Regina that is making positive strides is the one at 7 Stones Elementary School. From personal communication with a staff member at 7 Stones:

This school did not wait for a student to ask for a GSA to be established, they went ahead and created the group because they strongly believe that a GSA should be part of the school, and that it will be beneficial for *all* students. Often, this group starts as a safe space and as place to gather and talk about gender while discussions gradually move towards sexuality. Presentations from guests have been made to the students, and the kids have also taken part in raising the LGBT flag at their school and have attended the LGBT flag raising at city hall. The GSA is seen as a safe space and as a conversation group where students can come, but they are not required to. The group meets at lunchtime and has had up to 25 students attend meetings, although numbers often fluctuate. The group has created a blog <http://gsasupport.blogspot.ca/> and twitter account [@7StonesGSA](#) in order to help establish credibility of the group, as well as to be part of the LGBT community in Regina. *“The school culture has improved and our group has made good recommendations that have helped the whole school.”*

The province’s [\*Action Plan to Address Bullying and Cyberbullying\*](#) (November 2013) does not take enough *action* to protect and respect LGBT youth in our schools. Like wise, *The Day of Pink or Pink Shirt Day*, while a notable action and initiative, does not do enough to fight homophobia that unfortunately still strongly exists as part of everyday dialogue. Yes, reducing bullying is important and will help, but schools and teachers need to move towards acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ

persons, in order to reduce suicide and save lives. LGBTQ students do not want to be tolerated, they want to be accepted and they rightfully should be.

As Brad Wall has stated in a [letter to Imperial School's GSA](#) in 2013,

“Our government is committed to promoting caring and respectful schools that ensure healthy personal and social development for all. ... Everyone has the right to an education free from bullying, discrimination or violence. Whether it is over ethnicity, sexual orientation, or one’s choice of clothing, bullying in any form is unacceptable. Our government understands the seriousness of this issue and we are concerned about the devastating effects of bullying in our schools.”

If this is what our Premier believes, then Bill 612 must be enacted for,

“[the] rights of all students to be recognized, [and] creating safe learning environments” while ensuring that “every student that asks for a Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) in a school can have one.” – [www.respectfordiversity.ca](http://www.respectfordiversity.ca)

Despite everything, the [Ministry of Education Policy Statement #GSD 2015](#) has proposed positive steps forward through claiming that they are:

“in the process of preparing an online comprehensive resource document to assist school divisions to create safe and welcoming environments for all students and to respond to the needs of students who are gender and/or sexually diverse, including details of how students can initiate a student alliance on gender and sexual diversity, with the help of a supportive adult.”

I question however, if a *resource* will be enough for schools to work to create and do the things this statement indicates. With that said, I eagerly wait to be able to review this document.

The province of Saskatchewan needs to step up and to follow Alberta’s lead in not only [passing a bill](#), but in working to provide [resources for schools, teachers and students](#) who are eager to work towards creating a GSA in their school. Bill 612 – [Respect for Diversity](#) can do a lot of good for students in Regina and Saskatchewan’s schools. Not only will LGBTQ students receive more support, all students will benefit from safe and supportive learning environments. Even though there are community supports and organizations available, these are not always easy to access, especially for youth. Support, inclusion, acceptance and education must begin in schools. Sadly, it appears that the government needs to mandate GSAs in order for students to have access to them.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read and review this letter. I look forward to receiving your response,

Cynthia Schultz

Teacher, Graduate Student  
Member of the LGBTQ community  
Advocate