

How I Support LGBTQ+ Students at My School

Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

BY TAICA HSU

Growing up, I always wanted to become a teacher. As a precocious 8-year-old, I remember tutoring my friends in math. I loved helping them learn. In high school, I even started a tutoring program, and I participated in my school's peer counseling program.

While I dreamed of being an educator, I had no idea that one

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day I'd serve as an advisor to the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) where I taught. In high school, I knew I was gay, but I did not feel supported enough to come out to my friends and family. It wasn't until college that I felt comfortable telling others about my sexuality.

I came out during my first year at Dartmouth College. I also decided to put aside my dreams of teaching. I thought I wanted to be a doctor. I think I felt pressure to pursue a career like medicine, business, or law because society respects those professions more than teaching.

But by my sophomore year, I started taking education classes and changed my major to education. After I graduated from

Dartmouth in 2006, I attended the Stanford Teacher Education Program, where I earned my license to teach mathematics in California. In 2007, I did my student teaching at Mission High School, a very racially and ethnically diverse school in San Francisco, and I've been a math teacher there ever since. (For more on Mission, see page 15.)

Connecting with the GSA

For nearly 10 years, I have been the school's GSA advisor, which has been incredibly rewarding. I first became interested in helping the group when I was a student teacher. I would attend meetings throughout the year, and I got to know the students and the teacher then advising them. That teacher left when I became a new teacher at Mission. Colleagues told me not to take on too many things my first year, but the GSA was really important to me, and I decided to become the advisor.

A Gay-Straight Alliance empowers students to stand up for who they are.

Students really make the group their own. They take on leadership positions and take ownership of the club, and it has become a very supportive space for a lot of students. During my first couple of years, teachers would refer students to the GSA when they would say homophobic things or do things that were insensitive toward the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus) community. (I always include "+" because I think this movement should be as inclusive as possible.) And so, the GSA also became a place where students could learn from what we were doing.

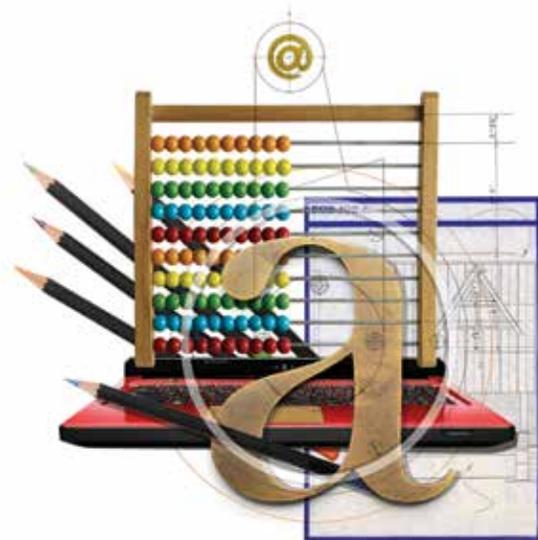
I remember one student in particular who was referred by a teacher to the GSA for calling another student gay. Instead of calling his parents, the teacher told him to attend a GSA meeting to learn why such speech is not OK. Although he was required to attend only once, he was really drawn into the group and kept coming all year. The members of the GSA were kind and welcoming, and they educated him about LGBTQ+ issues. He became a strong ally for our community the rest of his time at Mission.

Having a group where students feel supported and free to discuss identity in a way they might not be able to in other spaces in school is really powerful. Ultimately, a GSA empowers students to stand up for who they are and enables allies to stand up for their LGBTQ+ peers.

The students who belong to the GSA at Mission make sure the group is visible on campus. The club has sponsored a marriage booth where students of any sexual identity can pretend to get married. We hold events on the Day of Silence, and we put on a

drag show for LGBT Pride Month in our school district. For National Coming Out Day, we encourage students and staff to come out and identify as something different (not exclusively related to gender or sexual orientation), and we post these testimonials around the school. It's important that we are viewed as part of the school community, have a voice, and are respected.

Our membership ebbs and flows. Some students are especially committed to the work of transforming the school, while others join just to hang out with their friends, which is fine because they're still learning about LGBTQ+ issues and can be allies. This year, we have a core group of 10 students, half of whom were part of the club last year. I actually prefer a small group because students can get more done when we meet in our 40-minute lunch period. The club really is student-led. As an advisor, I mainly give them feedback and help with logistical issues, such as planning schoolwide events.



A Celebration of Drag

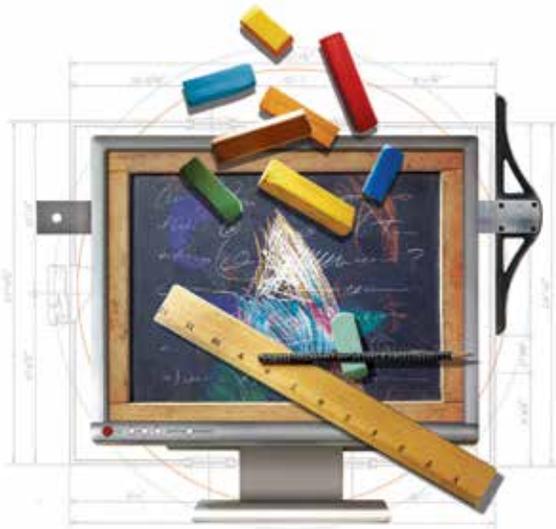
Among the most popular events the GSA plans are drag shows. The first one was very small, and we invited about half the school. GSA members only put the word out to teachers they felt comfortable with, ones who supported LGBTQ+ students and addressed homophobic and transphobic remarks in the classroom. They were invited because students felt these teachers would create a safe environment and would hold their students accountable for being respectful while watching the show. That spring, we held two 40-minute shows, in which students and teachers (including me!) performed.

As part of the show, students gave "coming out" speeches, or their friends or teachers read their speeches for them if they were too nervous to do so themselves. Parents and community members came too, and we got great feedback. Because it was such a big hit, we've been doing it ever since. It's even become a schoolwide assembly, so all students are now invited and attend, and a large number of students and faculty members, including the principal, participate in drag.

The GSA hosts the drag show because drag helps students understand the difference between gender (a social construct)

and sexual orientation. In watching and participating in drag, students see that gender is not dictated by the clothes you wear or by the activities you like. Gender is an identity that is fluid and can be expressed in many different ways. Gender expression—i.e., the ways someone manifests femininity or masculinity—may or may not conform to social constructs. While it can often be an extension of a person’s gender identity, it does not define it. Drag breaks down the idea of gender norms and gender barriers, which makes it very powerful.

I still keep in touch with former students like Pablo, whom I see a few times a year. Pablo currently works and takes college classes. A year after he graduated in 2013, Pablo came back to Mission to help choreograph the drag show. Other GSA alumni also tend to keep in touch. Remy, our most recent former president,



Because of these trainings, and because LGBTQ+ students have been so articulate about the fact that teachers should intervene when homophobic remarks are made, more teachers are using what gets said in class as teachable moments. For instance, I think it’s really important to ask a student what he or she means by a homophobic remark and then to explain the oppressive history of that language.

Sometimes when students say something derogatory, they don’t even understand its connotation. A teacher can respond with a question like, “What do you actually mean by ‘That’s so gay’?” Often, students will say, “Oh, I don’t mean it like that.” That’s when a teacher can say, “All right. Well, what else could you say to communicate your feelings without targeting or being negative toward an entire community?” This moment then becomes educational because the teacher can talk about the history of the derogatory use of the word the student has used. The teacher can help students understand how using the word that way offends people whose identity is being associated with a negative connotation.

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helped choreograph last year’s show and even participated in it. It’s important for students to see that the alumni connection to the GSA remains strong.

It’s a connection I regret not having in my own high school. I graduated in 2002 from a school in Corona, California, which is part of Riverside County. My high school felt oppressive, and it was not a good place to be LGBTQ+. When I first got involved with the GSA at Mission, I really wanted to cultivate a space where students could feel comfortable being who they are.

To ensure that all students feel supported in our club, last year students changed the name from GSA to QSA, for Queer Straight Alliance. They felt like that was more inclusive of all identities and that compared with “gay,” the word “queer” represents a broader identity. Our students noticed a lot of their peers were identifying as “gender queer” or just “queer” in general and didn’t want to label themselves as “gay” or “lesbian” or “transgender.”

Educating Other Teachers

Every few years, our club holds a training for the school’s staff. We help give teachers tools to intervene when a student says something homophobic in class. For years, teachers were just coming to me privately and saying, “I have a student who said something. Can you talk to them?”

At Mission, teachers have adopted this approach not only for LGBTQ+ slurs but for racist and sexist remarks, so they can help students really reflect on their language and be more aware of others’ feelings. Such reflections often occur in our school’s ethnic studies classes and during QSA meetings, both of which help students understand that discriminatory language is part of a system of oppression, in which we sometimes unintentionally participate but from which we can break free.

I do think my colleagues have gotten better at handling these situations instead of just coming to me. I’ve actually had teachers come to me and say, “Hey, I did this in class, and it really worked.” That feedback is empowering, and it shows that these trainings and discussions have pushed teachers forward to deal with discriminatory remarks and not just ignore them or pretend not to hear them. They are actually engaging with students around their language so that all students feel safe.

As a sign of its strong support for LGBTQ+ students and in an effort to make Mission more inclusive, our school just opened its first gender-neutral bathroom. We’re trying to ensure that students know about it and feel safe using it—and that adults know how to convey the purpose of a bathroom with no gender restrictions. Although the QSA has helped make Mission a more welcoming place for all students, we still have work to do. □