

# Cultivating Safe Spaces:

A Toolkit to Enhance School Supports for Vermont LGBTQ+ Youth in Elementary Schools





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## Dedication and Welcome Letter

*In 2019, I switched from being a mental health counselor in a community mental health center to a school counselor in a public elementary school. I quickly saw that the physical environment (pictures on walls, curriculum, signage, bathrooms) did not represent every student in the building. I wanted to create a more inclusive school environment. I reached out to Outright Vermont for support and guidance. This outreach effort led to increased staff curiosity and reflection about being more inclusive regarding language, signage, and more. Staff engaged in workshops with Outright Vermont, a Rainbow Club was started for 5th and 6th grade students, and students raised the pride flag on school grounds!*

*This experience led me to apply for a Doctorate Program in Education Leadership and on a path to pursue how to create more safe spaces and inclusive schools for LGBTQ+ youth in elementary schools. In 2021, I reached out to Outright Vermont to ask them to be my community partner in these efforts, by creating a toolkit to cultivate safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth in upper elementary school. Three years later, we are launching our toolkit! I'm honored to partner with Outright VT and have the privilege of calling them my community partner. I hope this toolkit helps guide your efforts to enhance safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth in elementary school!*

*This toolkit was made possible by conversations and surveys with many Elementary School Principals, Elementary School Counselors, and Middle and High School GSA Advisors. Thank you for your insights and expertise that made this toolkit possible. This toolkit includes:*

- ✔ *Insights from school counselors working with grades K-6 about what supports LGBTQ+ students already have access to in elementary school and what resources are needed for students to have a sense of belonging.*
- ✔ *Insights from middle and high school GSA Advisors about access to LGBTQ+ supportive spaces and what GSA advisors identify as student need.*
- ✔ *Recommendations for safe spaces, non-discriminatory policies, inclusive curriculum, and teacher support.*

With Love,



Jill M. Everett, M.A Ed.D  
(she/her)  
Belonging And Wellness

This toolkit is dedicated to LGBTQ+ youth in Elementary School. We see you. We love you. We hope you have rainbow joy and so many folks who have your back in your school. We know that the information in this toolkit can help your school be a more inclusive space for you so that you can continue to shine bright every day. You deserve that, and so much more.



“  
*It just feels good to be there... At my old school there wasn't a rainbow club, and I think there should be in all the schools, so people can learn about it.*  
”

## Background and Research Overview

Safe spaces are supportive environments for students who identify as LGBTQ+ and who are allies of the LGBTQ+ community. They allow students to socialize, provide support to each other, learn about LGBTQ+ related issues, and advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. Safe spaces, often known as Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs), can also be called Rainbow Clubs in elementary schools. Currently, most safe spaces are found in middle and high schools, where educators serve as advisors. Although students who attend elementary school also often participate in school clubs, activities, and sports, there is a lack of safe spaces in Vermont public elementary schools for students who identify as LGBTQ+. **By 2024, Vermont had less than 5 registered GSAs in elementary schools** – a long way to go to ensuring that every student has access to supportive and affirming spaces in schools.

These activities provide students with a sense of belonging and enhance their emotional wellness during their elementary years. Research has found that GSAs specifically provide a sense of belonging to students who identify as LGBTQ+ in their schools (Poteat, 2016). **All students benefit from a sense of belonging.** While access to GSAs is essential for students who identify as LGBTQ+, it must also be combined with non-discriminatory policies, teacher support, and inclusive curriculums to create a large positive impact on student wellbeing and achievement (Kosciw et al., 2022).

We focused our research to address the importance of safe spaces and other supportive resources for Vermont LGBTQ+ youth in elementary and intermediate schools. From our research comes this evidence-based toolkit for school administrators in Vermont to serve as a guide to support establishing GSAs and championing other supportive resources for LGBTQ+ youth.

Research shows that schools with inclusive programming, specifically GSAs, support a positive school climate for the school community (Kosciw et al., 2022). This means that **GSAs benefit all** who access the building: **students, faculty, and community members**. Safe spaces, inclusive curriculums, teacher support, and non-discriminatory policies are the four key aspects necessary for safe schools and yet these four pillars are currently not consistent throughout elementary schools.

## Insights from School Counselors

School counselors who worked in either elementary schools or intermediate schools that included a 5th or 6th grade and were not part of a middle school participated in a survey, describing the current environment of their schools (J. Everett, email, October 2023).

**73%** of K-5 school counselors felt their schools had safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students.

**60%** of K-6 school counselors felt their schools had safe spaces for their LGBTQ+ students.

**91%** of the K-5 school counselors felt their schools had a non-discriminatory policy that protected their LGBTQ+ students.

**67%** of the K-6 school counselors felt that there was a policy that protected their LGBTQ+ students.

School counselors also answered open ended questions about the needs of students in school and identified the following as necessary to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ youth in elementary and intermediate schools:

- ✓ Having visible and authentic representation of LGBTQ+ youth, including library books and pride flags/posters around campus.
- ✓ Offering supportive spaces for LGBTQ+ students, such as a Rainbow Club, that is also open to all students regardless of individual identity.
- ✓ Introducing inclusive curriculum about LGBTQ+ identities and language to support students' understanding of themselves and their peers
- ✓ Updating school and district policies to ensure they include non-discriminatory and affirmative practices for supporting LGBTQ+ students.
- ✓ Providing consistent training and professional development opportunities for staff and faculty to learn best practices for supporting LGBTQ+ students.

“  
*In Rainbow Club we read different books and we learn about what happened to people, and we can see how we feel. I think there should be more rainbow clubs in other school districts.*  
”





## Insights from GSA Advisors

- ▶ **GSA Advisors reported that an initial step to establish a GSA was to collaborate with administrators on establishing a safe space.** The key to establishing safe spaces was that there had to be student interest, so the GSAs are student run. The advisors indicated that when there was student interest, administrators were more inclined for GSAs to be established in schools.

If you're starting a new GSA, you're not starting from scratch - beyond this toolkit there are a whole host of resources available from GLSEN and Outright Vermont that other GSA advisors have found supportive to them.

- ▶ **Current GSA advisors found that their schools and larger communities were supportive of their efforts to have GSAs in their school.** When pushback has arisen, strong administrator support has allowed GSA advisors to focus on supporting youth and allowing the GSA to thrive.



- ▶ **GSA advisors reiterated the importance of having non-discriminatory policies because policies protect students against negative experiences at school.** Policies can support schools to manage situations that involve angry stakeholders or fighting hate speech. GSA advisors indicated that working with Outright Vermont and having LGBTQ+ signage and verbiage in schools are initiative-taking strategies to support inclusion work.
- ▶ **Advisors reflected that even though starting and facilitating GSAs can be a lot of work, the benefit that students receive from GSAs is invaluable.** The safety felt by knowing there is a space to go to, that includes peer support helps to cultivate a sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ youth.



# RECOMMENDATION 1: Safe Spaces and Teacher Support

## Step 1:

Develop a plan to create a safe space for students who identify as LGBTQ+ as well as ally students, such as a GSA or Rainbow Club.

## Step 2:

Establish both student interest and teacher support as the club is being developed, including finding at least one teacher to facilitate the group when they meet.

## Step 3:

Locate a room that can be used consistently for meetings in the school and then advertise this new club with signs around the campus.

*Note: GSA advisors don't need specialized training! But they can access Outright's free **Starting a GSA** online learning module for support as they navigate the process.*

As you create this new Rainbow Club, keep in mind some considerations to ensure full access for all students while maintaining their safety and privacy.

- Advertise and treat this club just like any other extracurricular activity.
- Parental consent should not be required to join this group, especially if other school clubs do not require it.
- Requiring parental consent creates barriers for access to youth who are not in supportive home environments and can lead to further isolation.





## RECOMMENDATION 2: Non-Discriminatory Policies

While supporting a new GSA to thrive, schools must ensure that they have a non-discriminatory policy that protects students who identify as LGBTQ+. A GSA will help to cultivate the environment of inclusion at a school, the club alone cannot shift the practices of students and faculty within the school – that comes from inclusive policies that protect student identity regarding their gender, sexual orientation, and pronoun use. These policies provide the roadmap of best practices for teachers about how to address situations that involve harassment and bullying.

Ultimately, non-discriminatory policies support a positive school culture, so it helps both students and teachers to advocate for students who face harassment.

Administrators can reference [Vermont State Law](#) and the [Agency of Education](#) for general guidance, as well as new policies from the [Champlain Valley School District](#) and the [South Burlington School District](#) for sample language to adopt in order to support and protect students who identify as LGBTQ+.



## RECOMMENDATION 3: Inclusive Curriculum

After the foundation has been set for an inclusive school environment, the work of schools is to introduce LGBTQ+ inclusion lessons to students. When there is already teacher support and a non-discriminatory policy in place that supports teaching inclusion lessons, the work becomes easier to hold. Teachers can access books, resources, and suggestions for inclusion lessons from resources like [Ready, Set, Respect!](#) from [GLSEN](#) and [Learning for Justice](#).



## Final Thoughts

The recommendations in this toolkit are generalized to support all elementary schools, therefore it is imperative to ask students directly about what they need specifically in their school to have a sense of belonging. These are evidence-based strategies that protect the lives of LGBTQ+ students and enhance their well-being. It is proven that students who identify as LGBTQ+ need safe spaces, teacher support, inclusive curriculum and non-discriminatory policies to increase their sense of belonging and well-being.



# We Got This!



## References

Kosciw, J., Clark, C. M., & Menard, L. (2022). The 2021 national school climate survey: The experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in our nation's schools. <https://www.glsen.org/research/2021-national-school-climate-survey>

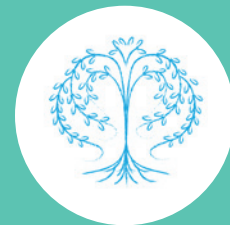
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