



# **The Youth Project's Gender and Sexuality Alliance Advisor Handbook**

**V. 2.0 (2024)**

**A Companion Guide for GSA  
Advisors in Nova Scotia**



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This handbook was created to support Gender and Sexuality Alliances and the incredible work they do in Nova Scotia's schools and communities. The handbook is intended for GSA advisors, and should be used in conjunction with the GSA manual for students. Feel free to share this with anyone else who might need direction on how to support an inclusive environment for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. Within this handbook will be information on the role of a GSA advisor as well as how you can help support 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in your school.

If you'd like any further information about how to support GSAs, or if you feel we missed something important in this manual, please contact The Youth Project at [gsa@youthproject.ns.ca](mailto:gsa@youthproject.ns.ca).

This manual was created in the summer/fall 2024, drawing from a previous copy of the Youth Project's GSA manual. This copy does not have Covid-19 safety precautions written in. We are still living in a pandemic and that fact must be considered when taking part in school clubs like GSAs. Please alter the activities in this manual to best protect your school and community from not only Covid-19 but also any other easily transmitted illnesses (ie. colds and flus) as well as MPXV (M\*nkeypox), which was declared a "Global Health Emergency" on July 23, 2022. When planning events make sure to ask your full GSA for their input on illness prevention measures, make sure also to either research yourselves or ask your advisor to research how best to keep everyone safe at that specific time. Sometimes you may have to cancel events to protect yourselves and your community. Canceling or rescheduling events for safety reasons can be a hard choice, but it is always a good choice. GSAs are about equity and community care, and doing your best to keep each other safe from illness is an important part of that.

## **About the Youth Project**

The Youth Project is a non-profit organization that supports 2SLGBTQIA+ youth aged 25 and under across Nova Scotia within Mi'kma'ki. As a multiservice organization, we host an education team, programming team, and support services team with an aim to further the inclusion and wellness of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth through an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, trauma-informed framework which centers youth voice and community leadership.

### **Support Services**

**Supportive Counselling:** The Youth Project provides supportive counseling for youth who want to talk to someone about sexual orientation or gender identity. Our support coordinator is available to listen, provide information, and help youth get the support they need. We can provide support to families as well. If you want some questions answered, are experiencing harassment, are confused about who you are, are coming out, need help, or just want to talk, we are here.

Call and make an appointment to talk to someone. We can come to your school or community and meet with you there if you can't make it to us. We can also use Skype to chat for those of you who are far away. All you need to do is contact us by phone or email.

Our support staff can also help you get connected to other safe and supportive resources in your community.

**Referrals:** The Youth Project runs many programs and services but you may need something the Youth Project doesn't provide. We can help you get connected to the right resources, the right people, and the right programs for you. If you are looking for a professional, a program, or an organization that is 2SLGBTQIA+ positive, we can provide you with that information.

We can provide referrals to doctors, mental health programs, therapists, employment programs, education programs, police, lawyers, and programs for health issues such as eating disorders, addictions, or anger management

If the referral you require is not listed please call and we will do our best to connect you with another organization that can provide assistance.

## **Education**

**In-class Workshops:** We provide classroom education sessions on sexual orientation and gender identity for grades 1 through 12. Depending on grade level sessions may examine diversity of families, respect and kindness, friendship, terms and definitions around sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as provide an exploration of homophobia, transphobia, homophobic/transphobic language, and their effects on students. Our workshops follow an

interactive format that allows students to participate in discussions and ask questions.

If you are a teacher and are interested in booking a workshop, please contact us at [education@youthproject.ns.ca](mailto:education@youthproject.ns.ca) at any time during the year to arrange a date and time for us to come in and do a session with your class. You can also fill out the [Workshop Request Form](#). Please note that these workshops book up quickly, so contact us as early as possible to ensure availability.

**Professional Development:** The Youth Project is committed to providing professionals, university programs and organizations with sessions that cover sexual orientation and gender identity as well as areas unique to each work environment. The length and audience of the session will determine the topics that will be covered. If your school or organization requires professional development around sexual orientation and gender identity, please contact us for a quote.

## Youth Leadership

When the Youth Project became a non-profit, charitable, registered society, it officially became youth-directed with the creation of the Youth Board. The Youth Board is made up solely of youth, 25 and under, who are members of the Youth Project. The Youth Board is responsible for the programs and services we offer. The decisions around which programs and services to offer, how they are designed, and what changes need to be made are all controlled by the Youth

Board. They are located on the same level as the Board of Directors and jointly make decisions on staffing, policy, and finances.

## **Social Opportunities**

### **Monthly Programs**

The Youth Project has a monthly schedule of regular programs. These programs are open to all youth ages 12-25 and happen once each month on a specific night. As of (August) 2022 all of the Youth Project's in-person events have a mandatory mask policy, masks are provided if you don't have one. If you have questions about a program or want to attend please email [teo@youthproject.ns.ca](mailto:teo@youthproject.ns.ca) or DM the Youth Project (@nsyouthproject) on Instagram.

**Drop-In:** Drop-In is a virtual social program taking place on Zoom. This monthly program always reoccurs on the 2nd Tuesday of every month from 6-8 pm. This program offers a less structured space for youth to hangout in whatever way they wish. Cameras are optional and participating via chat is more than welcome!

**Transformers:** Transformers is a monthly social support group open to trans, non-binary, and gender-questioning youth. This monthly program is being updated, and the new date and time will be determined based on the new YP schedule. Stay tuned for details!

**Game Night:** Join us for the Game Night at Game Knight Toys, Cards, and Games every second Thursday of each month at Alderney Library! This program is a social space for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth to hang

out and play games in a relaxed environment. During this program, we have a selection of board games to play, as well as sometimes a console set up for Mario Party and other multiplayer games

**Craft Night:** Join us on the 3rd Tuesday of each month at Wonder'neath (2482 Maynard) for Craft Night from 6-8 pm! During this program, we will have a selection of supplies for patch-making, bracelets, and buttons! Additionally, we will have a few board games set up for folks who are feeling less crafty!

## Events

Every year, The Youth Project hosts a variety of special events. Sign up for our [newsletter](#) or check out our Instagram page (@nsyouthproject) for more information!

**Prom:** Queer Prom is a dance event open to 2SLGBTQIA+ youth ages 19 and under. It's a space focused on queer-identified youth to be themselves, and dance the night away! In addition to a dance area, there will be an area for you to hang out and socialize with your friends in a more relaxed environment. Each year the prom has a theme and the space is transformed to match the theme. Many choose to dress according to the theme, but everyone can dress however they feel comfortable.

**Summer Camps:** Youth Project summer camps are a chance to get together with other youth from across Nova Scotia for a weekend of summer camp activities, 2SLGBTQIA+ information, and fun! Camps run on a refundable deposit of \$25.00 and are for youth aged 13-18. Activities include writing, arts & crafts, scavenger hunts, support & discussion groups, resources, campfires, ghost stories, swimming, and much more!

Our summer camps include: Camp Coyote, a summer camp for Two-Spirit, trans, and non-binary youth, and Camp Seahorse, A summer camp for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth.

## Resources

**Library:** The Youth Project has an extensive library available to youth, their families, and those who work with youth across Nova Scotia. We are happy to mail books out to youth elsewhere in the province. We have an extensive selection of young adult fiction with 2SLGBTQIA+ themes, characters, and authors. Our collection includes novels, graphic novels, poetry, and comics. We have several books by Canadian authors. We also have several children's books. Our non-fiction section contains books on coming out, gender identity, parents of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, homophobia, Gay-Straight Alliances, healthy living and relationships, and many more topics.

**Resources:** On The Youth Project's website and [GSA Website](#), you will find information on sexual orientation and gender identity for youth, parents, educators, and supporters, including general support information, healthier relationships and sexual health information, English and non-English resources for parents, and links to posters and visual information. We also upload book lists and recommendations for youth, parents, and more.

**GSA Student Manual:** We're excited to share that the **GSA Student Manual** has been updated to provide even more comprehensive support for GSAs across Nova Scotia! The manual covers everything

from starting a GSA to planning projects. This resource is designed to empower GSA leaders and members and ensure their work remains impactful and meaningful. Feel free to explore these updates and share them within your school community!

## **Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) Support**

The Youth Project has been working with GSAs since 1998, when we held a GSA leadership conference for those interested in starting GSAs in their schools. The Youth Project has been working alongside 2SLGBTQIA+ youth to support the continued success and expansion of GSAs throughout Nova Scotia's schools.

**GSA Support:** The Youth Project has a GSA Coordinator who provides support, education, and resources to GSA around the province!

**GSA Conference:** Every year we host the Nova Scotia Provincial GSA Conference! They get bigger and better every year with our biggest having over 250 GSA youth leaders and advisors in attendance. The GSA Conference is a day of skill-building workshops, creating connections, and making friends. Make sure to join our mailing list to stay informed on all things GSA-related and The Youth Project: [www.youthproject.ns.ca](http://www.youthproject.ns.ca) and <https://gsanetworkns.ca/gsa-conference>

## **The Role of a GSA Advisor**

As a GSA advisor, your job is first and foremost to advise. You should be available to support students and lift them up so they can achieve their leadership potential. Keep in mind that all GSAs are different, but in this section, you'll find some information that should help you foster trust and resilience in your school's GSA. The Youth Project has a GSA Facilitator Mailing List which allows advisors to share insight and resources. You can join the Mailing List by filling out this form <https://forms.gle/E5RkW8yoHqBknyWx7>

### **Advocacy**

The youth in your school's GSA should feel comfortable and safe around you. An easy way to show your support and care is to advocate for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in your school. Pay attention to topics or issues within your school that come up both in GSA meetings and during other school times. It can be very difficult for students to bring these things up with the administration, so you can help all of the students in your school by being the liaison between your GSA and the administration. There is a very large power imbalance between a student (particularly 2SLGBTQIA+ and other marginalized students) and an administrator, and you can help bridge that gap so students can use their energy to learn and grow.

### **General Support**

It's crucial to support 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in schools and as a GSA advisor, you are likely to work with many of these youth. That said, it

is very important for you to try to learn as much as you can about 2SLGBTQIA+ topics as possible so you can help answer any questions students might have. Lots of 2SLGBTQIA+ students find themselves in situations where they ask all of their questions to their peers or the student leaders of a GSA which causes undue stress to the youth tasked with providing answers. Even if you do your very best to stay up to date with terminology and issues you might find yourself in a position when you don't know the answer to a question posed by a student, and that's okay. If you find yourself in a situation like this, the best practice is to send the student to a supportive adult who does know the answer. This person could be another staff member at your school or another community-based youth worker, such as someone on the Youth Project's support services team. You might also want to ask other GSA advisors through the GSA Facilitator Network to see if anyone there might be able to help you answer a question or provide support.

Another thing you may want to look into is conflict resolution training. Conflict is bound to arise at some point, but having a group that trusts each other and is willing to work together is key for keeping a GSA running smoothly. Being able to help students come to an agreement or compromise is another fantastic way to show your support while helping your school's GSA going strong.

If your GSA has a strong student leadership you might feel like you can take a step back while they handle most of the goings on within the GSA. However, make sure you are still available to assist. Even the most robust of student-run clubs will need help from an advisor from time to time so make sure to keep an ear out and ask what you can do to help support students in taking active roles in the GSA. It may also be helpful to have you, as an advisor, encourage students to

take on tasks so everything doesn't fall on just a few students. Of course, you should always respect the choices of students if they say they don't want to or don't have the capacity to participate in a certain task or activity. A list of common positions in middle and high school GSAs is provided in the [GSA Roles and Responsibilities](#) doc, along with a link to their respective roles and responsibilities.

**Tip for Advisors and GSA leaders:** GSA leaders who have been part of the GSA the longest have institutional knowledge and skills that help to keep a GSA running smoothly. While this knowledge is important and easy to rely on, it can limit and diminish the contributions of other members and impact the ability of a team to work well together.

Make sure that leadership opportunities are provided to ALL interested youth. GSAs provide an opportunity for skill building and should not be limited to one or two people. Advisors, make sure that GSA leaders are not preventing opportunities for other youth who may be afraid to voice their interests.

Finally, while GSA students are likely to want more independent, it's still important to respect their boundaries. Encourage students to take on leadership roles and tasks, but if someone expresses that they're feeling overwhelmed or not up to a particular task, support them in stepping back. Flexibility and understanding are key to ensuring all students feel comfortable and included.

## **Elementary Aged GSAs**

If you are advising a GSA or similar club in an elementary school, obviously more responsibilities will fall to you to keep the club running.

It is likely that students will want to join an elementary GSA for the social aspect, more than in a bid to make social or policy changes. Some students, older youth in particular, may want to take on larger roles such as the ones outlined in the “Now What?: Assign Roles” section of our GSA Student Manual. You may also find the GSA split into people who are more interested in social change-making and people looking for a safe place to spend time with peers. In a case like this, you could suggest that the GSA creates a core GSA to work on projects at some meetings and have other meetings that are more for fun social activities.

## **Junior High Aged GSAs**

If you are advising a GSA or similar club in a junior high school, it’s important to balance structured activities with social time. Junior high students often benefit from having fun, low-pressure spaces to bond with their peers. You might encourage a mix of GSA meetings that focus on education, advocacy, and social or policy change with meetings that are just for hanging out, playing games, or watching movies. This balance helps students develop friendships while also feeling empowered to make a difference.

Conflict resolution skills will also come in handy here. Junior high students are still learning how to navigate social dynamics, so

conflicts or misunderstandings can arise. As an advisor, helping students work through these issues constructively will strengthen the group's bonds and help everyone feel respected and heard.

### **High School Aged GSAs**

If you are advising a GSA or similar club in a high school, your role may shift from providing information to offering guidance and mentorship as students take on leadership roles within the GSA. High school GSAs often become more active in advocacy, social change, and peer education. Students in high school may have more in-depth knowledge and experience with 2SLGBTQIA+ issues, and they may have a stronger desire to create change within their school and community.

High school GSAs often focus more on advocacy and activism, so you might support students in organizing events like awareness campaigns, fundraisers, or policy change efforts. While students are capable of taking the lead, they'll still need your assistance with logistics, school policies, and communication with the administration. Make sure students feel empowered to lead but know you're there to help them navigate challenges that might come up.

Even though students may take on a lot of responsibility, you need to remain engaged. Check-in regularly to see how things are going, offer to help where needed, and make sure students have the support they need to balance their GSA responsibilities with schoolwork and other commitments. Encourage students to delegate tasks so that the workload doesn't fall on a small group of people. This helps prevent burnout and ensures everyone feels like they're contributing.

Just like with junior high GSAs, conflict can arise, especially if students are working on advocacy projects with differing opinions. Conflict resolution training can be incredibly beneficial for you as an advisor. Helping students work through disagreements in a productive way will keep the GSA functioning smoothly.

## Parental Permission

GSA Advisors may encounter situations where parents or guardians do not support their child's involvement in the GSA due to personal, cultural, or religious beliefs. It's crucial to handle these situations with care, empathy, and a focus on the student's well-being.

No parental permission is required for students to attend any Youth Project programs or school clubs, such as GSAs. Schools should not notify parents about a student's participation in these groups to ensure a safe and supportive environment for all students. However, it's important to note that, according to the Department of Education's guidelines<sup>1</sup>, parental permission is required for students below Grade 7 who wish to officially change their name or pronoun in school records.

Many parents may not be fully informed about the purpose of GSAs and their positive impact on students' lives. You can share studies or materials that highlight the importance of supportive spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and how GSAs can reduce bullying and mental health challenges. It is better to try to keep the conversation solution-focused rather than confrontational. Acknowledge that differing values exist but stay firm in your commitment to the student's safety, emotional health, and rights to participate in the GSA.

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2014) *Guidelines for Supporting Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Students*  
[https://studentservices.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/Guidelines%20for%20Supporting%20Transgender%20Students\\_0.pdf](https://studentservices.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/Guidelines%20for%20Supporting%20Transgender%20Students_0.pdf)

## Before You Begin

Here are a few things to think about specifically before you start putting together a GSA, but also once your GSA is up and running. Lots of what is mentioned in this section will focus on how to foster a diverse and intersectional GSA where everyone feels safe, accepted, and heard.

People are shaped by many different experiences due to the many aspects of their lives, whether it is race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, age, class, or religion. If we only look at one of these factors, we are missing important parts of that person's identity. It is important to celebrate the diversity within your GSA, and local community, as well as include everyone when you discuss queer and trans people and the issues they may face. It is also important to look at how homophobia, biphobia and transphobia interact with other oppressions, like racism, sexism, ableism, etc.

For members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, representation in your school can be so incredibly meaningful. To hear about a successful gay man in your history class, or to learn about a great trans poet in English class are wonderful experiences, rare as they may be. Being able to see your identity reflected in the classroom can bring validation and a connection to the lesson. For those with intersecting identities they may never get to see themselves reflected - unless we are proactive, and make it our priority.

We all have intersecting identities with various degrees of privilege. We are not just our sexual orientations, or our gender identities. These exist within us alongside our racialized identity, our abilities or disabilities, our ethnicities, our cultures, our religions, and more. A pansexual woman of colour won't just be pansexual; her experiences as a woman, and a woman of colour, will impact her experiences in the world. These may be good experiences, but they also mean her life will be impacted by racism and sexism as well as homophobia.

It's important to look at our combined experiences so we as GSA members can identify the roots of our struggles, and look at how these ideas connect. Queer, Black author Audre Lorde has said "There is no such thing as a single issue struggle because we do not live single issue lives". We aren't just our sexuality or our gender identity, we are complex beings that all carry multiple identities. We all live complex lives, and should not have to hide parts of ourselves away. We can, and should, be appreciated for our whole selves.

When we face multiple sources of struggle in the world, these are known as intersecting oppressions. Oppression is when a person is mistreated or exploited by others with power, and results in stereotypes, myths and stigma about a group or a population. It is important that we look at how each of these identities intersect and make sure we are representing the whole person.

If we don't experience a form of oppression, we have privilege. Privilege is when a person has an unearned benefit or advantage. We do not exist in the world as purely privileged, or purely oppressed. But we may experience more privileges when we belong to groups who don't experience racism (being white), sexism (being male), cis-sexism (being cis gender), ableism (being non-disabled), or fatphobia (being thin), etc.

Having privilege is not something we have to feel bad about, but we do need to talk and think about it! It is upsetting to think of someone cisgender and straight who doesn't believe homophobia and transphobia still exist in the world, because we know it's happening, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people can hear, feel and see it. We all have a role in fighting homophobia and transphobia. It is the same with all other forms of oppression too. We have to acknowledge inequity, and use our privilege to help fight oppression.

## **Who is centered?**

As a GSA it is important that you work to center and uplift the thoughts and lived experience of multiply marginalized youth (youth who are not only queer but also marginalized in other ways). Some groups who are often overlooked are BIPOC or racialized youth, trans youth (specifically trans women, girls, and femmes), newcomer or immigrant youth, disabled youth, and fat youth. It is crucial that these youth feel seen and heard in your GSA as this can help them feel safe and cared for.

Pay attention to who's ideas and thoughts are being heard in GSA meetings. If they are coming from the same few members or youth who all share similar identities, why is that? Are others being interrupted or talked over? Are multiple marginalized youth even attending meetings, sharing their thoughts, or being a part of your GSA?

Keep in mind not to pressure anyone to share, but consider asking more outspoken members to step back so others have a chance to step up!

## **Inclusive language**

An easy way to help everyone feel included in your GSA is to use inclusive language. Avoid gendered language like "girls and boys" or "ladies and gentlemen", opt instead for terms like "folks", "people" or "everyone". You should also ask people what pronouns they use, or if you are referring to someone and don't know their pronouns use a gender-neutral pronoun like they/them or just use their name.

If your GSA finds itself in a situation where you must ask people to put their gender on a form or survey, question if you even need this information and why you are asking for it. If you do decide to include a question about gender, consider noting that sharing this info is optional. If it is deemed necessary leave a blank space so that

people can write in their true gender, and not just pick between girl or boy. Consider asking your school to do this for their forms as well.

Make it a rule in your GSA that anyone can use their name and pronoun of choice, and other members will respect and use them. Make sure you know when and where people use these names and pronouns (just in the GSA? Just at school? Do their parents or teachers use them too?). Respect their confidentiality if these are just identities they use only at GSA meetings – it may be their only place to do so comfortably. Name-tags that include pronouns, or pronoun buttons/stickers are a great way to cut down on unintentional misgendering and/or mis/dead-naming.

## **Protections for 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth in Nova Scotia**

### **Nova Scotia Human Rights Act Amendment**

In 1996, sexual orientation was added to the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act. This means a person has the right to be free from discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation.

In 2012, Bill 140 passed to include gender identity and gender expression to the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act. The inclusion of gender identity and gender expression to the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act provides transgender and gender non-conforming Nova Scotians with the protection against discrimination, including in employment, schools, facilities, housing, and when negotiating gendered spaces.

This includes transgender, cisgender and non-binary people who dress and express themselves through gender non-conformity.

### **“Conversion Therapy” Bans**

The Nova Scotia government banned the use of “conversion therapy” (a discredited way of attempting to change someone’s sexual orientation or gender) for anyone under the age of 19 in 2018.

This was a huge step for protecting 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in the province from the pain of this practice.

In January of 2022 a new law came into effect drastically restricting the practice of “conversion therapy” throughout Canada. This law makes it illegal to force someone to undergo “conversion therapy”, take a minor abroad to undergo “conversion therapy”, as well as profit from, promote or advertise the practice of “conversion therapy”.

### **The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s Guidelines for Supporting Transgender and Gender-nonconforming Students**

The guidelines are a booklet of 7 basic guidelines that help a student and their family transition through school years. It covers things like name and pronoun usage in school, negotiating gendered spaces, legal documents, and more. The guidelines are available on our website (under Resources), and the website of the Department of Education.

### **The Nova Scotia Education Curriculum**

Students in Nova Scotia are supposed to learn about gender identity, sexual orientation, and about homophobia at different grade levels. You can find these topics in the NS Education Outcomes, at <https://curriculum.novascotia.ca/>