



A summary of what was said on
January 31, 2015
Winspear Theatre,
Edmonton, Alberta.



We Are Listening: Sparking Public Conversation on Gay/ Straight Alliances

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February 2015

ISBN: 978-0-921417-67-5

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OVERVIEW

We are Listening – Sparking Public Conversation on GSAs was a public event held in the rehearsal hall of the Winspear Theatre in Edmonton on January 31, 2015.

The event was held in response to the introduction of Bill 10, which would allow Alberta school boards to reject student requests to create peer-support groups known as gay-straight alliances (GSAs)

The event was open to the general public as an opportunity to hear firsthand from individuals as they share their stories around their experiences with or without GSAs in schools.

The event, moderated by Ward I City Councillor Andrew Knack, was presented by the City of Edmonton Youth Council, Pride Centre of Edmonton, Edmonton Social Planning Council and Public Interest Alberta.

This report is a summary of what was said by youth, parents, educators and concerned citizens.



*Listening panel (from left) **Nathan Ip**, Edmonton Public School Board Trustee Ward H and former member of the Initial City of Edmonton Youth Council, **Nicholas Diaz**, Vice President Student Life with the University of Alberta's Student Union, **Mark Chiang**, Presbyterian minister and **Claire Edwards**, chair of the City of Edmonton Youth Council.*

Kerry Maguire

Edmonton Public School Board teacher at Jasper Place High School and district consultant for sexual orientation and gender identity.

I feel very fortunate to do the work that I do because I get to work with some amazing kids and some of them are in this room today.

Because of the current discussions, the government bills, etc, more and more schools are asking themselves about whether they should have a GSA.

What I really see happening with GSAs is that students are given a platform to develop their leadership skills. Yes, there is an element of support and yes there are social situations that occur within those safe spaces, but a huge piece of what I see are students who are free to explore and feel safe enough that they can take on leadership roles. And I don't mean leadership roles just within their GSA but within the whole school.

In my school of Jasper Place High School, we have about 2,400 students. Our GSA runs whole school events and they are supported by the whole school. Our meetings are (attended) by 30 students once a week... That's the one thing that I am really seeing changing. We are not only just creating safe spaces within our schools. We are creating places where students can develop skills, gain self-awareness and take on bigger things.

Students, however, are telling her there are still things they need.

One of the things they are saying is that they need role models. Another thing they need is ways to connect to community resources.

They also want good information, correct information and relevant information about their lives and identities.

One of the things that I have seen is that it is not always the students who are starting up GSAs. Now we are starting to get staff members saying that they see a need for this, that they see a benefit.

One of the things that I see students really struggling with is family conflict. That's probably the biggest support piece that we deal with. We think about culture and identity as something passed on from our families but a lot of our students do not have that. Their families may not know how to support them or how to help them gain awareness about themselves.

Amanda Barrett

Junior high school teacher, Queer Straight Alliance advisor and a long-time volunteer within the LGBTQ community.

Working on the frontlines with our youth, I have seen uncertainty and pain when students feel they are struggling alone. I have seen those same students relax and grow



Kerry Maguire

when they see that one person understands their journey and supports them and is there.

Too many of our youth face violence, bullying and discrimination at school and these issues can be intensified by LGBTQ students or heterosexual students who are gender non-conforming and perceived to be gay.

Students who do not feel safe or do not feel included at school can have high absentee rates, declining grades and can be at greater risk of suicide. These problems are very real. As adults, we have a responsibility to protect our students. We should be helping them fight homophobia, transphobia, isolation, ignorance – not adding to the strife. We can start tackling these issues by supporting queer straight alliance clubs and labeling them as such.

(MLA) Laurie Blakeman said that “Real support means real action” and I couldn’t agree more. We need to ensure that our students find a physically and emotionally safe place while they are in school. A place where students can be their authentic selves and thrive. It should not matter whether our students are in the public system or a charter school and it shouldn’t matter where in the province they are attending class. All students deserve a welcoming and affirming education.

She said that GSAs are not about sex. Instead, they are about leadership, support and school safety.

There is nothing going on (at a GSA meeting) that couldn’t happen with every member’s parent there watching.

Schools should not be battlegrounds and students should not have to fight for visibility and community. As parents, teachers and members of the community, we have a responsibility to support our kids. It is imperative that we call on our premier and education minister to protect our youth. Real support means real action.

Aura Leedy and mother Krista



Aura Leedy and mother Krista

Aura, 17, is a student at J Percy Page and a member of the City of Edmonton Youth Council.

My story is pretty typical. I realized I was bi (my mother may not realize this yet) when I was in grade six. I went through junior high. It was the hell of my life. It was not fun. The whole time I pretty well sat there thinking: “The bullies were wrong” because they called my friends gay, they called me gay. It was pretty mean.

In grade nine I finally got the courage to say it out loud in school and then I went home and told mother. And she said: “Ok, yeah” and then my sister talked about fights. It was pretty lame.

In grade ten it was my first real experience in a GSA. It was beautiful. I don’t know how

to put this, it was beautiful, just beautiful.

Everyone there was very supportive. Everyone had gone through pretty much the same thing. They were all ready to really help each other which was really cool because I think a lot of the time people just think about themselves and give up. And that's sad.

For me, GSAs save lives. It saves the personality because I would not be where I am without it.

In my three years of being in a GSA, I've seen people come in who are broken. Within a month they are ready to take on the world. And it is not just for those who are questioning their sexuality ... it's really for teenagers to get together and support each other through high school which can sometimes be the best years of your life or the next hell in your life after junior high. That's amazing for me because a lot of people need that.

She concluded by saying that many of her teachers at J Percy Page do not know what it is like to be LGBTQ and they don't realize what they are doing that affects the youth in the school.

Krista Leedy

Parent of three children, mother of Aura

When she shared with us that she liked boys and girls we said: "OK, We love you" and then: "What's for dinner?"

She was a little disappointed, you could tell, for our less than epic reaction although she later confessed that she was very relieved.

She loves school and she loves to learn and is thriving in her school environment. But this has not always been the case. Aura had a very dark period where we watched her passions dull and her love of school became a daily battle of overcoming her dread to get on that bus.

She opened up about what was happening to her and her very small circle of friends, about the bullying, her hopelessness, the growing hate towards her bullies and her feelings of drowning in despair.

This was halfway through grade seven. My spouse and I went to the school. We tried to talk to the administration and the teachers. I tried to talk to the parents of the other kids involved. One parent. ONE PARENT, was open to a conversation!

In the meanwhile, my daughter sank deeper into that dark void. As a parent, I felt helpless. At home, in our community, I could give her a supportive environment, but at school I had little influence. At that time the teachers could only address what was happening in their classroom, not in the hallways, not before and after school. And in our opinion, the school administration was unwilling to address the issue. There was no GSA at that school.



Krista Leedy

For two and a half years we lived in desperation, giving Aura as many supports as we could. We sought medical help and advice. We continually made our plight known to the staff at the school. We encouraged her to get involved in positive extra-curricular activities. We limited her social media and we listened. We did everything that good parents are supposed to do, but it didn't matter how many positive experiences or how much laughter we shared, seven hours of her day, five days a week, was filled with the dread, hate, self-loathing and fear.

My heart broke with every tear she shed and we felt helpless. We kept telling her that it would get better. We prayed that it would get better.

Every morning I would wake up afraid of what I might find. Every time she would hide in the house, escaping into the corner of a closet when she really felt overwhelmed, I would make sure that she wasn't hurting herself or worse.

I lived for nearly three years in fear that I would have to bury my daughter. Instead of reading this speech to you I would be reading her medical examiner's report saying "death by suicide."

In grade ten, it did get better. The bullies were still there but Aura found a safe place with safe people. She found a sanctuary. She was beaming, for the first time in a very long time. She had attended her first gay straight alliance meeting that day during lunch. It was a Thursday. She found a group that accepted her, that empowered her and gave her hope. She came home and talked with great passion about the people she met. Most importantly, she wasn't alone.

In that safe space, she found some footing. She was enveloped in encouragement and friendship. She belonged and she was safe. My heart sang. There was only a few times when Aura came home in tears after that. It wasn't just that she had a group of friends who had her back, it was that the very presence of the GSA in the school made it clear to other students, that being who you are whatever that is, is okay. She was in an environment of acceptance.

By grade eleven, I no longer lived in fear for my daughter. That darkness had begun to shrink back and became shadows. The real Aura started to emerge. She started taking on leadership roles in her GSA. She joined other student clubs at school. She became a leader amongst her friends. And she has LOTS of friends.

At home, we saw her confidence grow. She blossomed. You can imagine my glee when she asked to join a professional hand bell group and when she applied for a position with the City of Edmonton Youth Council.

And what I saw happening to Aura, was a story repeated among other youth in her GSA. They also found a safe and encouraging place, a community of family.

Aura has some pretty awesome parents but many of these youth didn't and still don't. So, while at 3:30 pm Aura has a safe and accepting place to come home to, many of her friends only feel safe and accepted within those school walls with their GSA family.

So, why is a GSA important? It saved my daughter's life and that's not an over state-

ment. It gave her the support that we parents couldn't. She found a safe place of refuge. By its presence it created an accepting – not a tolerant – but an accepting school community. She found community, acceptance, encouragement and life. I thank you for listening to my story.

Mia Soetaert

A Bellerose Composite High School student. She started a GSA in her junior high and is a member of a LGBTQ youth group.

Through grade four to grade seven I was very deep in depression and anxiety. I probably went to every psychologist, psychiatrist, mental health group and depression group you could go to. But nothing seemed to get to the bottom of what I was feeling. I would always tell my parents that I was different but I could never quite tell them what the difference was.

Eventually, after going through a downward spiral in grade seven, I ended up in the hospital for a little bit. I came out to my parents as a lesbian. I remember my mom looking me in the face and saying: "That's it? That's honestly it? I thought you were doing drugs or something." I said, no mom, I just like girls.

I didn't have a GSA at that point in time. I went to an all-girls junior high school. There, no one really thought there was a need for a GSA. For me, it (a GSA) was just a safe space for everybody to go and hang out. Why wouldn't we need one? Right?

By grade seven, I still was not out to anybody at school. I was just out to my parents.

Grade nine rolled around and I decided that this would be the year that I would come out to everybody. So, I came out to all my best friends. Their support was overwhelming actually. One of my best friends said: "You are the same person you were yesterday. I don't care." And she later came out to me and that was pretty insane.

So, then I approached my English teacher and said I can't live without a GSA anymore. It was the one place I could freely express who I was. So, we started it in October of my grade nine year.

The first meeting we had ten kids. Most high schools don't have that many kids (attending a GSA meeting) so, I was pretty proud of my junior high. We went on with meeting about once every two weeks. We tried to develop a safe place for everybody in the school, not just for the girls in the GSA, but for the whole community. The program was about inclusivity and I felt that was really what we exemplified. We did the Day of Silence. Pink Shirt Day. There was an elementary program (in the school) and we even had them doing it.

No one thought we could have a GSA and now we are doing all these cool and amazing things.

The GSA also helped me be okay about who I was. It helped me develop so many leadership skills. I probably wouldn't be here talking to you guys if I didn't have the

GSA.

We accepted everyone and anyone. I just think that GSAs are amazing places to make friends and build communities.

Caeleah Bartosck

A 13-year-old grade eight student who helped establish a GSA at her school.



Caeleah Bartosck

I came out to my friends and family last year in May. I was extremely nervous because I wasn't completely sure how anyone would react. Turns out my mom and my dad were kind of expecting it.

Me and my mom both contacted my school last year and asked if there was any chance I could get a GSA in my junior high because my older brother had told me about it because he goes to Jasper Place and that school has one. He told me about it and I asked my mom about it. So, we asked the school and they told us there were no policies on getting a GSA for junior highs.

So, when Laurie Blakeman came up with Bill 202, Mickey Wilson, from the Edmonton Pride Centre asked me if I would be okay with talking at a press conference. I was in the news several times asking for GSAs and supporting Bill 202. I've done it so many times that I can basically say L-G-B-T-Q off by heart.

My school got a GSA three weeks ago.

At the first meeting, we got 40 kids in there. So, that's sort of proof that we needed a GSA in our school.

I am really happy about that. I have made so many friends due to this. I was scared and excited at the same time when I walked into the GSA for the first time. And I was afraid (that there would not be) anyone there. But when I walked in and saw all these different people ... They are all my friends now. I can go there and I am accepted by the kids at my school. I still see kids at my school teasing other kids for being gay or for being assumed that they are gay.

We can be ourselves now and I can already see kids being more open. I went from hating my school to loving my school within three weeks. I have made new friends and I am learning to be a bigger leader in my community.

We are all sort of learning together about how the GSA works (because) we are all new to it.

People have told me that I am brave because I was on TV back in December for supporting Bill 202. But I just kind of feel it is kind of weird because all I want is for my school to be safer.

I may have a GSA now but what about the kids that don't? Not everyone is willing to come out and ask.

I am only 13 and my mom somehow managed to convince me to come out to her

because she somehow knew before I did.

But, I am happy with who I am. My friends accept me and I am willing to say in front of my school that I am a lesbian and I am proud of it.

It is kind of sad, though, to go to the GSA and see kids talk about how their families are not fully accepting. Their only safe place is at school. And that (school) is not always a safe place.

So, I am happy that we can walk the halls of my school and be proud and we can just be kids.

Courtney Cliff

A community liaison worker for the AltView Foundation in Strathcona County.

I graduated from high school less than ten years ago and I came out at 15.

High school was a very difficult time for me. I went through bouts of bullying, which now in hindsight, I chalk that up to discrimination.

I had a very difficult time graduating because I rarely went to class because I was afraid I wouldn't be safe in school.

I did not have a GSA in my school. After graduating, I found a place in university. It was the MacEwan GSA called InQueeries where I was afforded the leadership opportunities that we are talking about today.

It was also a space where I could learn about myself and my incredible community. I became the president of that GSA and now find myself creating GSAs in high schools which is kind of like coming full circle.

So, many years later from when I was in high school, in the areas that I work, I am still seeing students who are afraid like I was. That is frustrating and disappointing and it makes me very angry to be perfectly honest. They do not feel safe in their schools and they do not feel there is anyone in their school to support them or advocate for them or even to relate to them.

I believe that the government must help to facilitate these groups and must not be a hindrance. GSAs are safe spaces, lifelines and community resources and I have seen firsthand how GSAs are important in rural schools in which I work.

Richard Feehan and Kathaleen Quinn

Both described themselves as social work educators and parents of an 18-year-old son.

Mother:

Brenndan came out that he was gay to our family when he was 13. We have a very large Irish Catholic family and out of those 100 to 150 people, if you count the extend-



Richard Feehan and Kathaleen Quinn

ed family, everyone embraced him. So, Brenndan felt very much accepted and okay to be who he was in his home and in our friendship community.

When Brenndan went through junior high, like another young woman who spoke earlier, it was hell. (I think we can all remember those years. I think schools have to do something about those years, grade seven, eight and nine.)

Brenndan would not say he was bullied because, as anyone who knows Brenndan would say, he has a very strong sense of himself. He would say: "You cannot be bullied unless you have agreed to be bullied. And I have never agreed to that." Everyday in grade seven, eight and nine, I would try to be home from school because there were always stories: taunting, verbally putting him down, making comments as he walked down the street. Not only that, but there were arguments that happened in the classroom where people from the LGBTQ community were talked about but in a mocking way.

What I found in junior high with Brenndan, is that the schools did very little to stop this talk. Teachers must have known what was going on. So, (he) was not a happy boy in junior high. So, when Brenndan went to high school, he went to Strathcona High School and he said: "I am coming out fully because however I am going to live my life, I am going to live it authentically."

Brenndan then joined a GSA.

At night Brenndan would get phone calls. These kids would call him feeling very alone, very sad and sometimes suicidal. He would stay on the phone talking to them.

They have phenomenal teachers who provide the support but they would reach out to him and to the other leaders in the GSA to tell their story. This was very alarming to Richard and I to realize our son was 16 and was getting calls from people who were suicidal.

My biggest thought, as a person who has been active all my life in social issues, is that in 2015 we are expecting our children to do this work. I just cannot tell you how appalling that is that we feel we do not need to make this world accepting for everyone.

We wanted Brenndan to be himself. We want him to live to his potential. We want him to be accepted and respected. We want him to see himself visible in the hallways of the school.

When the year book came out, I looked through it. At grad he did lots of slow dances with his beloved boyfriend but no pictures showed up and no awards were given to the GSA that spent thousands of hours at Scona making sure that everyone was accepted. I thought: Somehow, we're still not there. There is still an "othering" going on.

Father:

The thing we want for our boy is not to just survive, but to thrive, to live in a world that celebrates who he is, every moment, everyday, the same way I want every child in every

school in this city and province to be celebrated. Nothing less, not one... small... micro-millimeter less.

Lauren White

A 16-year-old St. Joseph High School student who described herself as straight

I am actively involved in my school St. Joseph... I love my school. A couple of months ago a friend of mine had posted a link to a Paula Simons, Edmonton Journal article outlining the injustices youth are facing at Archbishop Joseph McNeill School by being denied a GSA at their school.

I read several more articles, sources and studies. I couldn't sleep. An issue like this seems so out of the times. We are in 2015. Why is the issue of support groups for a serious issue being debated when it should be a right.

I started an online petition on Change.org and it has gotten hundreds of signatures and lots of media attention. It states that every school, including Catholic schools like mine, should have a GSA if requested by their students.

I want Bill 10 to be discarded. I believe it is discriminatory and not needed in our schools. I want to see Bill 202 put into legislation. In 2015, an MLA should not even have to propose changes as simple and basic as this. The stats, research and studies say the same thing. GSAs are positive in a school environment.

Anyone can join a GSA. They are not exclusive and they do not only serve LGBTQ students. They provide a foundation for understanding and acceptance for students in all schools, for students with all sexualities. A straight student like myself would benefit from a GSA because I am able to learn how to better support and stand up for my LBGTQ friends.

Maybe (someday) I will come back to St. Josephs and walk down the halls and I would no longer hear things like: "That's SO gay."

Jesus has said: "Love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another."

I believe that GSAs are one of the best ways to act on this teaching especially in an age of discrimination against LGBTQ youth.

Right now in Canada, students only make up 13 per cent of the Canadian population but we do make up 100 per cent of the future.

We need to be healthy and we need our well-being to be placed in top priority. Alberta's schools need GSAs. Please help us.

