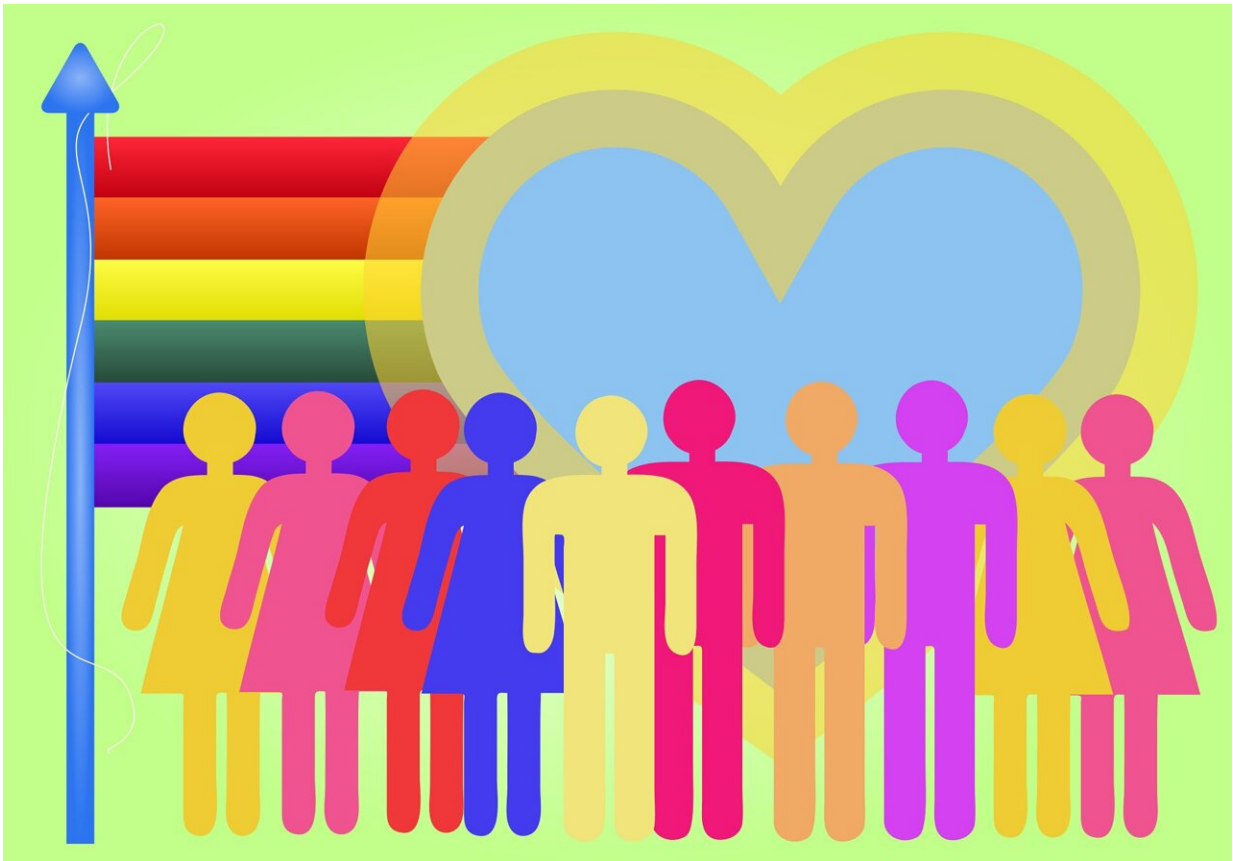


Advocacy by LGBTQ+ school clubs may help combat student depression

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Advocacy by student-led Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA) clubs could help to reduce school-wide disparities in depressive symptoms between LGBTQ+ and heterosexual students, according to a new study.

The findings, published today in the *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, suggest that schools with GSAs (also known as Gay-Straight Alliances) that engage in more advocacy to highlight issues affecting LGBTQ+ students can help to promote well-being among LGBTQ+ youth across the wider school population.

"Discrimination is a major contributor to depression among LGBTQ+ youth. GSAs provide an affirming space in schools for LGBTQ+ youth to access support and work collectively against discrimination that they face," says lead author, Dr. Paul Poteat, Professor of Counseling, Developmental, and Educational Psychology at Boston College.

"Our results suggest that GSA-led advocacy efforts to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ students' experiences and to address discrimination have the potential to reduce disparities in depression between LGBQ students and heterosexual students in the general school population."

GSAs are now in an estimated 44% of [middle schools](#) and high schools across the United States. They are [student](#)-led school clubs that aim to provide a space to socialize, access social-emotional support from peers, and advocate for students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and with other sexual orientation and gender identities (LGBTQ+). GSA advocacy activities often seek to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ issues and counteract bullying and discrimination within the school.

This study included 1,362 students from 23 [secondary schools](#) across Massachusetts who attended schools with GSAs but who were not members of the GSA—89% of whom identified as heterosexual and 11% as LGBQ+. Participants reported their depressive symptoms at the beginning and the end of the school year—and separately, GSA members reported on their group's advocacy efforts over the school year.

The researchers found that:

- LGBQ+ youth reported higher depressive symptoms than heterosexual students at the start of the school year.
- Depression disparities between LGBQ+ students and heterosexual students were smaller at the end of the [school year](#) for students in schools whose GSAs had engaged in more advocacy over the year.

These effects tied to GSA advocacy were still present even after accounting for students' initial depressive symptoms and several other known contributors to youth mental health.

"Our findings further underscore the value of GSAs to promote the well-being of LGBQ+ students—suggesting these groups are a key school-based resource for addressing the [mental health](#) needs of this group," adds co-author Dr. Hirokazu Yoshikawa, Professor from the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development, at New York University.

"GSA advocacy is outward facing and includes efforts to counteract discrimination and bias in schools—factors that often underlie [depressive symptoms](#) in LGBTQ+ youth—which could help to explain why its benefits appear to extend beyond those students who actively participate in these groups."

The authors highlight certain limitations of this study, including a lack of consideration of other school policies and practices such as anti-bullying policies or staff development. Similarly, they were unable to include the involvement of participants in other advocacy activities across the school. Additional research would be needed to consider whether these findings are applicable outside of Massachusetts, as GSA activity and its benefits may vary depending on broader factors, such as the socio-

political context of the school's location.

More information: GSA Advocacy Predicts Reduced Depression Disparities between LGBTQ+ and Heterosexual Youth in Schools, *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/15374416.2023.2169924](https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2023.2169924)

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