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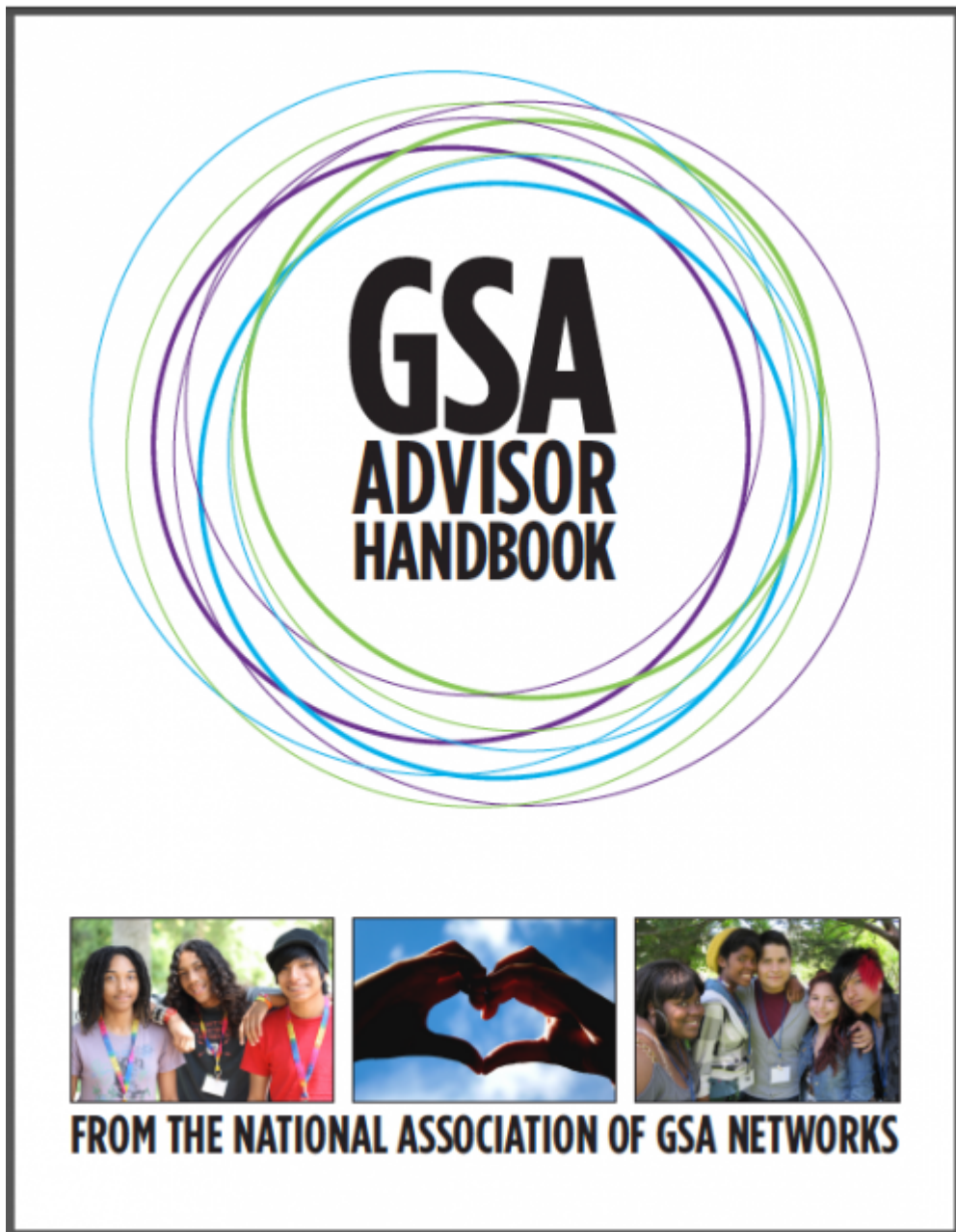
The GSA Advisor Handbook - Hot off the Presses!

Nov. 7, 2011 ? laura

They're dedicated?They're amazing?They're making it better?**They're GSA advisors!**



Advisors play a critical role in the success of GSAs, but there aren't very many resources available to them. Plus, many advisors say "yes" to being an advisor without prior knowledge or training of what the job will entail.



The [National Association](#)

[of GSA Networks](#) [1] had been discussing this gap in resources for advisors for years, and in 2011 they decided to fill it with **The GSA Advisor Handbook**. The handbook contains sections with tools to support advisors including, "Your Role in a GSA?", "What to Do in Your GSA?", and "Sustaining Your GSA Over Time?". It also includes a "Frequent Issues?" section that addresses important questions about religion, talking to school administrators and conflict resolution. The brand new handbook is ready for download at <http://www.gsanetwork.org/advisor-handbook> [2], and National Association members couldn't be more excited.

"This handbook has been a labor of love," wrote Tim Michael, GSA Outreach Manager at [Gay Straight Alliance for Safe Schools](#) [3] in Wisconsin, in the opening letter of the new resource. "Our goal in writing this handbook was to provide new GSA advisors with a basic foundation on which to build, and more seasoned GSA advisors with new ideas and suggestions to take their

students? club to a new level.?

3. Your Role in a GSA

In this section:

- a. Guiding Principles for GSA Advisors
- b. GSA Advisor General Roles
- c. Co-Advisors
- d. Possible Leadership Structures
- e. Facilitation

As a GSA Advisor, you are vital to ensuring that these life-saving clubs not only exist from year to year but that they grow and thrive. Students need guidance in organizing GSA activities and campaigns, mentoring in building the strength of the club, and connection to on-campus and off-campus resources. In many ways, a good advisor is the foundation that the students can build on to have a strong, empowered and effective GSA club that is not only providing a safe place for its members, but that is also transforming the school culture.

Guiding Principles for GSA Advisors

To help guide you in supporting your students as they run their GSA, there are some key principles to remember. As an important ally to GSA leaders, working with these principles will ensure that you help your students succeed. These principles are:

Youth Leadership

Always remember that GSAs exist for students to have a safe place to be themselves and to have an organized way to reduce homophobia and transphobia in their schools. As a student-led club, the GSA must always be directed by students with adults supporting their ideas and leadership. In practice, this means students run their own meetings, set their own agendas, decide which issues they want to learn about and tackle, and make all important decisions. As an adult supporting this process, we know this can be tough for you! However, GSAs work best when students are in the driver's seat and their advisors help them co-pilot the club. Allow yourself to learn from your students and you may be surprised what you'll learn!



Photo by Clay Straight Alliance Network

Youth Empowerment

Making sure that students have the skills and confidence to run their club is a critical part of the work a GSA Advisor does. Building the capacity of students to run their club, think critically, and plan effectively will not only ensure that your GSA is run well, it will also help build the confidence and abilities of your students. In practice, this means you will help students learn how to facilitate their own meetings, how to plan events, and how to speak to adults about their issues and concerns, to name just a few examples. This can also mean as an adult stepping back and letting the students make some mistakes and guiding them to learn from those mistakes.

Building for the Future

As the Advisor, you will be one of the most constant and stable parts of your GSA. Help the current students think, plan and act not just for this school year or the next, but also for many years down the road. Working for social justice in our schools takes time and we need strong, well-led and well-organized GSAs to lead this movement. You can help your students build for the future by raising funds for next year, creating strong structures in the club that will ensure consistent and good student leadership, or creating an archive of GSA records, events, campaigns, and actions so that future leaders have access to the history of your club.

Appropriate Boundaries

As an adult working with youth, it is crucial that you maintain supportive and healthy relationships with the students in your GSA. As you know, school professionals working directly with students are state mandated reporters. Make sure you know what it means to be a mandated reporter in your state. *You may not be able to guarantee confidentiality with your students on a variety of issues including students' sexual activity, risk for harm both self-imposed or imposed by others, suicidal thoughts or behavior, or alcohol and other drug use.* Additionally, make sure you know what your school's policy is on sharing cell phone numbers, personal e-mails, and being "friends" on Facebook and other social networking sites. GSA advisors are often the "cool" teachers; consider what it means to be friendly but not a friend with your students. It is best to let students know and remind them where these boundaries fall so that no miscommunication occurs.

Seven National Association of GSA Networks members from five states wrote the 30-page handbook, with more editing help from member networks along the way. The handbook is the first of its kind and the first ever publication of the National Association.

?I was really excited to be a part of writing a handbook for GSA advisors,? said Michael. ?We have had a lot of advisor turnover in Wisconsin in the past year and this will be an invaluable resource to the people who are stepping into that role. I can't wait to distribute it!?

?What's nice about this handbook is that it answers questions that advisors may not even know to ask,? said Graham Brinklow, Youth Outreach Coordinator for the [Indiana GSA Network](#) [4] at Indiana Youth Group.

5. Sustaining Your GSA Over Time

In this section:

- a. Transitioning Leadership
- b. Fundraising
- c. Documentation

Advisors play a key role in maintaining GSAs and continuing their work. Sometimes GSA activity will ebb and flow based on involvement of the students and the time of year, and advisors can help maintain the GSA by supporting students to be more effective leaders.

Specifically, advisors need to emphasize student leadership in activities that sustain GSAs over time, such as transitioning leadership, fundraising, and documentation. Note: If there is a slump in GSA activity, it is a chance to check-in with GSA officers and ask if they want to revisit the GSA's mission statement.

Transitioning Leadership

As each school year comes to an end, many GSA advisors worry about what will happen to the GSA club once old officers leave. It is important to create a strategy for passing the torch of leadership so that the GSA stays strong for future years. Regardless of your club's leadership structure, current student leaders have a short-term goal every year of finding a reliable and passionate group of individuals to lead the club.

Here are some suggestions for your student leaders to transition the leadership. Remember that it is important that you support your students as they learn how to do the transition themselves!

Structure of Your GSA

Encourage students to share leadership so that younger members can build their leadership skills. Some ideas include:

- Rotate who facilitates your GSA meetings
- Hold regular officer meetings



- Have a co-officer system. Plan elections early for old/new officer overlap and possibilities for co-facilitators

Good communication between officers ensures that leadership transitions will be smoother and easier.

Training

No one is born a leader. We all need help and training to get there. Encourage students to run a GSA Training Day or attend leadership summits with local organizations. Some things to train the GSA on are:

- Facilitation
- Days of Action
- Campaigns
- How Your School Works
- Students' Legal Rights
- Planning Events
- Coalition Building

Resources/Documents

Keeping a Resource Binder can be helpful while trying to manage a lot of different activities. Important things to include in the binder:

- Local and national resources (<http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources>)
- GSA Constitution
- GSA Mission Statement
- Past Meeting Agendas
- Ground Rules for meetings
- Past Event Planning Sheets
- Past Flyers
- All School Policies and Complaint Forms
- Old Officer Contact Information
- Officers' Statements: These are written summaries of how the year went for the GSA, written by all the officers. It includes what the GSA did, successes, challenges, areas for improvement, and incomplete projects. Over time, these statements will record the history of the GSA.

Daniel Ramos, Program Manager for the [Colorado GSA Network](#) [5] at One Colorado, got an early look at the handbook in August of 2011 when he was a part of the editing process. "In their role as advisors, school staff are looking for tools, resources, and best practices to partner with students to build and sustain active GSAs," Ramos explained. "The GSA Advisor Handbook will help the Colorado GSA Network support advisors in their efforts to create safe, supportive, and inclusive schools for LGBT and allied students."

Now that the handbook is finished, National Association members will distribute this resource throughout their own GSA networks everywhere from Hawaii to Alabama, Tennessee to Vermont. And we hope that this resource will be useful for those advisors who do not have the support of a GSA network in their region or state.

To download the GSA Advisor Handbook and learn more about it, visit

[www.gsanetwork.org/advisor-handbook](https://gsanetwork.org/advisor-handbook) [2].

To learn more about the National Association of GSA Networks, visit

[www.gsanetwork.org/get-involved/change-nation/national-association-gsa-networks](https://gsanetwork.org/get-involved/change-nation/national-association-gsa-networks) [1].

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Links

[1] <https://gsanetwork.org/get-involved/change-nation/national-association-gsa-networks>

[2] <https://gsanetwork.org/advisor-handbook>

[3] <http://www.gsaforsafeschools.com>

[4] <http://www.indianayouthgroup.org>

[5] <http://www.one-colorado.org>