

LGBTQ club formally approved at LUHS

LUHS board voted to approve Gender & Sexuality Alliance as an official club Jan. 24, but requested changes in its bylaws took two more months

By Kelly Holm
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

More than three years ago, students at Lakeland Union High School unofficially established a Gender & Sexuality Alliance (GSA) to advocate for and support the LGBTQ community at their school.

"This group will work towards creating a positive and inclusive school community, where all students feel welcome and supported, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity," reads the webpage for the LUHS GSA, which also contains links to resources such as the Trevor Project, local mental health support and an academic study about the experiences of LGBTQ youth in rural areas.

In order for an LUHS club to be granted formal status, it must either be education-based and following an existing curriculum or come with the chance to compete against similar clubs from other schools, according to a school policy last revised in 2015. Additionally, a club must have existed for two years unofficially in order to become eligible for funding and transportation.

Formal approval

At the high school's Jan. 24 school board meeting, club members and advisers asked the board to approve formal status, and requested funds to attend the Northwoods Pride Festival at Nicolet

College and a state conference for GSA student officers in Madison. Five students in the club, which has a regular attendance of about 30 members, are officers.

"It would be nice for our officers to go to that and learn more about what's going on for advocacy, and different opportunities that we can bring back here," GSA adviser Amanda Lade told the board. "Just all kinds of opportunities that our students need, that this area seems to lack for that group of students."

The board voted 5-4 to approve the LUHS GSA, but requested changes in the club's bylaws in order to finalize the process — namely, to specify that GSA was a club for students, not faculty and staff, and to clarify whether GSA would be affiliated with a national organization.

"Section 3 of your proposal talks about (how) the membership is open to LUHS ... it talks about the students and employees," board treasurer Pamela Carroll said. "I'm not aware of any employees in any of our other formal clubs, that are members of the club."

LUHS art teacher Leah Trojan clarified that advisers are considered voting members of Wisconsin student councils, the organization which she advises.

"The way our student council is set up, I am considered a member and a voting party of student council," Trojan said. "When we vote for officers for membership, I vote, too."

Board vice president Barb Peck asked whether LUHS GSA was to be a representative of a national movement, since she understood that GSA took inspiration from the LGBTQ student advocacy organization GLSEN, while board clerk Heidi Fink questioned the choice of the word "alliance," though it is a common and generally accepted name for school LGBTQ organizations.

"Alliance, by definition, simply means commu-

nity coming together for the mutual benefit," LUHS counselor Sadie Vendl, the club's other adviser, said.

Board member Barry Seidel continued the critique of the language in the proposed bylaws.

"You use words like combat, like alliance, things that could be construed as divisive or polarizing. And I think that you need to take a strong look at that," Seidel said, further suggesting that the club should be "for all views on this topic. As well as promoting an increasing knowledge and awareness of the LGBTQ (community), also the other side of it and the opposing views, so that the content and the structure of the club is balanced."

Funding for adviser stipends and bus transportation for two trips was approved with the club's formal recognition.

Board critiques GLSEN

At the Feb. 28 LUHS board meeting, references to GLSEN and to employee and staff participation were still in GSA bylaws despite the board's request that they be removed, according to Peck.

"We asked for two changes to occur. One was to eliminate any references to staff and employees. That's still in there," Peck said. "Also, any reference to the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN's former name), and that's still in there."

Vendl said that she didn't think GLSEN was referenced by name in the previous month's draft of the bylaws, and that the club has added it in order to demonstrate the "existing curriculum" aspect of the formal approval process. Peck, however, was leery that citing GLSEN might convey approval of all of the national organization's views.

"I realize that this gets into controversial

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LGBTQ

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things. And it's not that I don't support your club, I very definitely do," she said. "But when you start looking into the national organization itself ... they are wanting school districts to adopt their resources."

Peck cited picture books GLSEN recommended for teaching elementary students about gender identity and pronouns, while Vendl said she only intended to incorporate the organization's curriculum geared toward grades 9-12.

Activities coordinator Emily Mallek said that it would be fine if GSA used GLSEN as its sample curriculum, even if it was not explicitly referenced in the club's bylaws.

As for faculty and staff, Vendl said, "they may not be members, but there's certain professional development pieces that GSA might promote to help create inclusive classrooms throughout the building."

"I guess we've never had a club do that kind of thing before," Carroll said, while Fink suggested that membership should be specified as being for current LUHS students, landing the club a third month as an LUHS board agenda item.

Third time the charm?

After revisions to the bylaws specified membership criteria and eliminated reference to GLSEN, the board approved them. Several community members spoke during public comment, though, with a variety of appraisals.

Craig Holmquist of Lake Tomahawk expressed concern about a Trans Youth Council proclamation found in the GSA Advisor Handbook — published by the GSA Network, an organization separate from GLSEN — which contained anti-police sentiments.

"I don't know if there's police officers or sheriffs here, but I have a hard time with money going to that point," Holmquist said. "I am aware, and I think that needs to go into deci-

sion-making."

Mallek later told *The Lakeland Times* that the LUHS GSA did not use the aforementioned handbook, nor was GSA Network an organization they had any affiliation with or included among their online resources.

Therese Schmidt opined about the importance of faculty and staff support, saying the board's previous insistence against their mention in the bylaws bothered her.

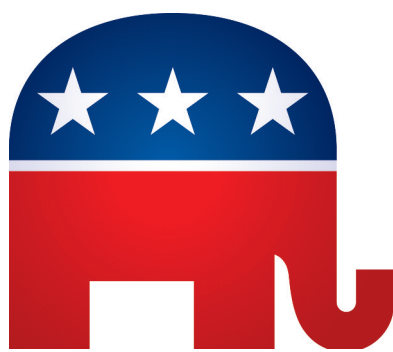
"Faculty and staff are typically urged to participate, to come to basketball games, to go to music concerts," Schmidt said. "These students are advocating for themselves and their right to a safe environment."

For LUHS junior Jonah Gilbert, the GSA vice president, standing up for his club was brief but bona fide.

"(I'm here) to advocate and represent my club, and thank the school board for creating a space for our club to flourish," he said.

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