

How Inclusive Policies and GSAs Shape Schools and Empower LGBTQ+ Students



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An Introductory Background

- Psychologist by training, in schools of education, 20 years of work with schools to support LGBTQ+ students
- Multi-disciplinary team of practitioners and researchers in education, public health, psychology, social work

The Present School Context for LGBTQ+ Youth

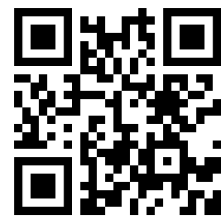
- Schools have a dual responsibility to promote learning and ensure wellbeing
- LGBTQ+ youth face discrimination in schools and oppressive legislation targeting schools

The Present School Context for LGBTQ+ Youth

- Could focus on characterizing policies, reviewing harassment trends, detailing their negative effects...



**ACLU: LGBTQ+
legislation tracker**



**Trans-specific
legislation tracker**



**Pollock & Yoshikawa
Florida policies report**



**Myers et al.
meta-analysis**

- *...but I won't.*

The Present School Context for LGBTQ+ Youth

- Cannot eclipse that schools are where LGBTQ+ youth *access peer and adult support, resources*
 Even in otherwise hostile schools, districts, states
- Must also attend to affirming policies, practices, youth-led efforts

An Inclusive School Context for LGBTQ+ Youth

**Gender-Sexuality
Alliances
(GSAs)**

**Inclusive Policy
Implementation**

A Snapshot of this Presentation

- What GSAs do, and how they facilitate empowerment, wellbeing, and learning
- How inclusive policies and GSAs promote affirming schools

The Aims of GSAs and Similar Groups



What do GSAs do?

How many are there?

The Aims of GSAs and Similar Groups

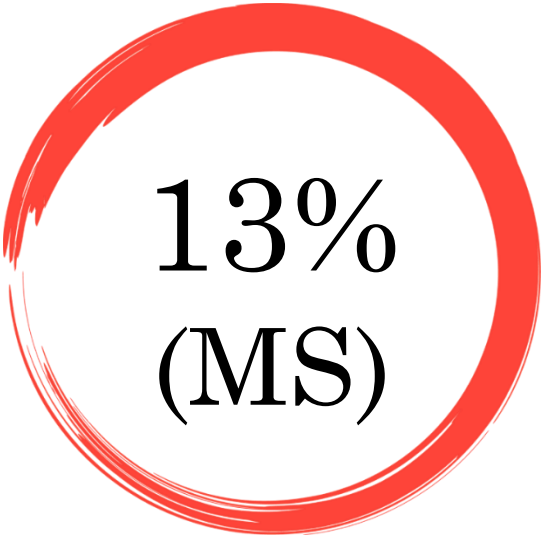


The Aims of GSAs and Similar Groups

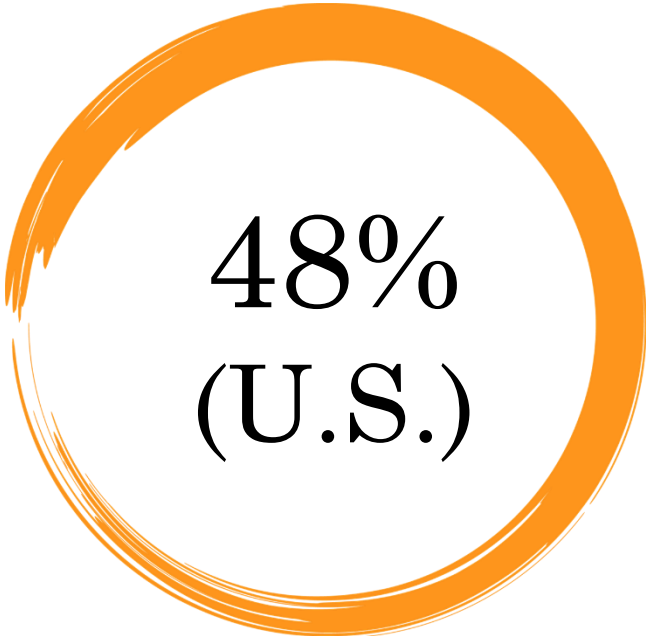


Presence of GSAs in Secondary Schools

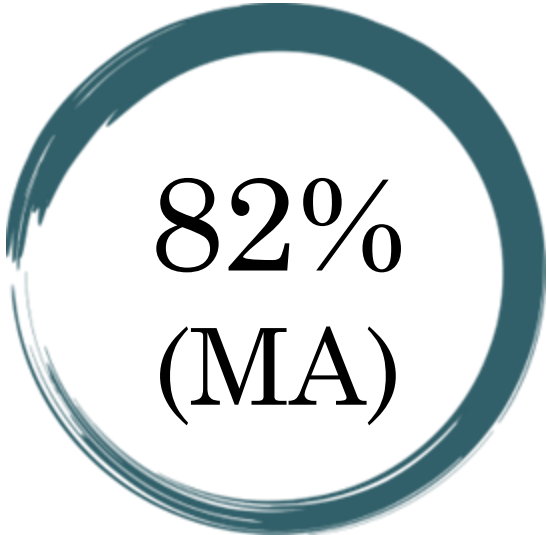
- From CDC 2022 School Health Profiles

A red circular graphic with a thick, hand-drawn style border.

13%
(MS)

An orange circular graphic with a thick, hand-drawn style border.

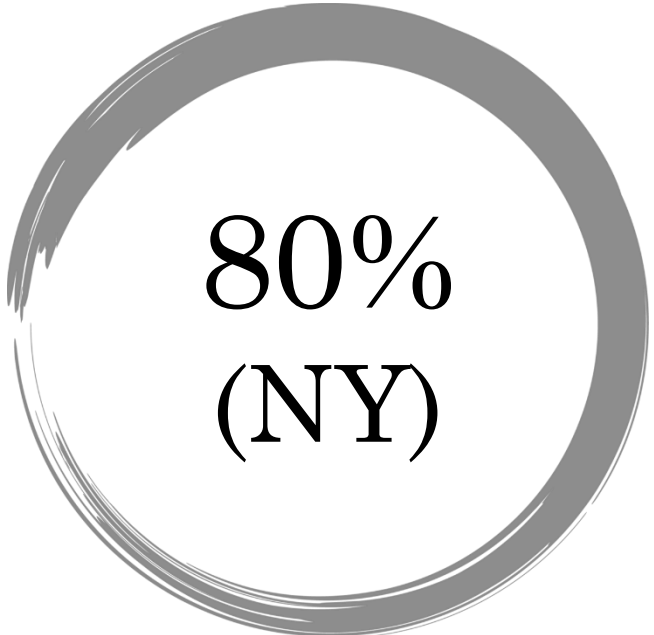
48%
(U.S.)

A teal circular graphic with a thick, hand-drawn style border.

82%
(MA)

Presence of GSAs in Secondary Schools

- From CDC 2022 School Health Profiles



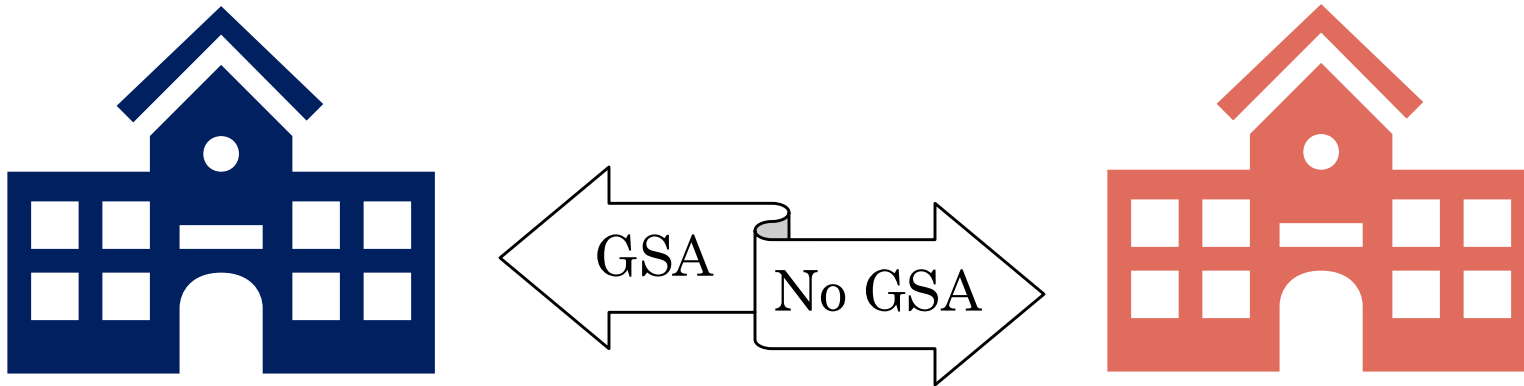
80%
(NY)

Estimated 80% of NY secondary schools

GSAs and Student Safety, Wellbeing



GSA presence is associated with greater safety, wellbeing



The Importance of GSA Presence

GSA presence speaks to

the importance of access



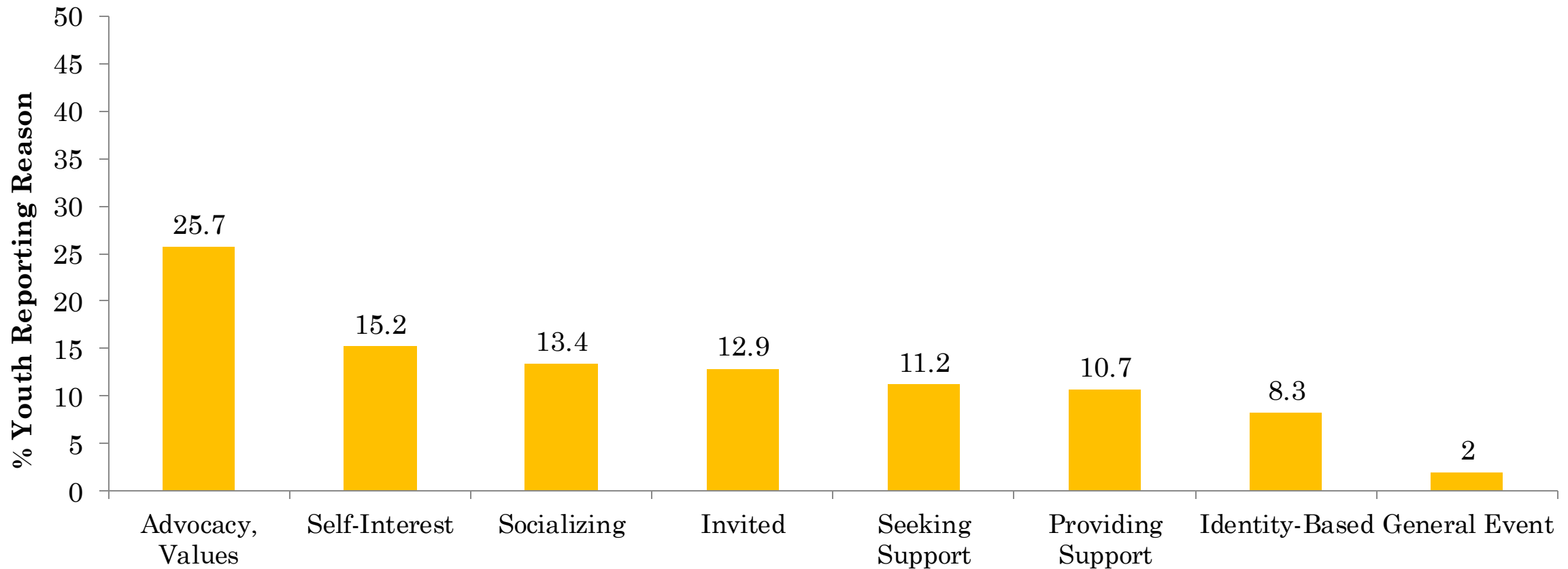
Historically and now, GSAs have faced pushback and hostility

From Presence to Experience

Youth join for different reasons and differ in their experiences

Members are diverse in how their needs, strengths, and backgrounds shape their lives

Primary Reasons Why Youth Joined a GSA



{ Data are taken from a survey of 448 youth in 48 GSAs across Massachusetts in 2012 }

Primary Reasons Why Youth Joined a GSA



{ Data are taken from a survey of 448 youth in 48 GSAs across Massachusetts in 2012 }

How are GSAs Run...Usually?

Meeting Up

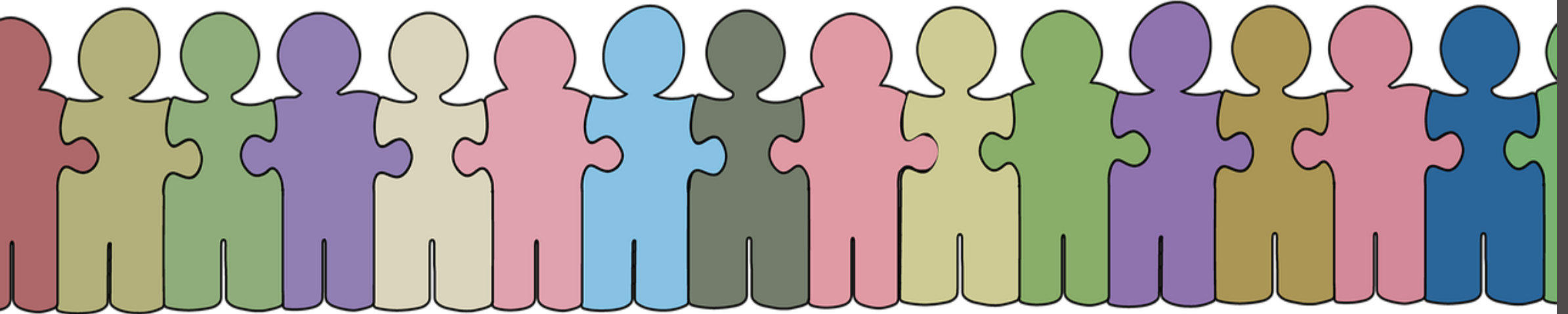
- ▶ Weekly or biweekly up to 1hr
- ▶ Lunch, elective, after school

Getting Going

- ▶ Activities, discussions, planning
- ▶ Youth led, advisor supported
- ▶ Some structure, agenda

Youth and Advisor Roles in GSAs

Aspire to be youth led, advisor supported*



Youth and Advisor Roles in GSAs



What responsibilities
and roles do youth,
advisors take?

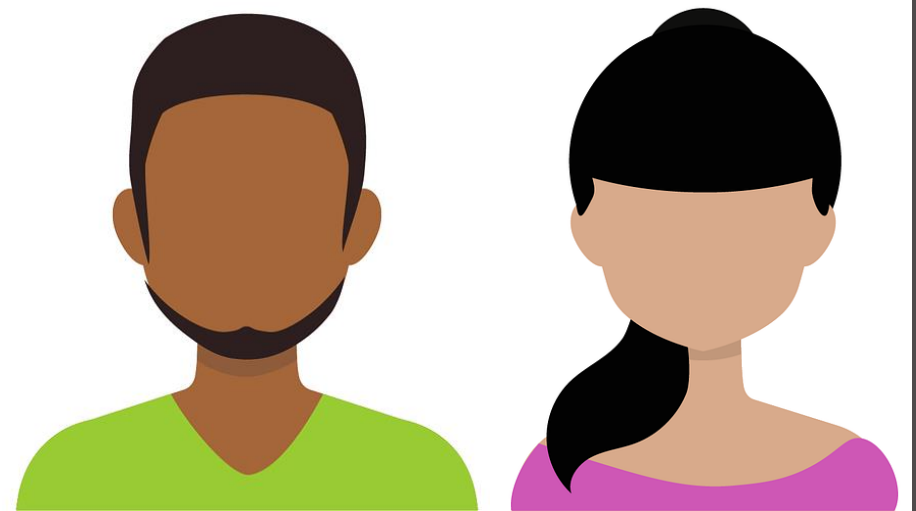
Youth Leadership and Responsibilities

- Choosing agenda, discussion topics
- Formalized positions
(president, media specialist, treasurer)
- Co-facilitate meetings
- Tasks for events



Advisor Leadership and Responsibilities

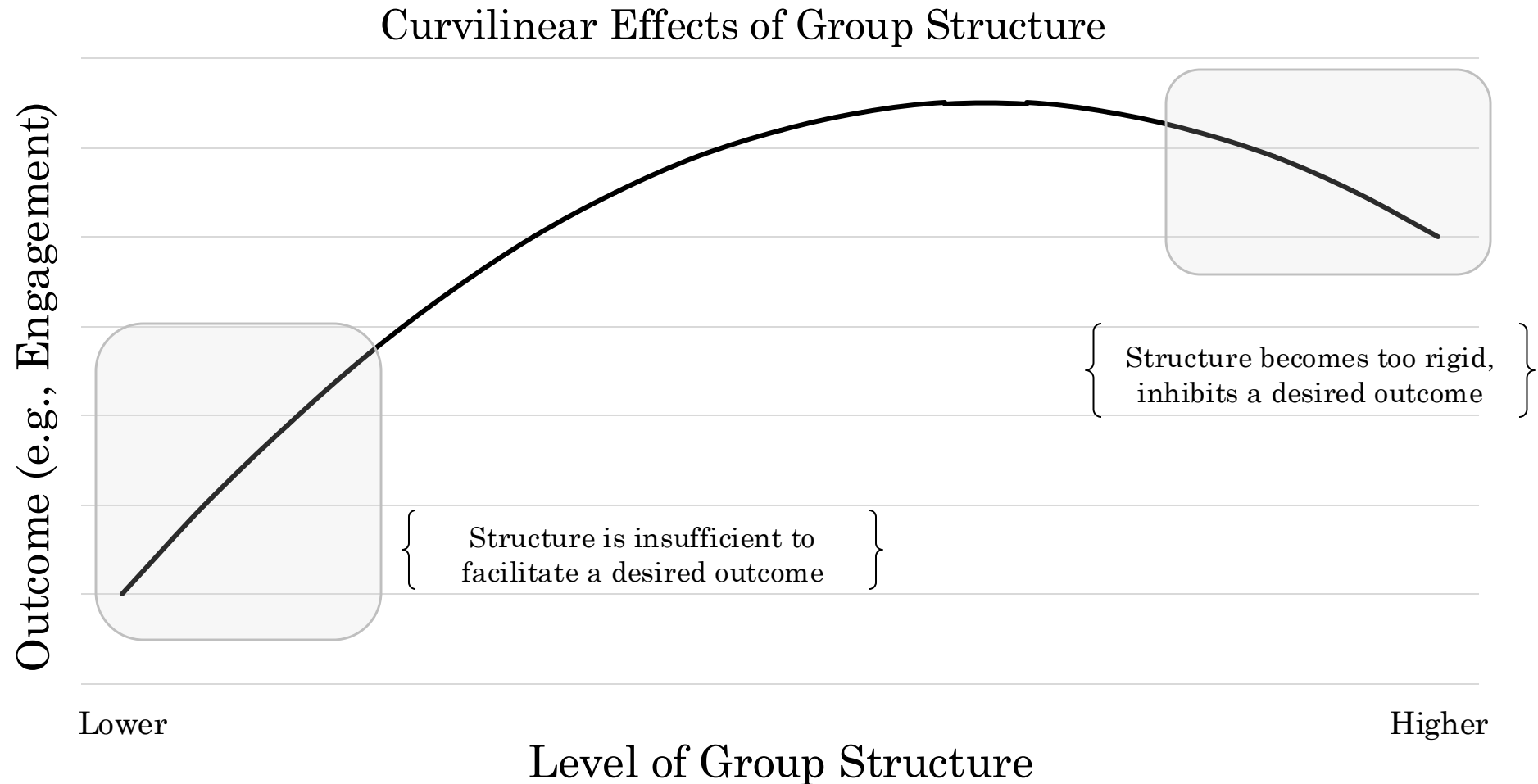
- Historical memory, institutional knowledge, continuity
- Liaison to other school/district personnel
- Scaffolding
- Social-emotional support



Benefits of *Sufficient* Structure

- Sufficient structure is a key element of successful youth programs
 - Meeting agendas, (co-)facilitators, check-ins and follow-ups
- Associated with engagement, sense of agency, advocacy

Benefits of *Sufficient* Structure



What Does an “Ideal” GSA Look Like?

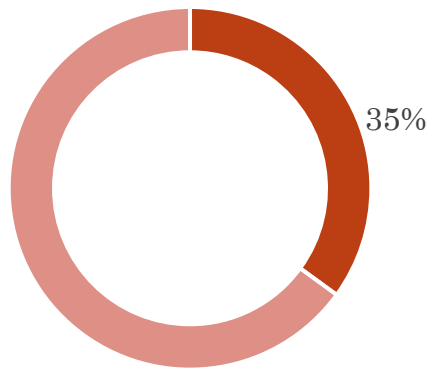
- Responsive to members’ needs, interests, strengths
- Meaningful leadership opportunities for youth
- Meeting consistency, continuity



GSAs as Settings for Health Promotion

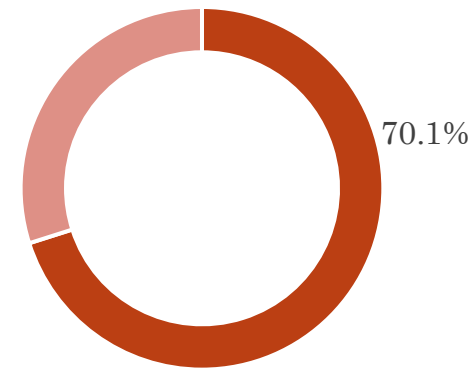
- Are there mental health needs among GSA members?

Probable Mild Depression: Classes



■ Above Threshold ■ Below Threshold

Probable Mild Depression: GSAs



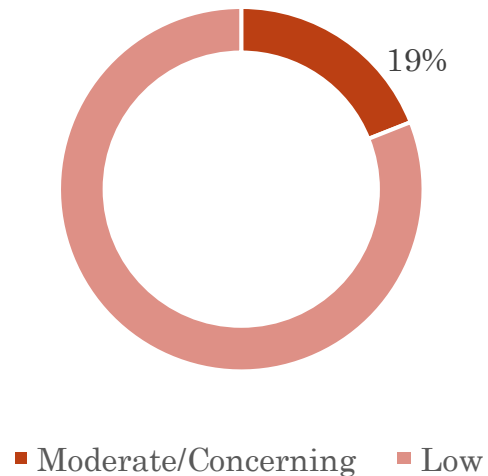
■ Above Threshold ■ Below Threshold

{ Data are taken from surveys of youth in 23 schools/GSAs across Massachusetts }

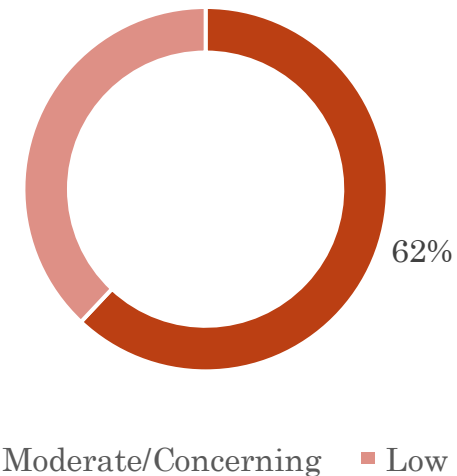
GSAs as Settings for Health Promotion

- Are there mental health needs among GSA members?

Moderate/Concerning Anxiety: Classes

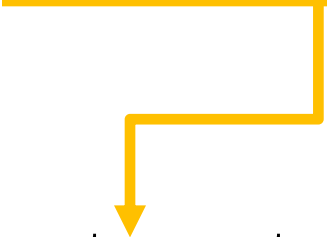


Moderate/Concerning Anxiety: GSAs



{ Data are taken from surveys of youth in 23 schools/GSAs across Massachusetts }

How do GSAs Promote Health?

- Greater engagement may promote youth's health
through a process of empowerment
- Gained sense of confidence, agency to set and achieve goals
- Relational, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral

How do GSAs Promote Health?

- Greater engagement may promote youth's health
through a process of empowerment

**Here,
indicated by**

Peer validation
Social justice self-efficacy
Hope

{ Data are taken from surveys at beginning/end of school year from 580 youth in 38 GSAs across Massachusetts }

How do GSAs Promote Wellbeing?



Sense of Hope

Perceived Peer Validation

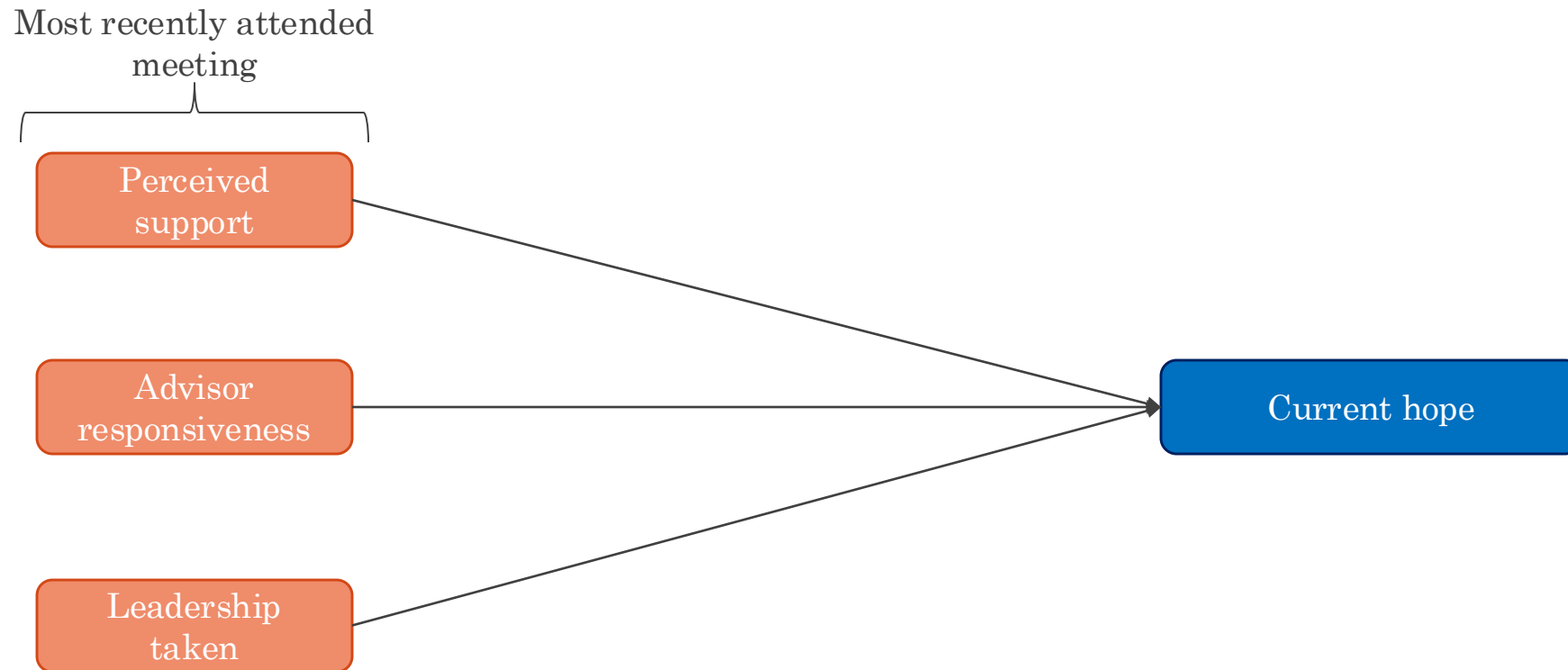
Self-Efficacy to Promote
Justice

Hope as Resilience through Oppression

Hope is a marker of resilience, and a means to heal from oppression

{ Positive future-orientation, belief in our ability to identify and achieve goals, agency to persist through obstacles }

GSA Experiences that Promote Hope



{ Data taken from 8-week weekly diary survey of 94 GSA members across U.S. }

How do GSAs Promote Wellbeing, Learning?

Experiences
in the GSA



Social-Emotional
Wellbeing



Academic
Engagement

GSA peer support

GSA advisor support

Youth leadership in GSA

Sense of Hope

School Belonging

Positive Affect

Negative Affect

Academic Engagement

Advocacy in the Current Moment

- A means to resist oppression, counteract discrimination
- A form of active, engaged citizenship tied to beneficial outcomes (solidarity, empowerment, wellbeing)...
- ...that can also carry risks, costs (burnout, backlash, pressure)

Advocacy in GSAs

- GSAs provide space for advocacy and awareness-raising

Events to commemorate, celebrate, or raise awareness

Presentations or workshops for adults and peers

Protests against anti-LGBTQ+ policies, practices

Petitioning for inclusive LGBTQ+ policies, practices

Displays or announcements or social media posts

What Coincides with and Predicts Advocacy?



What Coincides with and Predicts Advocacy?



For tnb-LGBQ+ *and* cis-LGBQ+ youth, **leadership** coincided with more advocacy

What Coincides with and Predicts Advocacy?



TNB-LGBQ+ youth reported **more victimization** when doing more advocacy, but *not* cis-LGBQ+ youth

What Coincides with and Predicts Advocacy?



For cis-LGBQ+ youth, **sexual orientation outness** predicted more advocacy (no effect for tnb-LGBQ+ youth)

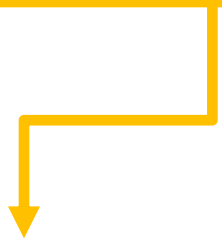
What Coincides with and Predicts Advocacy?



For tnb-LGBQ+ youth, **gender identity outness** predicted *less* advocacy

Supporting & Respecting Advocacy Decisions

- Trans/nonbinary LGBTQ+ youth and cisgender LGBTQ+ youth
 - May *weigh certain factors differently* in making decisions
 - May *experience advocacy differently*



- Victimization coincided with advocacy for tnb-LGBTQ+ youth
 - Many discriminatory policies expressly target gender
 - Need to discuss risks *prior to* and offer support *during* advocacy

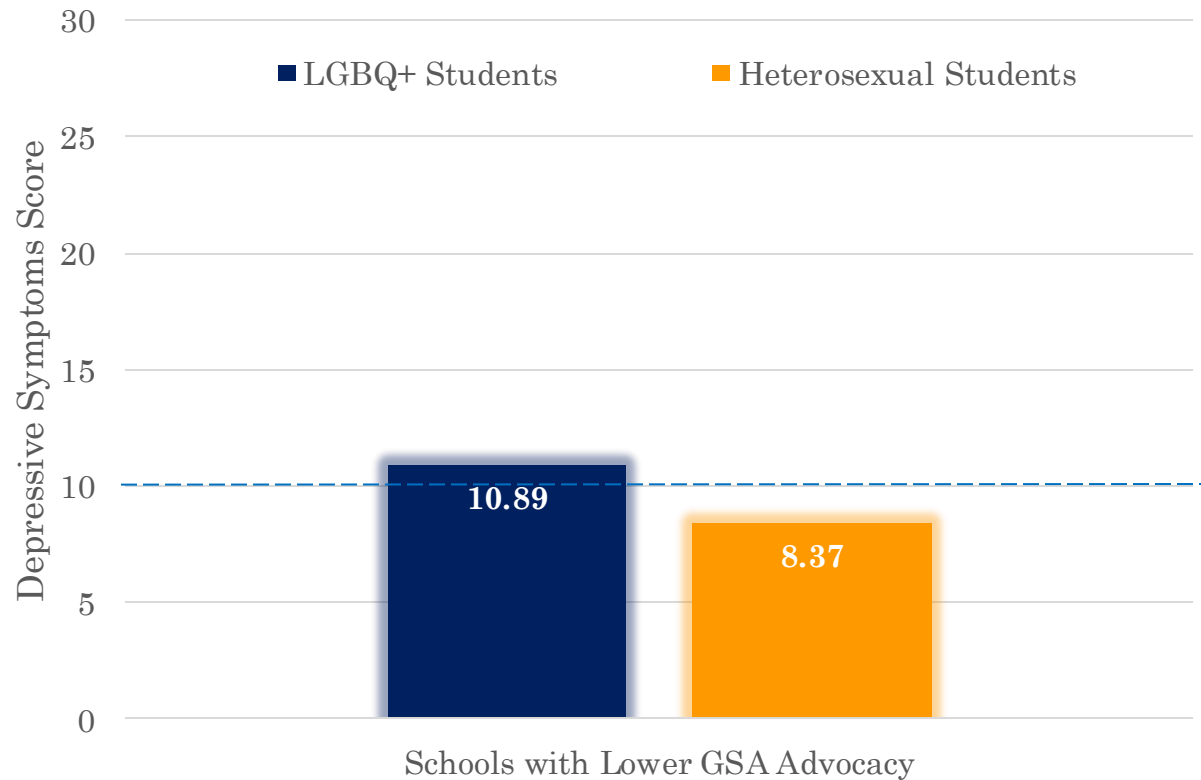
Supporting & Respecting Advocacy Decisions

- Sexual orientation identity outness for cis-LGBQ+ youth
 - Advocacy can bring elevated visibility
 - Youth more out may have felt more capable to take on greater roles
- Gender identity outness for tnb-LGBQ+ youth
 - Recall that victimization coincided with advocacy for tnb-LGBQ+ youth

School-Wide Benefits of Advocacy

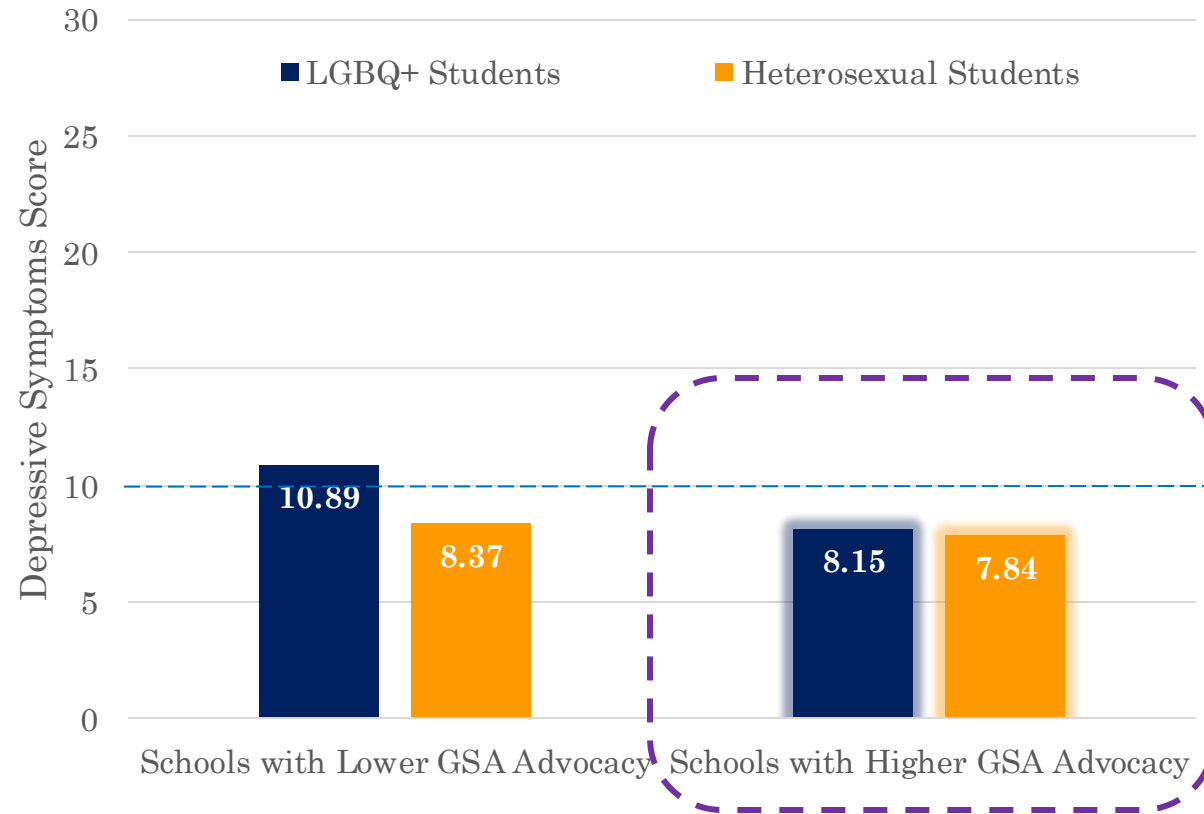
- Does GSA advocacy carry benefits...
...for students *not* in the GSA?
- Advocacy efforts **could reduce disparities in depression** by improving conditions for LGBTQ+ youth in the school at large

School-Wide Benefits of Advocacy



A significant difference in depression symptoms for students in schools whose GSAs reported **low advocacy**

School-Wide Benefits of Advocacy



Difference was *not significant* for students in schools whose GSAs reported **high advocacy**

LGBTQ+ Inclusive School Policies, Practices

- Students attending schools with inclusive policies report greater safety, wellbeing

Inclusive curricula

Enumerated anti-bullying policies

Professional development for school staff

Use of name, pronouns specified by students

LGBTQ+ Inclusive School Policies, Practices

- LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices can...

Raise visibility of LGBTQ+ communities, social issues

Affirm LGBTQ+ students

Signal commitment to protect LGBTQ+ students

More than Having Policies “On the Books”

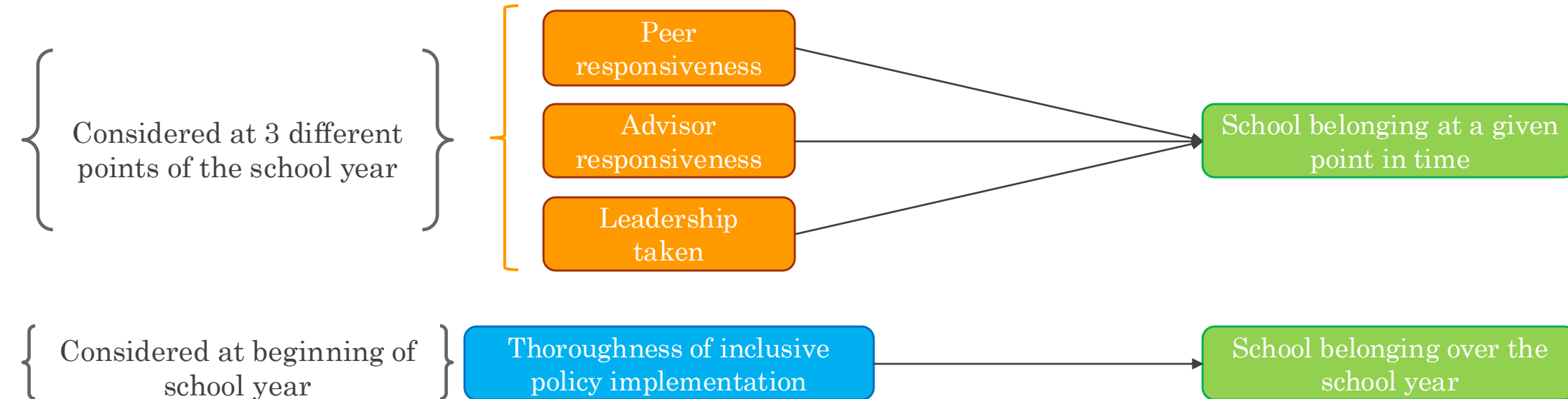
- Adopting policies is *one step* in their implementation
- **Thoroughness of implementation** can depend on...
 - Resources, guidance, PD for implementing policies
 - Support, hostility, or pushback within/outside of school

Inclusive Policies and Academic Engagement

- LGBTQ+ youth in *schools that more thoroughly implement inclusive policies* report greater academic engagement over the school year
- Policies could promote engagement, directly or indirectly
 - With relevant and representative materials
 - May reduce hypervigilance or class avoidance

The Contribution of GSAs *and* Inclusive Policies

- GSA experiences, inclusive policies predict greater school belonging



The Contribution of GSAs *and* Inclusive Policies

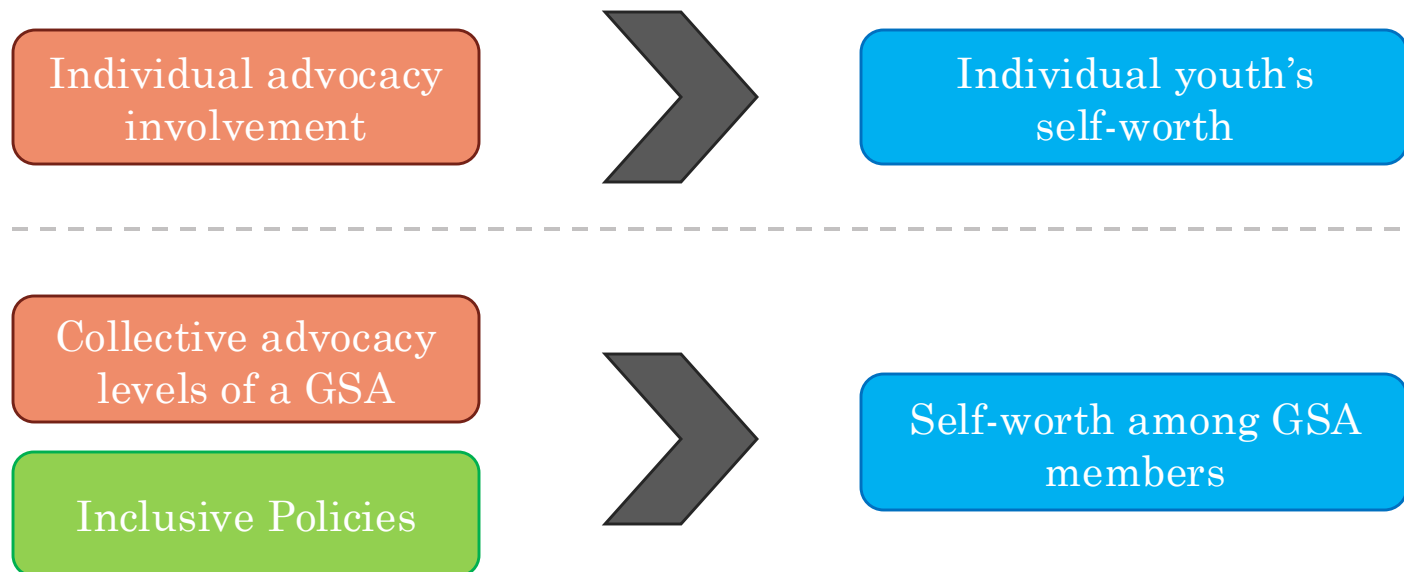
Self-Worth

Our sense of value as a person and deservingness of love and belonging

»»» An essential counterpoint to stigma and shame—a sense of *unworthiness* of love and belonging

The Contribution of GSAs *and* Inclusive Policies

- Advocacy and attending schools that more thoroughly implement inclusive policies *predict self-worth*



Considered at 3 different
points of the school year
among 627 youth in
51 GSAs in MA, NY, CA

The Contribution of GSAs *and* Inclusive Policies

- Engaging in advocacy, awareness-raising to affirm others could reinforce youth's own sense of worth
- Youth could benefit from peers who engage in advocacy, **beyond what comes from their own advocacy**

The Contribution of GSAs *and* Inclusive Policies

- **Implementing policies with fidelity** can affirm and signal adult commitment to protect LGBTQ+ youth
- Important for **youth and adults to work collectively** to shape schools into spaces that promote thriving for LGBTQ+ youth

For more information:

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