

SUPPORTING STUDENTS IN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

CCSSA's LIFE Framework

"Living Inclusion Faithfully for Everyone"

A. BACKGROUND

Catholic Schools share a foundational belief that all children are loved by God, are individually unique and that the school has a mission to help each student to fulfill their God-given potential in all aspects of their person: physically, academically, socially, morally and spiritually.

Alberta's Catholic school districts are responsible for creating a Catholic faith community, which provides education for all students within the Catholic tradition. The authenticity of each school's faith community is determined by its adherence to the faith under the collective leadership of the teachers, administrators, clerical advisors, and all other adults within the school. It is the task of those individuals to integrate the faith into every program and aspect of their Catholic school. Parents and guardians, the primary educators of children, entrust their children to Catholic schools so that they may flourish and be pastorally nurtured as they learn the subjects in the Alberta curriculum.

To provide guidance to the Catholic school faith community, in order that it may act in accord with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, Alberta's Catholic Bishops have provided the *Pastoral Guideline for the LIFE Framework* in 2018 to support the faithfulness of the *LIFE Framework*. This Guideline provides an explanation in accordance with the episcopal teaching role described in Canon Law, Can. 806 §1, and is fundamental to the understanding and application of the *LIFE Framework*. The *Pastoral Guideline* consists of a thematic overview, followed by some practical and more specific guidance for the development of policy and administrative guidelines regarding the establishment of student-led organizations and activities in Catholic schools as well as information about discerning conflict resolution to further positive relationships between all partners in Catholic Education.

B. COMMITMENT TO THE LIFE FRAMEWORK

Catholic Schools are committed to using the *Pastoral Guideline for the LIFE Framework* (2018) and the *LIFE Framework* (2015, revised 2018 & 2019) to inform the creation and operation of student groups and activities which seek to promote student inclusion within the schools and, in fidelity to Catholic teachings, eliminates all forms of bullying including - but not restricted to - harassment and discrimination with regard to sexual orientation and gender identity; and to promote justice, respectful relationships and language within Catholic schools.

C. NAMING OF LIFE FRAMEWORK STUDENT GROUPS AND ACTIVITIES

Students may select a respectful and inclusive name for the LIFE group or activity after consulting with the principal. The principal will adhere to the *Education Act*, s.35.1 (3)

D. WHO MIGHT BE SERVED BY LIFE FRAMEWORK STUDENT GROUPS / ACTIVITIES

- All students

E. GUIDELINES FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF STUDENTS GROUPS AND ACTIVITIES

These Guidelines will be interpreted and applied so as to be in concert with the *Pastoral Guideline for the LIFE Framework* (2018).

Some students, especially those with same sex attractions, and those who identify with different genders, as well as those who experience discrimination or isolation based on body image, race, culture, language, performance in school, social anxiety/lack of social connection, or other individual attributes, may be at-risk in schools. Therefore, every school is required to respond to establish student groups and/or activities when there is a student request.

When students wish to establish a group or hold an activity, it is important to determine the nature of the request and how best to meet the expressed needs. 'What are you looking for?' Through conversations with students, the purpose for the group needs to be identified, so it can be properly structured within the guidelines. Flexibility and responsiveness, based on needs, are critical. Student groups may be established for the following purposes:

Advocacy

- To support a faithful vision of an inclusive Catholic school

Peer support

- To foster and support the individual student and inclusion within the Catholic school

In each type of group, issues that result in discrimination and bullying may be addressed, including, but not limited to:

- Sexual orientation
- Gender identity
- Gender
- Body image
- Race, culture or language
- Performance in school
- Social rejection, peer acceptance

General norms also govern all types of student groups. Groups shall:

- Support the mission, vision and core religious values of the school and the school jurisdiction
- Reflect the philosophy and theology of communion and emphasize inclusion, hospitality, respect, justice and religious fidelity.

Since each type of group addresses different needs (advocacy, peer support), specific guidelines and additional norms follow.

Advocacy Groups

Purpose

- To advocate in the Catholic tradition against all forms of discrimination and/or behaviours that cause students to feel isolated and not included.
- To provide students who experience discrimination and isolation, the opportunity to engage with other students so as to support them and to engage in anti-discriminatory activities.
- To empower students to use their unique God-given gifts for the benefit of furthering a more just community for everyone.
- To discuss issues that cause harm to young people in society.

Norms

- Ensure the student groups are led by trained Catholic facilitators and assisted, when possible, by counselors, chaplains or social workers.
- Be open to exploration of a variety of issues, including sexual orientation, gender identity, bullying, discrimination, justice, and respectful relationships and language from the Catholic tradition.
- Ensure advocacy efforts are directed against all forms of bullying and discrimination.

Activities

- Exploring how inclusive practices enhance the lives of all within the school's faith community.
- Sponsoring activities throughout the school year to address these areas (i.e. bullying awareness week activities, peer advocacy, guest speakers, and frequent liaison with the school principal).
- Promoting social justice activities to address needs locally, nationally or internationally.

Peer Support Groups

Purpose

- To provide students who experience discrimination, isolation, and a lack of feeling included in their school community or society an opportunity to meet with other students who offer their support through facilitated discussions. To support students experiencing a variety of challenges related to, but not restricted to, feelings of belonging, self-worth, identity, and friendship.
- To support marginalized students suffering from bullying, and/or social exclusion based on gender, sexual orientation, culture, size, physical or academic ability, or other criteria.
- To support students who may be experiencing challenges related to their sexuality (e.g. how to talk to parents, friends, etc.).

Norms

- Ensure that student groups are led by trained Catholic facilitators and assisted, when possible, by counselors, chaplains or social workers, as appropriate.
- Ensure boundaries, related to personal privacy and confidentiality, prior to the discussion of any topic, so members do not feel pressured to make personal disclosures.
- If a student discloses information to a staff member, regarding her or his sexual orientation or gender identity, it is important to respect the student's right to confidentiality subject to the necessity to protect the safety of the student and others.
- Be sensitive to the safety of all students who are at risk.
- Do not label or discuss students who are not members.
- Consider inviting students to develop additional norms and procedures with the facilitator carefully guiding this process.
- Ensure all normal group processes, as understood and practiced by Catholic school counselors, are followed.
- If individuals are experiencing mental health issues, and/or are 'at-risk', to provide individual counselling support, separate from the group, to best support this student and maintain privacy and confidentiality.

Activities

- Exploring those areas with staff facilitators where inclusion could be improved (e.g. student group discussions as per "norms" outlined through the leadership of the facilitator).

F. FACILITATION OF STUDENT GROUPS/ACTIVITIES:

- The principal shall designate a Catholic teacher(s) to facilitate all LIFE groups/activities.
- As faith guides, strengthening every aspect of Catholic education, facilitators integrate prayer, scripture, and Catholic teaching (e.g. 'the dignity of the human person' and 'a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable') into their discussions as appropriate. The groups will be permeated in a manner consistent with all Catholic school programming.
- The principal shall ensure the facilitator(s) receives in-service or information on both relevant Catholic teachings and the facilitation of group discussion.
- At the principal's discretion, if the school has a counsellor, social worker, Family School Liaison Worker (FSLW), chaplain or a staff member with a similar designation, that staff member should co-facilitate.
- The facilitator(s) shall attend every meeting.

G. INFORMING PARENTS ABOUT LIFE FRAMEWORK STUDENT GROUPS:

The *Alberta Bill of Rights*, s.1 (g) recognizes that parents have the right to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children. The eighth paragraph of the preamble to the *Education Act*, recognizes parent's rights and responsibility to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children.

The following two step process is recommended to advise parents regarding the formation of student groups/organizations:

Step 1 – A general notice is provided to the school community (included in each school's student handbook) that students may be organizing groups or clubs at the school in the future based on interest or need, and notifying parents that human sexuality topics may be addressed within the groups or clubs.

Step 2 – If a new student group or club is established in a school, as in Step 1, notification of the establishment of the group or club is sent to all parents (not naming any students involved in the group or club). This notification will include a statement that it is the parents who are responsible for discussing with their child the purpose and nature of the club, whether their child wishes to become a member, and their child's obligation to contribute to a welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging. Parents will be invited to discuss with the school administration all aspects of student groups, clubs, and activities excepting that the names of student members will not be provided.

Reference: Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta (CCSSA) www.ccssa.ca