

CCSSA's LIFE Framework

"Lived Inclusion For Everyone"

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.

Specific background resources for LIFE Framework: Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association (ACSTA) *Safe and Caring Learning Environments for Students*, the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta (CCSSA) *Commitment to Inclusive Communities*, and Calgary Catholic School District's (CSSD) *Supporting Inclusive Communities*.

Commitment to the LIFE Framework

Catholic Schools are committed to using the LIFE Framework as a guideline for the creation and operation of student groups that are comprehensive in their approach to inclusion and open to the exploration in a Catholic context of a variety of issues including bullying, sexual harassment, sexual orientation, gender identity, discrimination, justice, and respectful relationships and language.

Naming of LIFE Framework student groups

Names for student groups seeking to further respect the human person will be approved by the principal, in consultation with the chief superintendent, will incorporate language in keeping with the teachings of the Catholic Church, and will respect the intent of this document.

Who might be served by LIFE Framework student groups?

- All students

Guidelines for the Formation of student groups

Because 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, it is advised that every school be well prepared to establish student groups to address these needs. Such groups should be formed when there is a student request.

When students wish to form a group, 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, is critical. Student groups may be formed for the following purposes:

- Advocacy
- Peer support
- Counselling

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

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- 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 values of the school and the school jurisdiction while upholding the sanctity of human life through discussions, acts of justice, and social action within the context of Catholic teaching on social relationships.
- Reflect through name and action the philosophy and theology of communion and emphasize inclusion, hospitality, respect and justice.

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

Advocacy Groups

Purpose

- To advocate against all forms of discrimination and/or behaviours that cause students to feel isolated and not included.
- To assemble students who experience discrimination, isolation, and a lack of feeling included in their school community or society with students who want to offer these students their support via initiatives designed to advocate against all forms of discrimination.
- To enable students to feel empowered to activate their unique God-given gifts for the benefit of furthering a more just community for everyone.
- To discuss issues that cause pervasive 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 from a Catholic perspective to exploration of a variety of issues, including sexual orientation, gender identity, bullying, discrimination, justice, and respectful relationships and language.
- Ensure advocacy efforts are directed against all forms of bullying and discrimination.

Activities

- Exploring how inclusive practices enhance the life of the school (e.g. celebrating a school's success annually through a variety of means).
- 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 whole school social justice activities to address needs locally, nationally or internationally.

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Activity Exemplars

- Schools and school boards participating in the LIFE Framework are invited to submit one page descriptions of successful activities to the Executive Director of the CCSSA for inclusion in this document's appendix.

Peer Support Groups

Purpose

- To assemble students who experience discrimination, isolation, and a lack of feeling included in their school community or society with students who want to offer these students their support via facilitated discussions.

Norms

- Ensure the student groups are led by trained Catholic facilitators and assisted, when possible, by counselors, chaplains or social workers.
- Ensure boundaries prior to the discussion of any topic, so members do not feel pressured to make personal disclosures.
- Invite, but not pressure, other students to join them.
- Be sensitive to the safety of all students who are at risk.
- Refrain from labeling or discussing students who are not members.
- Consider inviting students to develop additional norms and procedures with the facilitator carefully guiding this process.

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).

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Counselling Groups

Purpose

- To assemble students who experience discrimination, isolation, and a lack of feeling included in their school community or society with students who want to offer these students their support via facilitated discussions.
- To support students experiencing a variety of challenges related to feelings of belonging, self-worth, identity, friendship, etc.
- To support students who may be marginalized as a result of bullying or social exclusion based on gender, sexual orientation, culture, size, physical or academic ability, etc.
- To support students in understanding their sexual identities who may be experiencing a variety of challenges related to their sexuality (e.g. how to talk to parents, friends, etc.).

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Norms

- Ensure the student groups are led by trained Catholic facilitators and counsellors, and assisted as needed by psychologists, chaplains or social workers.
- If a student discloses information to a staff member regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity, it is important to remember that they have a right to confidentiality unless student well-being is at risk.
- Ensure all normal processes for group counselling are followed.
- Be sensitive to the safety of all students who are at risk.
- Refrain from labeling or discussing students who are not members.

Activities

- Utilize counselling strategies to address group needs.

Activity Exemplars

- Schools and school boards participating in the LIFE Framework are invited to submit one page descriptions of successful activities to the Executive Director of the CCSSA for inclusion in this document's appendix.

Facilitation of Student Groups:

- 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.
- Student groups shall be facilitated by a Catholic teacher and approved by the principal.
- 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.

Informing parents about LIFE Framework student groups:

The Alberta Bill of Rights, s.1 (g) recognizes that parents have both the right to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children. The second paragraph of the preamble to the School Act and paragraph eight of the preamble of the Education Act (upon proclamation), 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 LIFE Framework/Diversity clubs:

Step 1 – A general notice is provided to the school community (recommended inclusion in annual student handbook) that students may be organizing LIFE Framework/Diversity clubs at the school in the future.

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Step 2 – If a LIFE Framework/Diversity club is formed in a school, notification of the formation of the club is sent to all parents (not naming of any students involved in the formation of the clubs). This notification includes the responsibility of parents to discuss with their child the purpose and nature of the club, whether their child wishes to become a member and their child's obligation to both refrain from bullying behavior and contribute to a safe learning school environment that respects diversity. At all times parents are invited to converse with the school regarding the intention of the LIFE Framework/Diversity Club.

Section 16.1 of the School Act or Section 35.1 of the Education Act whichever is in force:

Support for student organizations

16.1(1) If one or more students attending a school operated by a board request a staff member employed by the board for support to establish a voluntary student organization, or to lead an activity intended to promote a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging, the principal of the school shall

- (a) permit the establishment of the student organization or the holding of the activity at the school, and
- (b) designate a staff member to serve as the staff liaison to facilitate the establishment, and the ongoing operation, of the student organization or to assist in organizing the activity.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1), an organization or activity includes an organization or activity that promotes equality and non-discrimination with respect to, without limitation, race, religious belief, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, family status or sexual orientation, including but not limited to organizations such as gay-straight alliances, diversity clubs, anti-racism clubs and anti-bullying clubs.

(3) The students may select a respectful and inclusive name for the organization, including the name "gay-straight alliance" or "queerstraight alliance", after consulting with the principal.

(4) The principal shall immediately inform the board and the Minister if no staff member is available to serve as a staff liaison referred to in subsection (1), and if so informed, the Minister shall appoint a responsible adult to work with the requesting students in organizing the activity or to facilitate the establishment, and the ongoing operation, of the student organization at the school.

(5) If a staff member indicates to a principal a willingness to act as a staff liaison under subsection (1),

- (a) a principal shall not inform a board or the Minister under subsection (4) that no staff member is available to serve as a staff liaison, and
- (b) that staff member shall be deemed to be available to serve as the staff liaison.

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APPENDIX

LIFE Framework Group Exemplars

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LIFE Framework Student Groups

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Name of School District: Calgary Catholic School District

Names of Groups: Spectrum, One Voice, SAVE, SAGA, STABLE

Formation of the Group

Students requested a support and advocacy group for sexual minorities in a high school. Students were supported by school administration, teacher sponsors (one of which was a counsellor), and instructional services to develop a mission statement for the group. The mission statement then helped inform student choice of name and logo for the group. Students created a prayer for the group that they use to start all their meetings. Students decided on a meeting schedule that saw the creation of a student executive that met with teacher sponsors for biweekly planning meetings, and held general meetings on the weeks after the planning meetings. Two years into the club, the student executive chose to change the logo; both logos incorporated inclusivity and our faith.

Junior High students requested an advocacy and peer support group in an elementary/junior high school. The students approached the vice-principal requesting the formation of a group. In particular, students were most interested in providing awareness, and in promoting a positive environment for students who may belong to sexual minorities. The vice-principal, in collaboration with the administration team and instructional services, supported students in determining the purpose for the group, in selecting a name which reflected students' desires for the group, and in organizing activities. As this school included students from kindergarten to grade nine, student leaders also determined their target group, how to best communicate with this group, and how best to implement an awareness campaign, which they felt was needed in the school.

Group Activities

In the beginning years the High School group student leadership was very **focused on advocacy**. They facilitated many advocacy and information based group sessions on a variety of topics that included but were not limited to: identity vocabulary, coming out, stereotypes, unique qualities of each person, portrayal of minorities in the media, mental health concerns and resources, Church teaching and sexual minorities, labeling, gender roles, combatting homophobia, etc. A variety of methodologies were used such as discussion, YouTube videos, simulations, cue cards, expert presenters, student presenters, etc. for these sessions. HS student's meeting started with their prayer.

The HS group has in the recent years primarily moved to focus more on **peer support and/or counselling**. Ice breakers are used, full length movies that are related to an inclusive topic or seasonal fun are shown over several meetings or after school. They provide opportunities for art therapy collaboration with other groups and the arts program. Some examples are: creation of school colouring book, the group collectively painting on canvas, painting personal shirts, "We All Wear a Mask" activity where students decorate individual masks, "The Heart of Our Community" activity where students created hearts on individual square canvasses that were then clustered together in a mosaic.

"We Don't Say" Poster Campaign in which the HS group created school and social media based posters similar to the Duke University campaign to address diversity and encourage people to think before speaking, as the words one delivers can have negative consequences. The students have updated these posters each year. The group has also led many other school-based activities such as: random acts of kindness, bake sales, making friendship bracelets, making buttons, participating in the school free trade fair, kindness-grams, creating a banner against discrimination to be signed by students

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and staff in the hallway, curate an awareness bulletin board, create a colouring page (mandala) for school colouring book as mental health support for all students, and sponsoring school-wide guest speakers on the topic of inclusion.

Once the Junior High group was established, the students operated primarily as an **advocacy group**. They developed a poster awareness campaign, directed at the junior high students (grades seven to nine). They also shared information with individual classes, and encouraged participation of all students. While their activities focused on supporting students who may belong to sexual minorities, they also incorporated activities and slogans to address inclusion for all members of the school community. This included addressing slurs towards individuals or groups of students. **Peer support** occurred within the context of building awareness, and reinforcing messages that everyone belongs in the school.

Advice to Teacher Facilitators

The HS group sponsors have found that the group functions best when student leadership selects larger projects to work on, and then, span these initiatives over several meetings. This welcoming, caring, respectful and safe environment allows for authentic discussion to happen while working on projects.

The JH group sponsors found it most helpful to listen very carefully to student needs, and to ask questions to help students determine the purpose for their group. By addressing student needs, the sponsors were best able to support desired activities and group meetings.

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Name of School District: Christ the Redeemer Catholic Schools

Name of Group: Spectrum Club

Formation of the Group(s)

A student club has been running for the past three years under the guidelines of the LIFE Framework. The students who started the group requested a GSA, and eventually named their group the Spectrum Club. The group is facilitated by a teacher and a family school liaison worker. The club's formation predated the legislation authorizing GSA's, and the students have honored the original group by continuing to operate with this name. When facilitators asked what the founding students were looking for, they suggested a range of possibilities documented in the LIFE Framework including advocacy, peer support, or counseling. The students indicated their choice was to focus on peer support. As a result, the club became a safe place where students were made to feel welcome, meet new friends, and socialize with one other. There has also been discussion on various topics dealing with gender and identity.

Group Activities

The group meets weekly, always starts with a prayer, and is focused on the inclusion of all.

Advice to Teacher Facilitators

The most important element in adhering to the LIFE Framework while supporting student groups is for the adult facilitator(s) to determine what the students are looking for from the group. This student-centered answer guides the agenda and focus of the group, and enables the students to really reflect on how the group can best support their needs and the school as a whole. Most often, students have been desirous of groups that focus on creating a welcoming environment in which they give and receive peer support.

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Name of School District: Edmonton Catholic School District

Names of Groups:

- Everyone Under the Rainbow
- Saints Pride
- Outreach
- SOY (Support our Youth)
- Crusader Pride
- Rainbow Squad
- PALS (Pride Acceptance League for Students)
- Rainbow Ravens
- The 'IN' Crowd
- Bridge Builders
- PALS (Pride Advocacy League for Students)
- Wequality
- Spectrum

Formation of the Groups

In each setting, a student or a number of students have made the request for a support group. A lead teacher is identified (volunteers to lead the group) to lead the process in formulating a group. A first meeting date and location is decided upon and information is shared during school wide morning announcements (invitation for others to attend). The purpose of the first few meetings is for the group to formulate their purpose/mission/vision of the group, as well as its structure (when to meet, where, how often, etc.) Students take a look at ECSD Policy and Regulation 138 (Commitment to Inclusive Communities) as well as the LIFE Framework (Lived Inclusion for Everyone) to guide them in their work.

Group Activities

The various groups are very active in supporting students. Below is a sample listing of group activities across the District:

- Created emblems and mottos to support their mission, vision, beliefs and values
- Generated identity (what the group is about) and connections to the name (branding) through various messaging techniques (announcements, school broadcasts, newsletters, school assemblies, Open House brochures, table at Open House)
- Established formal structures with executive and minutes

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- Sponsored presentations on inclusion, belonging and language awareness
- Hosted the local MLA to talk about bullying issues and to learn more about the community
- Planned for and hosted monthly school wide events (i.e.: belonging activities, community building, mental health, inclusivity, anti-bullying videos, etc.). These events are low risk (no stigma attached to participation), high energy, and high interest for the entire school
- Put together presentations on Diversity and Inclusion and made presentations to their school staff as well as their peers
- Requested presentations to meet their needs i.e. bullying and “what are your worries”.
- Attended the *Free To Be Youth Conference* and the *Headstrong Anti-Stigma Conference*
- Provided a retreat experience for their members i.e. grounded in faith, song, building community, team building and planning purposes
- Held Flex Sessions during school day – “Inclusive Language”; “Building Inclusive Communities”
- Hosted the club from their feeder junior high school, in support of the transition from junior to senior high
- Groups Host School Campaigns:
 - “Smile Because You’re Beautiful” – students look at themselves in the mirror and recognize the beauty in their smile (positive self-image)
 - “Rainbow Buttons” – build awareness of group ‘Everyone under the Rainbow’ and inclusivity throughout the school: ‘all are welcome’
 - “Best Part of Me” – over a lunch hour campaign, students were invited to paint the palm of their hand, add it to a banner, and later right down the best part of themselves (positive self-image)
 - “Pink Shirt Day” – all schools participated in this event which raises awareness of bullying, and solidarity to stand up to bullying
 - “Spirit Day” – take a stand against bullying

Advice to Teacher Facilitators

- Set guidelines and parameters that are respected by all (confidentiality). Creating this safe space for sharing will help students feel that they can express themselves freely
- Maintain a regular schedule for meetings, whether weekly or twice a month, helps to develop a safe and respectful space where the group establishes and honors its norms. It is also important that the group has a space that it can identify as its own
- Be clear that the purpose of the group is not for one-on-one counselling. For those needs, school staff are made available (counsellor, FSLW, administrator, teacher, etc.)
- Be a good listener and do not interrupt (a motto for both adults and students)
- Leave judgment at the door
- Allow student voices to articulate their needs
- Be available whenever student needs arise
- Assure them they are all loved and accepted
- Encourage participation/support of teacher peers to build a visible presence in the school. Some clubs have an FSLW (Family School Liaison Worker) and this person joins the weekly meeting at lunch. Some clubs have noted that teachers and administrators have joined in on presentations. One club spoke of how their principal sat in the circle with them at their first group meeting and listened while the

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students shared their wishes for the group. The principal also shared what he wished for the students and the journey the group would be undertaking.

- School inter-visitations between junior and senior high LIFE groups in catchment areas help to cultivate community, belonging, and space of sanctuary. Stigma is very much a part of life as an LGBT person; thus, knowing ahead of time that a school has a club that offers support for youth and allies helps to ease with the transition

Creating a District Network of Support

- Consider hosting network sessions for facilitators of LIFE groups. In ECSD, *Inclusive Communities* hosts four sessions for lead facilitators to come together to dialogue, share ideas, and learn from each other.
- Build capacity across your District to support teachers who are new to the facilitator role (due to staff changeover or a new club established at site). Match the new teacher with a Teacher Mentor who has led a LIFE group and provide time (teacher replacement) for teachers to get together and share, plan, provide support
- Build capacity of teacher leadership by tapping into the expertise lead facilitators are cultivating through their work. In the 2016-17 school year LIFE group lead facilitators have lead the following:
 - FLEX session, District Wide Principal Meeting—as they brought awareness of what their LIFE group is all about. At this time a number of teachers presented their story of their LIFE group (group name, how they got started, generating an identity in the school, successful practices of inclusion, school campaigns, school presentations, etc.)
 - Diversity Training for First Year Teachers – a panel of lead teacher facilitators were invited to present their school story to first year teachers on what diversity and inclusion looks like at their school. After sharing their diversity profile and highlighting the various supports and clubs in support of inclusion (i.e.: Healthy Relationship Group, Game Squad, All Girls Empowerment Group, etc.) teachers then spoke about their LIFE group. By shedding a light on the work they and their students are doing to cultivate inclusion, it helped first year teachers to see what diversity and inclusion look like across the District
 - Capacity for Teachers to present at other schools. One teacher is highly sought-after across the District for her work regarding use of *Inclusive Language* and *awareness* through terminology, school climate, and respect. She has presented at many schools, and to students and staff in a number of capacities (LIFE club meetings; school flex sessions; staff PD)

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Name of School District: Elk Island Catholic Schools

Name of Group: Group is unnamed by student choice

Formation of the Group(s)

A LIFE group with a variety of students who identify as part of the straight, gay, transgender, and immigrant population that are striving to bring inclusion for all students to the forefront of their discussion and activities. When asked what they call their group, students indicated they really do not have a name and prefer it that way as they believe a name does not accurately reflect their exploration of diversity, can be divisive, and limits the full depth of what they are trying to accomplish. Their choice was a sense of belonging as students, God's children, and not through the identification of their sexual identity, ethnicity or any other identifier. As a group that celebrates diversity and inclusion as a Catholic way of life in the school, they focus on how to support vulnerable populations and provide support to school and division leadership as a consulting group. They have been successful in assisting with the implementation of school processes, consulting with the design of new school builds and modernizations, and provided insight into the daily life successes and struggles of students who need advocates to be their voice.

Group Activities

The group of students meet weekly with the school facilitator and individually or in smaller groups with the school counselor or chaplain for support and guidance. The group always starts with a prayer and student check in using a focused topic or conversation starter. Initial small group activities included setting appropriate guidelines to foster trust and respect as well as build relationship. As the group is focused on the inclusion of all, structured activity and discussion of lived experiences of inclusion followed introductory gatherings. Group focus remains on building awareness and creating an inviting yet safe environment for participation. On a quarterly basis they meet with the division Superintendent.

Advice to Teacher Facilitators

Meeting with interested participants prior to their first small group gathering allows facilitators to build relationship, offer support and guidance, identify student goals and hear individual voices that might otherwise be silent. It also allows assessment of student time commitments and optimal opportunities for regular gatherings, should student choose to participate in small group gatherings. This initial interaction is also important in allowing group participants to identify their own priorities and action in order to best meet needs and goals. Including various members of the school team (School Chaplain, Counsellor etc) is considered a best practice. Moving forward, meetings will take place in EICS between all school leads, admin, and CLS staff to discuss common best practices.

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Name of School District: Red Deer Catholic Regional Schools

Name of Group: Optics

Formation of the Group(s)

School administration received a request from a student to form a Queer-Straight Alliance (QSA). After numerous conversations over several weeks, school administration was able to convey to this student and her parents their genuine concern and desire to further enhance a safe and caring environment that was more inclusive of all students. The LIFE Framework developed by the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta was instrumental in providing direction in this preliminary stage.

In the course of these conversations, school administration actively explored with this student and her parents the philosophy of QSA's, attended the ATA Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Alliance Conference and meaningfully continued to dialogue what the purpose or end game of this particular student advocacy group would be. Eventually the first student group meeting was scheduled. The purpose of this first meeting was to discuss gender identity, inequalities and labels. There were approximately twelve students in attendance for this first meeting. School administration and two staff members also attended this initial meeting.

Group Activities

Since the first meeting, this group has met every second week over the lunch break. Group membership has increased to approximately fifteen members. The student advocacy group agreed to call itself "Optics" (i.e. seeing things from different perspectives) and regularly meets to discuss items related to identity, social stigma and public support that focus on the positives of being a safe and inclusive school environment. Two staff members attend the meetings and provide guidance, support and advice.

Other than continue to encourage new members to attend meetings, at this time our "Optics" group has not planned to take their advocacy initiatives into the general school population. However, this concept may occur in the future.

Advice to Teacher Facilitators

The LIFE Framework document was instrumental in providing direction and support during the formation of our "Optics" group. It was also very beneficial connecting with colleagues from other school divisions to hear their story and learn from their experiences.

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