



Ontario Catholic School
Trustees' Association

**Respecting Difference Resource
for Catholic School Boards**

Clarifications to Support Implementation in Catholic Schools

The OCSTA Respecting Difference Resource is designed to enhance the array of resources available in Catholic schools to eradicate bullying and provide caring support for all students. Part of supporting students requires recognition of the unique situations that can cause stress and challenges in the school environment. Among the various issues that have been highlighted by students, parents and the government are instances of bullying and intolerance of students who are attracted to the same sex and/or addressing issues of gender identity. The Respecting Difference Resource has been designed to specifically address this identified need and all needs identified by students.

The following Question and Answer guide has been created to highlight and clarify those areas of the Respecting Difference Resource that specifically address the needs of students attracted to the same sex and/or addressing issues of gender identity.

Question and Answer Guide

1. **Can students establish a Respecting Difference Group that specifically addresses the needs of students who identify themselves as Lesbian/Gay/Bi-sexual/Transgendered/Queer?**

Answer: Yes. Respecting Difference Groups can address a variety of issues or can be issue specific and address only one type of issue e.g. the well-being and safety of students who identify themselves as L/G/B/T/Q.

2. **Will students be able to speak about their Lesbian/Gay/Bi-sexual/Transgendered/Queer identity in these groups?**

Answer: Yes. If a Respecting Difference Group is established in a Catholic school to address the concerns of students who identify themselves as L/G/B/T/Q those students most certainly can discuss their concerns regarding their sexuality or how other L/G/B/T/Q students are being treated in the school and community. If, however, aspects of what a student is sharing during a Respecting Difference meeting is deemed by the staff advisor to be the kind of personal information that should be handled confidentially to ensure the protection of a student's privacy, the staff advisor may suggest the discussion be continued in a more private setting with a staff professional specifically trained to address the issue being raised.

In order for these groups to be truly safe places for students to talk about issues that concern their well-being in school, privacy considerations must be considered. Schools cannot guarantee that students in Respecting Difference groups will protect the privacy of their peers. An unintentional disclosure of information shared in a student-led group could be detrimental to the emotional or physical well-being of the student(s) affected by the disclosure. For this reason all efforts will be made to support healthy and productive discourse and sharing in Respecting Difference groups but staff advisors will pay special attention to those situations where a student's privacy may be at risk.

NOTE: The individual support is meant to be supplemental to those discussions which occur in a group setting. For example: If a student is suffering from severe depression as a result of a bullying incident, that student might benefit from access to professional help beyond that provided in a forum consisting of peers and a staff advisor.

3. Outside of privacy considerations, what kinds of issues are deemed “inappropriate” for Open Forum Discussion?

Answer: There are certain topics that could be deemed inappropriate without adult facilitation, for example:

- Issues/topics that call for action or advocacy on positions that may be contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Such discussions, however, may in fact take place as students challenge and explore the social and doctrinal teachings of the church. This would not be unlike the kinds of discussions that already take place in religion classrooms and other interactive learning environments in Catholic schools. The presence of a caring adult to listen and to facilitate, as needed, provides a healthy and open forum for discussion.

The most important aspect of these groups is the opportunity they provide for students to discuss issues regarding the safety and well-being of themselves and of other students. These groups also help to ensure that students' needs are addressed either directly in these forums or with the appropriate staff professional, as required.

4. Can Respecting Difference groups promote through traditional methods (e.g. posters, announcements, etc.) that the group welcomes membership from students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or queer?

Answer: Yes. Respecting Difference groups, which are open to all students, can be promoted within the established procedures currently in place in secondary schools and applicable to all other student led groups or activities. No exception should be made for any type of Respecting Difference group – including those for students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or queer.

- 5. Must every school establish a Respecting Difference group that addresses specific needs such as sexual orientation or racism, etc.?**

Answer: No. Such groups will be established upon the request of students. It is possible that in some schools a broader group based on inclusivity is preferred by students. Under this scenario, anti-bullying groups may deal with all aspects of bullying, regardless of the origin.

- 6. Are pre-existing student-led groups/clubs acceptable under the Respecting Difference framework?**

Answer: Yes – student-led groups/clubs are acceptable under the Respecting Difference framework as long as those clubs meet objectives and guidelines set-forth in the Respecting Difference document.