

## **A Pastoral Approach to Supporting and Guiding Students in Inclusive Communities – Gender Identity and Expression**

### **Purpose:**

Our Catholic schools are committed to supporting inclusive communities that teach care and compassion for every person, regardless of age, race, sex, gender or sexual orientation, and require that every person be treated with dignity and respect. <sup>1</sup>This document provides background information about Catholic teachings, and considerations for schools, when supporting and guiding students with respect to gender identity and expression.

### **Background:**

Catholic schools are places of both learning and believing. Our schools share a foundational belief that all children are loved by God, created in God's image, and individually unique. The school has a mission to help students grow as children of God in all aspects of their person: physically, academically, socially, morally and spiritually.

The Catholic Church teaches that the body and soul are so united that one's gender identity is rooted in one's biological identity as male and female. In Catholic teaching, one's sexual identity is considered "a reality deeply inscribed in man and woman". <sup>2</sup>It is the conviction of the Catholic Church that genetically, anatomically and chromosomally, the body reveals the divine plan, and that humans are "obliged to regard [their bodies] as good and to hold [them] in honour since God has created [them]". <sup>3</sup>Therefore, to attempt 'gender transitioning' is contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church.

In our schools, students at all grade levels may need support and guidance with respect to gender identity and expression. Instances of attempted gender transitioning may be presented at all levels in elementary and secondary schools. Any educator approached with a request for accommodation must respond with sensitivity, respect, mercy, and compassion.

Gender identity issues are complex, delicate and highly personal. Persons who present themselves as members of the opposite sex are said to be experiencing gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is manifested in a variety of ways, including strong desires to be treated as the other gender or a strong conviction that one has feelings and reactions typical of the other gender. <sup>4</sup>Individuals may also experience gender-questioning; that is, persons "may be questioning or exploring their gender identity, and their gender identity may not align with their sex assigned at birth".

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<sup>1</sup>[The Joy of the Gospel](#), nos.110-114

<sup>2</sup>[Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World \(2004\)](#), n.8.

<sup>3</sup>[Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), specifically, no. 364, 365, 2392, 2393, 2393.

<sup>4</sup>[Diagnostic & Statistical Manual-5 \(DSM-5\)](#), American Psychiatric Association

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Some may also exhibit gender non-conforming behaviours, which is "an umbrella term to describe people whose gender expression or gender identity differs from gender norms associated with their assigned birth sex". Not all children that gender-question or exhibit gender non-conforming behaviours will attempt gender transition in their adolescence or adulthood.

Importantly, while there is individual variation, this is an "at-risk" group in need of special care and attention. For example, students who identify as transgender often experience higher levels of: bullying ... physical violence, sexual abuse, drugs/alcohol abuse, sexually transmitted infections, depression, anxiety and suicidal attempts than their peers. Therefore these students may engage in various coping mechanisms and defensive strategies, including acting out or withdrawal behaviours.

Students' understanding of their own gender identity and expression evolves over time, and may not remain consistent throughout the years. Therefore, the level of ongoing support and guidance required will vary, depending on individual need.

#### **Considerations for Schools:**

##### **Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe Learning Environments**

In a Catholic context, and in keeping with the teachings of the Church, school administration and staff have the responsibility to ensure a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that fosters a sense of belonging in all aspects of school life. All students benefit from knowing there are safe and caring adult advocates in their school and parish. The learning environment supports what is best for individuals, and at the same time, the needs of the community as a whole.

In addition, for the benefit of the individual and family, schools protect the privacy and confidentiality of students, including information about gender identity and expression. Ideally, school environments are designed to support inclusivity, allowing for full participation of all members without disclosure of personal information.

##### **A Collaborative Approach:**

Aligned with best practice, schools develop plans for individual students based on their needs. It is important to determine needs through a collaborative team approach, engaging the student, family, staff, and other professionals in the discussion and planning as appropriate.

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<sup>5</sup>Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People, American Psychological Association, 2015  
ibid, p. 54

<sup>7</sup>Supporting Transgender and Transsexual Students in K-12 Schools: A Guide for Educators – Canadian Teachers Federation  
ibid, pgs. 11-16

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The following considerations reflect these understandings:

- **Athletics**

Athletic eligibility for all students participating in school sports is determined by the Alberta Schools' Athletic Association (ASAA) and/or local division athletic associations. Eligibility at secondary level reflects criteria of these associations to ensure consistency and alignment. For intramurals, the principal will determine best practice and rationale for all individuals involved. Based on specific student circumstances, educators address additional needs in consultation with the principal and district leadership.

- **Course Selection**

Schools may choose to offer gender specific courses (e.g. physical education). The principal will determine the best practice and rationale for all individuals involved.

- **Dress Code/Uniforms**

Most schools and divisions maintain dress codes that provide students with positive guidelines for appropriate dress in an educational setting and the context of a Catholic school environment. These dress codes should be flexible enough, and worded such, that all people feel comfortable in school environments. For those schools that incorporate school uniforms consideration of all students must be kept in mind in the design and choice of the uniforms.

- **Names**

While schools are required to use legal names on all legal documents, common names may be used at the request of parents on a day-to-day basis. If parents provide legal documentation to support a name or gender change, school legal documents are amended. Families initiate this process and present such information, if they choose to do so.

- **Overnight Field Trips**

Overnight field trips are planned to accommodate individual needs, protecting the privacy and confidentiality of students, and allowing students to participate without the requirement to disclose personal information. The principal, in consultation with the student and family, determines the best practice and rationale for all individuals involved.

- **Washroom/Change Room Accessibility**

Each school is encouraged to designate gender neutral single stall washrooms available for all students as a washroom and change room. This supports students with their gender identity and expression, body image concerns, or request for additional privacy for any reason.

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**Resources:**

Catechism of the Catholic Church: specifically, no. 364, 365, 2332, 2333, 2393;

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World (2004), n.8.

FAQ on Gender Identity Disorder and "Sex Change" Operations-- National Catholic Bioethics Centre

Lived Inclusion for Everyone (LIFE) Framework -- Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta

Joy of the Gospel, nos. 110-114

Alberta Human Rights Act (Section 1)

Alberta School Act June 1, 2015(Sections 16.1, 43.1, 45.1)

Diagnostic & Statistical Manual-5 (DSM-5), American Psychiatric Association

Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People, American Psychological Association, 2015

Public Health Agency of Canada—Questions and Answers: Gender Identity in Schools

Safe and Caring Schools for Transgender Students--Alberta Teachers Association

Supporting Every Student: Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe Learning Environments

Supporting Transgender and Transsexual Students in K-12 Schools: A Guide for Educators –Canadian Teachers Federation

Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe Learning Environments: Information for School Staff (Alberta's Amended School Act)

September 14, 2015

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