

Staff Guidelines for Creating a Safe and Caring School for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) Students

Introduction

Edmonton Christian Schools (ECS) are places where God's love, peace, and grace define the nature of community. In this community, staff and students feel free to share their joys and to carry each other's burdens. ECS respects diversity of opinion in an atmosphere of mutual respect, and every student at ECS is viewed as a child of God possessing God-given gifts and talents.

Purpose:

Currently, the topics of Same Gender Attraction and Same Gender Sexual Behavior are highly contentious and emotionally charged in both our general Canadian society and our school community. These topics are very personal because they touch on the identity of family members and friends as well as challenging our understanding of the interpretation of scripture and thus the underpinnings of our faith.

Given both the importance and sensitivity of this issue, the Edmonton Society for Christian Education has spent almost two years on developing guidelines on dealing with this topic. As a first step, this document articulates how Edmonton Christian Schools (ECS) will create an appropriate school environment for students who identify as LGBT or who are questioning their sexual identity. As such, this document tries to provide specific enough guidance to our school staffs to help them create a safe, caring, and hospitable school environment for all students, including LGBT students.

It is important for the ECS community to understand that this is a first step, and that, as a Christian school community, we will not shy away from discussing difficult topics with our students and in our community as a whole. ECS has always had a culture of teaching our children to think critically within a biblical context. As we together study and discern what the Bible says, and what responsible interpretations of scripture say about being LGBT, we will work towards developing educational strategies as this topic comes up in the classroom.

In the meantime, we will continue to develop a safe school environment and set some guidelines around working with students. As well, students will not be discouraged from holding certain views about this topic. Throughout any discussion on the topic students will be challenged to develop their views from a worldview of a renewed mind informed by Scripture. ECS will ensure that students are strongly encouraged to take a holistic view; to consider the whole set of Gods commands to us, and to consider what it means to practice neighbour love in a fallen world.

The Guidelines presented in this document are first of all based on a Biblical command to love one another, to build communities of grace, as well as on the ideas that it is important to develop relationships and to keep conversations going regardless of differences of opinion/thought about a topic.

Principles:

Given the foregoing, the following are key principles that have influenced these guidelines.

1. **As fallen people, graciously under Christ's costly redemptive and restorative work, there are many Biblical principles to which we need to be held captive. Principles regarding sexual morality are not the only ones that come into play on this issue.**

Other key principles include the following:

1. Loving one another: genuinely desiring and acting towards causing the best for each other, and desiring to have relationship with them just as God does.
 2. Humility: knowing that we are all fallen and sinful, and that, as such, no-one stands above another before our God.
 3. Gentleness: treating other people in a fashion that is not harsh, but rather emphasizes the value of relationship with them.
 4. Graciousness: treating others not as they and we deserve to be treated, but rather how God treats them and us.
 5. Hospitality: where the opportunities to listen, engage, and explore the variety of perspectives through the lens of a biblical worldview is welcomed. Hospitality, therefore, invites a deeper exploration of who we are, what we are called to be, and how we are called to live with one another in a manner that truly reflects the heart of Christ.
2. **Humans, while originally made perfectly, are broken. Brokenness (even for those of us who are followers of Christ and recipients of his redemption and ongoing restoration) permeates our very being.**
 1. Our Christian community is now in the middle of a discussion as to how to respond to those who live with a same gender attraction (SGA). We need to recognize that not all Christians think alike on this topic. This being said, we also know that many of the families that have children at ECS belong to denominations with official statements that indicate that, along with the importance of providing a welcoming church environment for LGBT people, being sexually attracted to a member of your own gender is part of this brokenness.
 3. **In our brokenness we do things that are against the will of God.**
 1. Our fallenness is obvious in the sexual brokenness that often permeates society and our personal life. The emphases that are placed on the desires of the flesh are evident in every corner of society. Promiscuity, pornography, exploitation of women and children, adultery, premarital sex etc. point clearly to this brokenness. Many of the families with children attending ECS, are members of denominations that would include sexual behaviour between same gender couples as part of that sexual brokenness, while others are not.

Implications of these Principles

This section draws out a few of the important implications of these statements; in no way is it intended as a complete set. As we provide guidelines for our staff, and as we enter into a time

of study and discussion, it is important to note the following: These principles of the Christian faith, held in common by much of our school community (although not exclusively), are at some points at odds with key elements implicit in the thinking of much of Canadian society as the predominant view expressed throughout our mainstream Canadian media, and in the statements of many of our institutions, holds a view that homosexual attraction is completely value neutral; that it is “natural”. Such a belief context provides no reason to differentiate between “natural” and “right”.

Furthermore, it is generally held as “harmful” to make any statement questioning those so-called natural states are anything less than “right.” This puts some Christians in a position of having, in some ways, to respectfully differ with our society. These Christians cannot uncritically accept such a statement in our schools, given its incompatibility with the position that many of them hold.

Others in the ECS community may still be questioning/thinking about what God is trying to say to us about SOGI issues as the Christian community works through this topic.

However, even though we are not fully united amongst ourselves about our exact beliefs on this subject, an attempt is still made here to provide some guidelines for the schools.

General Guidelines:

1. Edmonton Christian Schools will be a safe and caring learning environment for all, where love and community building will be the expression of who we are. This is the primary principle of Christian behaviour from which follow the rest.
2. ECS will not tolerate hatred or violence towards people; indeed, ECS expects these to be displaced by their positive opposite attributes of love and peace through Christ’s transformative work in our lives and our community. As such, ECS will not tolerate bullying of any kind.
3. When teachers are asked about same gender attraction, or when they have students come to them to discuss their sexual orientation or gender identity, any statement made should respect a position that building a community of love comes first. When it comes to discussing the school’s position, statements made should draw students to the Bible and to the various responses to the Bible from things like church statements and other interpretations.
4. A misconception that often prevents faith-based schools (and educators), such as Edmonton Christian from addressing issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity is the conflation of sexuality and sexual practice as synonymous terms of identity expression. Because a student is an LGBT person does not automatically mean that he or she is or will be sexually active. LGBT student concerns and issues should be addressed within our biblical framework and that of student health, safety, and human rights. Sexual orientation and gender identity concerns should be addressed respectfully within our school context.

Specific Guidelines:

1. Prepare and educate staff. Consider focusing on the theme of “building community”

especially as it relates to LGBT students for school-based PD days. Consider having discussions around what the Bible says about Same Gender Attraction and talk about what our school community, what the district, and what the community at large is saying about the topic.

2. Educate all students to create positive attitudes and a healthy school environment especially as it relates to building community.
3. Establish basic expectations for the school - examples might include:
 - a. In the classroom, hall, and property, we prohibit any kind of disparaging, insulting remarks, slogans, jokes, etc. that are directed at any particular student or group of students. [e.g., that's gay; faggot!] This will be treated as a bullying and harassment issue. This policy extends to gestures (i.e. hand signals or bodily movements) abusive graffiti, emails, text messages, notes, and any other written or electronic form of threat or harassment.
 - b. Verbally abusive comments must not be aimed at students or persons as a group with SGA. This would be as wrong as language that generally disparages women, minorities, other religions or denominations, etc. Denigrating the general group to which someone belongs is as hurtful as any other personal insult, and will not be tolerated.
 - c. Physical assault, harassment, bullying threats directed toward anyone for being SGA or otherwise will not be tolerated.
 - d. Teachers and support staff will actively shut down SGA harassment (in speech or deed) in the classroom, halls, and property. Remaining silent, or worse—sharing in the disparaging comment or attitude—may impart to any observing student, including students with SGA, the impression that the Christian school does not love or care about him or her.
 - e. Clothing with writing or any other forms of communication on it must not be permitted if the slogan or communication is not appropriate for the school context.
 - f. Anti-heterosexual propaganda, slogans, insults, etc., are also not acceptable. Being militant and "in your face," whether gay or anti-gay, will be seen as unChrist-like behaviour and will be censured.
 - g. Public displays of affection should not be allowed for both homosexual and heterosexual couples.
4. Train school counselors.
 - a. Reference materials and contacts for relevant organizations are imperative for the school counselor, whose office is often a haven for students.
 - b. The school will be extremely sensitive when it comes to the types of print resources that are made available to students.
5. Consider establishing an exception to protocol.
 - a. With issues of discipline, learning difficulties and child abuse, the first adult in the school who is aware of a problem generally calls on the support of other adults, be they administrators, counselors, parents or police. In the case of LGBT students, such protocol can be dangerous for the student. First, telling even one person can leave the student vulnerable. Second, some parents will not readily accept the news that their child is LGBT making home life very

difficult. The timing around informing the parents should be carefully calculated.

- b. While it is important to respect a student's confidentiality, any suspicion that the student may be suicidal, must result in appropriate action. Ensure that the student receives immediate attention. Refer him or her to a school counselor or psychologist. The counselor or psychologist will determine what further steps are necessary to protect the student.
6. In developing a language around how to discuss or what not to say when students come to staff to discuss their gender identity or sexual orientation the following will serve as guidelines:
- a. Do not talk about "them" and "us." Using the word "them" tells the student that the gay or lesbian student is not part of the class. Gays and lesbians are not "they", they are "us."
 - b. Do not exude sympathy for gays and lesbians as unfortunates. Analyze your reactions.
 - c. Do not lend the impression that gays and lesbians are found only in certain parts of the country. While it is true that all groups tend to gravitate to areas where they find support, they are everywhere.
 - d. Do not make assumptions about gay youth:
 - i. Do not assume the interests and experiences of gay men and lesbians are the same.
 - ii. Do not assume all gay men and lesbians are in pain and in conflict over their sexuality.
 - iii. Do not assume the out gay youth who appears to have it all together, does.
 - iv. Do not assume gay teens know a lot about sexuality, they too have been exposed to many myths, stereotypes, and incorrect or partial information.
 - v. Do not assume all gay teens are sexually active
 - e. Be yourself! If a student confides in you, it already indicates a tremendous amount of trust in you. Thank the student for trusting you. Be prepared.
 - f. The student who confides in a teacher or principal may or may not be gay. Many individuals experience sexual ambivalence and/or confusion during puberty. Do not say "It is just a phase." "You're too young to know." "You can't know for sure if you've never had sex." "You're not gay unless you have engaged in same-sex activity."
 - g. Remember that gay or lesbian students may be experiencing guilt and grief reactions, since all have heard their community say is that it is "wrong" and "God considers it an abomination."
 - h. Listen, Listen, Listen. Use extreme caution in what you say and affirm. The student may hate the idea of being gay and is coming to you for affirmation that s/he is not gay. So statements like "It's obvious that you are gay, but that's ok, God loves you anyway," maybe too much for such a student to handle. Gay kids themselves may be homophobic. They may then think 'Oh my goodness, it

is obvious, now I am doomed." Then again they may not be experiencing grief or guilt; some are content with self.

- i. Use the vocabulary the student uses; if the student uses "homosexual" follow his/her lead. Likewise, if the student uses "gay" or "lesbian," use that term.
 - j. Students may appear confused about their orientation when in fact they are only confused with what terminology to use.
 - k. Respect confidentiality. The teacher's lounge has caused many students harm.
 - l. Ask yourself questions:
 - i. Does the student have friends s/he can trust with the information?
 - ii. Do parents know? What would happen if they knew?
 - m. If trust and openness exist, sexual behavior may need addressing. But do not assume sexual orientation means sexual activity.
 - n. Be aware of your limitations. Some gay/lesbian kids have deep-seated spiritual and psychological issues that are beyond the realm of the average teacher to deal with.
 - o. Have lists of resources and support available. Students may be curious about what the Bible says about being LGBT. Appropriate resources, including scriptural references, websites, books and articles should be available to help students develop their views about being LGBT.
7. Things schools may not do:
- a. Suggesting reparative therapy isn't something mainstream psychology currently supports. Teachers suggesting this therapy could be suspended from their teaching positions. Students and their families therefore need to make this their own choice.
 - b. Unauthorized disclosure of a student's sexual orientation or gender identity to family, friends and teachers (except in cases of suicidal ideation or other harm-inducing behaviours)
 - c. Denying counseling services or access to community supports
 - d. Suggesting that sexual orientation or gender identity confusion is simply a phase that a student will grow out of.

Conclusion

The foregoing policy statement is a sincere attempt to provide guidance to staff and administration of Edmonton Christian Schools in dealing with the topic of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. Well established statistics, as well as numerous tragic public events have highlighted the particular vulnerabilities of LGBT students. It would be not only naïve, but also unloving for a Christian school community to close its eyes to this sad reality. While recognizing that there exists a considerable difference of opinion among Christians about the appropriateness of same gender sexual behavior, all Christians affirm the need to treat all of God's image bearers with love, respect and dignity. It is for this reason that the current Board of the Edmonton Society for Christian Education has adopted this policy for ECS.

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