

Dear CCS Families,

We want to follow up with the latest information on the new student group being developed at our secondary school. As we stated earlier, because this deals with matters of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), we recognize that this process has raised some significant and emotionally charged questions within our community. It remains our intent to continue to approach this project and these topics with respect and sensitivity. Through it all, we continue to pray that we will experience unity in Christ (Colossian 1:17) especially through these times of reflection, growth, and change.

We also want to thank those of you who have taken time to share with us your thoughts on the matter over the last few months. It is profoundly evident by your many and diverse responses that each of you deeply values the safety, care and well-being of all our children. It is also readily apparent that each of you wants to faithfully serve God and care for others through your involvement with CCS. It is because of these deep parental devotions - as well as our personal and professional commitments to authentic Christian living and learning - that we continue to take time to listen and respectfully respond to the breadth of questions and concerns such new activity brings.

BACKGROUND

Since formally announcing this project in December, administrative leadership has continued to respond to parent inquiries through many phone calls, emails, and personal meetings. In February, the CSCE Board provided the CCS community with a basic group description and clarified both the context of the group's origins and the necessity of its formation ([February 1 Letter](#)). The letter named the essential values that would guide the group's development and inform its operations. It also established an opportunity for parents to offer their comments and questions to leadership in the coming weeks. In early March, Parent Listening Sessions were held to facilitate safe, respectful and productive exchanges between parents and leadership. Combined with the information gathered through the many previous points of contact with parents, the feedback gleaned from these listening sessions has helped us form a more thorough response to community concerns and questions about the new student group.

The following responses address the most frequently raised topics and questions we heard through this period. For purposes of consistency, some of the previously published points are shared here again.

RATIONALE AND NECESSITY

The “inclusive student group” we’ve been discussing arises from very specific circumstances. First, a request for a club was made by current students; as a school, we are bound by Alberta law to permit and support its development. This request arises from very real and personal experiences of students who have witnessed or experienced alienation, bullying, and an absence of support from peers, parents, and staff for CCS students who identify or are questioning as LGBTQ.

Our age groups at the secondary school are particularly prone to challenging social dynamics as they are experiencing a dramatic transition in their physical and mental development. Research over the last 20 years has contributed to our understanding of the social dynamics affecting these ages, especially where sexual identity is concerned, as summarized in this article from the National Library of Medicine (US, 2016):

The early adolescent years are characterized by heightened self- and peer regulation regarding (especially) gender and sexuality norms. During adolescence, youth in general report stronger prejudicial attitudes and more frequent homophobic behavior at younger ages. Young adolescents may be developmentally susceptible to social exclusion behavior and attitudes, whereas older youth are able to make more sophisticated evaluative judgments regarding human rights, fairness, and prejudice. Therefore, today’s LGBT youth typically come out during a developmental period characterized by strong peer influence and opinion and are more likely to face peer victimization when they come out. Such victimization has well-documented psychological consequences.

Add to this social dynamic strong religious beliefs that inform communal values and attitudes, and the likelihood of alienation or victimization in our school setting not only becomes probable, but has also been readily observed in our students and alumni. Intentionally working with students to care for one another while reversing these harmful activities is warranted.

The purpose of the group is to attend to the social, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of

- students who identify as LGBTQ,
- students who have personal questions related to matters of SOGI, and
- students who are looking to support their peers and grow in their understanding of others.

PARTICIPATION

The group description clearly states that this group is not a requirement for all students. It is voluntary for students in Grades 9 - 12. Should a need arise for any students in Grade 7 or 8, the principal/adult facilitator will assess and determine what level of engagement might be suitable based on their maturity. The confidentiality of the participants and their conversations will be strictly enforced to prevent student harm.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

One of the most troubling concerns for parents is the lack of transparency the school can provide in regards to what happens in real time within the group. As parents ourselves, we understand this feeling of “loss of control” deeply. While provincial regulations were originally put in place to protect students, these can feel like a hurdle to fostering trust and the communication needed to help our children. To this point, we want to assure our families that CCS staff recognize that it is in the best interest of students to have and sustain open communication and healthy relationships with their parents. To that end, it will remain the stated intent of the group’s adult facilitator to understand each student’s home environment, and - as circumstances permit - encourage, equip, and assist them to have safe, meaningful, and constructive conversations with their parents about their feelings, experiences, and concerns.

BIBLICAL TEACHING

The most fundamental challenge identified by parents concerning the group’s operation is its content - that is, what will be said or “taught” to students who participate.

As an extension of our programming, the student group is subject to the CSCE’s foundational documents, including its mission, vision, values, and education philosophy. It operates according to the goals set out in our CCS Learning Experience and is governed by the policies for faith integration that inform all CCS programs. In accordance with these statements, this means it respects and acts upon the authority of Scripture.

In respecting both the authority of Scripture and the diversity of perspectives inherent within our Christian community, teaching staff at the secondary prioritize finding common ground through a discernment process with students that starts with referencing the Bible. The approach expects all learners to practice the “3R’s”:

1. Root their choices (ideas, opinions, decisions) in the Bible,
2. Reflect the Image of Christ in their treatment of others and
3. Respect diverse opinions as each person grows in their journey towards knowledge and wisdom. In addition to being “Biblically-rooted”, students are

also encouraged to seek out the wisdom of their parents, their church, and other authoritative sources.

These same values and standards of classroom practice apply to the student group. Recalling its purpose, we are reminded again that this is not a “debate club” pitting students or ideas against each other to resolve an answer. This allows parents’ beliefs and the teaching of a student’s church to remain integrated within the context of student learning.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

We have heard some say that the existence of this group nullifies our Christian identity - that it makes CCS like any other public school. To the contrary, we must assert that we have the unique advantage of approaching the needs of these students with the living person of Jesus Christ - continuing to connect their sense of value and purpose to their identity as children created by a loving God, saved by the sacrifice of Jesus, and equipped with the Holy Spirit to contribute to the growth of the Kingdom. Those are not statements or values to be found in just any public school. They are the distinctives that continue to inform and inspire the staff daily in their tasks as Christian educators, and will continue to be central to the activities of this new student group.

OTHER SUPPORTS

In addition to maintaining our Christian integrity in the operation of this group, there is also a deep desire to do it “well”. This means being willing and able to access professional resources to ensure student safety and care, as well as authoritative information to supplement learning on specific topics beyond our general knowledge.

Research continues to show that students who identify as part of a sexual minority or who even question their sexuality are particularly vulnerable to serious personal harm, not only socially but also mentally. This includes a much higher likelihood of clinical depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide (up to 3x more likely). A supportive, student group may be helpful in these instances, but cannot address significant mental health issues should they arise. Students who present with any symptoms of concern will be provided support by the existing Family School Liaison and Making Connections Coordinator, who may make recommendations for licensed psychiatric or other professional care. This level of care is available to any and all students regardless of their participation in the student group.

In terms of other information, group facilitators (currently, our secondary principal) will curate a media library to support further learning in the diverse Christian perspectives on SOGI topics. This will include things such as theologically informed

commentaries, scientific research, personal testimonies and other stories. Members of the community may recommend sources or even provide copies for the library. These resources will be made available to support personal learning and growth, and serve as complements to ongoing student dialogues, specific or individual questions, and general edification of group members or staff concerning these topics.

COMMUNITY AND UNITY

Finally, there are concerns that this group and the student needs it addresses will only serve to generate divisiveness within our community. In a body of believers, consensus is often difficult to find, and the resulting conflict can sometimes end in harm. In His Word, God has given us the foundation to be both gracious and loving as we seek resolution, and it is our role as a school to help our community find unity even in disagreement. This is what we are trying to equip our students to do in and beyond high school.

We readily acknowledge that we have chosen the far more demanding approach in making space for many Christian differences; this is the community we are structured to be and aspire to become. We also understand that this environment might be challenging for some to acclimate to or accept. It is not for families to force the community to conform to their will or expectations, but rather for each of us to weigh our ability to live in harmony with each other in spite of our differences. It is also incumbent on parents to choose what the best environment is for their children relative to their familial beliefs, priorities and needs. We acknowledge that CCS might not be to everyone's preference, but for those who choose to participate, they are expected to do so in accordance with our established communal values - respectfully and graciously.

The development of this new student group is a unique opportunity for us to transform a legal and cultural expectation into something extraordinary in service to God's Kingdom. This process has granted us the opportunity to specifically ask how a group of students questioning their sexual identity can be informed by the Scriptures and defined in the person of Jesus Christ – the Word Incarnate. We love all our students and seek to build deeper relationships with every one as God's covenant children.

FOLLOW UP

We've attempted to address the most significant and recurring concerns shared with us by our community in this written response. We trust that it lays out clearly the direction CCS is taking in this matter. The CSCE Board has also reviewed and approved the content within this communication.

We invite each reader to reflect on these responses to come to a better understanding of our mission-informed response to this student group and its operations. Should you have any final comments or unanswered questions, we invite you to attend a meeting with CCS leadership on **Tuesday May 17, 2022 at 7:00 PM** in the LINC at our secondary school campus. This dialogue will be led by our secondary principal, Jadan Barthel, and CSCE executive director, Ken DeWyn. The focus will be primarily on any comments and questions that arise from this written response.

Respectfully submitted, with prayers and service towards greater unity and understanding,

The Secondary Leadership Team

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