WITHOUT EXCEPTION
GIVE RISE TO HOPE

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LGBTQ+ MINISTRY IN CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOLS
A GUIDE FOR GETTING STARTED

Through every abundant grace, we pray that God is able to carry us through the obstacles and difficulties encountered on this journey together (St. Elizabeth Ann Seton).

This guide is a living document intended to serve as a pastoral resource, **not a theological treatise**. It is written for Catholic high school professionals seeking to accompany LGBTQ+ students but struggling with how to begin. For many schools there is no firsthand experience in these matters, so this document aims to share collective wisdom. Not every suggestion will be relevant to the unique circumstances in each school; however, there is a universal desire for every person in Catholic schools to experience the love of Christ and to feel safe in person, property, space, and opinion.

This guide is written through the lens of ministry to adolescents; however, other generations of LGBTQ+ persons are present in our communities as well—and they must be cared for under similar principles. *Every person is created in the image of God, called to a life of holiness, and destined to seek union with the divine.* Every person in a Catholic school community has the right to feel noticed, named, and known.

While written with a focus on Catholic secondary schools, the material discussed in this guide is transferable to other Christian sectors. This conversation is often guarded and private in Catholic institutions, which contributes to the work being done nervously and in secret. The hope is that this resource will open a dialogue, present a pathway forward, and remind leaders that the end goal is better pastoral care for human persons.

ACTION PLAN FOR STARTING AN LGBTQ+ MINISTRY

STEP 1: Discern the Call

What would it look like to explore how we can better serve our LGBTQ+ students? This is a critical question for Catholic schools. An answer begins with listening to the stories of LGBTQ+ students, but it must continue with a prayerful commitment to "faith seeking understanding." Through a commitment to authentic dialogue, we pray to grow in wisdom, age, and favor (Lk 2:52).

Principle: "A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring" (USCCB, Option for the Poor and Vulnerable).

Actions:

1. Identify and partner with an ally group of adults and students for initial support.

2. Assess your school's threshold and readiness for this conversation. Questions might include:
    a. What fears does each individual bring to the table?
    b. Does your school community acknowledge LGBTQ+ persons in any way?
    c. Are there any restrictions on speaking about or offering support to LGBTQ+ persons?
    d. Are there students asking for or showing a need for this ministry?
    e. Are there other diversity initiatives at your school? Are these initiatives public or private?
    f. Is the administration supportive? The religious order? The diocese? Can you identify and collaborate with allies from these groups?

3. Organize a meeting between the ally group and key administrators to achieve two goals:
    a. Share student testimony (in person, recorded, or in writing).
    b. Ask the critical question: *Can we explore how we might better serve our LGBTQ+ students?*

STEP 2: Select a Task Force

If your school is willing to explore ministry to LGBTQ+ students, then this effort will require support from both school and church leaders who have substantial competencies in knowledge, skill, and endurance. Education in the Catholic intellectual tradition must be balanced equally with formation in the virtues of Catholic social teaching. Furthermore, a task force will need to prepare a shared vision with language that will stand up to scrutiny.

Principle: "Authority is exercised legitimately only when it seeks the common good of the group concerned" (CCC 1903).

Actions:

1. Establish a task force, including persons from relevant disciplines; for example, administration, campus ministry, counseling, theology. It is best not to include leaders who will make the final decision.
    a. *Not every adult is a good ally*. An ideal member of the task force is well-regarded in the community; connected to the students, faculty, and staff; intellectually and emotionally mature; tactful in difficult conversations; hospitable, faithful, patient, and kind.

2. Identify misgivings and obstacles within the school community so they can be addressed proactively.

3. In cooperation with the ally group, commit to adult education and professional development. Use resources that avoid divisiveness and establish a foundation in Catholic doctrine, Catholic school identity, and the ongoing work of the new evangelization. Some resources include:
    a. Catechism of the Catholic Church 142-184, 1700-1876, 2331-2400;
    b. The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools (Miller, 2006);
    c. Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions (USCCB, 2011);
    d. Living as Missionary Disciples (USCCB, 2017);
    e. The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022)
    f. National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (Second Edition) (NCEA, 2023).
    g. In a State of Journeying: Inclusion in Catholic Schools (Palmieri, 2024).

STEP 3: Clarify the Goals

There is a fear among some Catholic school leaders that supporting LGBTQ+ ministry compromises the integrity of a Catholic school. This is not true. An open posture to welcome all students does not have to challenge the positions of Catholic doctrine. The goal of LGBTQ+ ministry is twofold: (1) to meet the needs of students who are created in the image of God so they feel welcome in the Body of Christ, and (2) to accompany students on the path to holiness as they discover their own uniqueness in relationship with God, self, and others. Students feel like they belong when they are *noticed, named, and known* on their journeys to discover who God is calling them to be.

Principle: Solidarity is a direct demand of Christian fellowship (CCC 1939).

Actions:

1. Administer an anonymous school climate survey that probes matters of identity and belonging for *all* students.
    a. If such a survey is beyond your school's threshold, then use the school climate information available through GLSEN.

STEP 4: Acknowledge the Reality

Our classrooms and campuses have become a new kind of courtyard, where young people bring their lives and experiences of culture to our Catholic institutions of learning, faith, and service. Catholic schools must venture to meet students in this space, in order to create communities where members discover each person has meaning, purpose, and value.

Principle: "The heart is the place of this quest and encounter, in poverty and in faith" (CCC 2710).

Actions:

1. Share the school (or GLSEN) climate survey data with the ally group and administration.
    a. Schedule meetings to review the data and brainstorm areas for action.

2. If supported by the data, then request to write a proposal for LGBTQ+ ministry at your school.

3. Begin offering prayers in your school community that simply acknowledge the diversity of human experience.

STEP 5: Design the Program

The purpose of support groups is to create opportunities for fellowship in learning, faith, and service. LGBTQ+ students do not often encounter people who are like them; therefore, finding solidarity in shared experiences can be transformative. St. Teresa of Calcutta said, "Do not worry about why problems exist in the world, just respond to people's needs." Schools should have the confidence to advertise groups and events that welcome LGBTQ+ students and allies.

Principle: "Support groups, noted for their adherence to Church teaching . . . continue to be an important part of Church ministries and are to be encouraged" (USCCB, Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination).

Actions:

1. In concert with the ally group, write a proposal for LGBTQ+ ministry that is connected to the Catholic *mission, vision, and values* of your school community.
    a. Include climate survey data and testimony from students.
    b. Identify potential group moderators.
    c. Choose a group name that respects Catholic tradition and the school's threshold.
    d. Identify calendar days when LGBTQ+ persons and issues can be acknowledged.
    e. Highlight programming ideas; for example:
        i. Learning Events
            1. Guest speakers
            2. Confronting prejudice
            3. Identifying allies and helping create welcoming places
            4. Forming healthy relationships
        ii. Faith Events
            1. Prayer/Reflection experiences (spiritual exercises)
            2. Liturgy of the Hours
            3. Scripture/Catechism studies
            4. Liturgy experiences
            5. Retreats
        iii. Service Events
            1. Campus ministry partnerships
            2. Spirit Day and Day of Silence (GLSEN)
            3. Supporting charities (like The Trevor Project or the Family Acceptance Project)
        iv. Social Events
            1. Creating playlists
            2. Movie or TV show screenings
            3. Book clubs with LGBTQ+ authors or protagonists
            4. Partnering with other LGBTQ+ ministries

STEP 6: Launch the Plan

Creating a safe environment offers students an opportunity to be themselves as beloved children of God. “Love will always be the greatest sum: we cannot love the God we cannot see if we do not love the brother or sister we do see” (CCC 2840). While it is understandable that some schools might not be ready to recognize an LGBTQ+ ministry in their external media, the ministry does not need to be hidden within the life of the school.

Principles: “It is not enough to love the young, they must know that they are loved” (St. John Bosco).

Actions:

1. Create and display an LGBTQ+ affirming symbol in welcoming spaces, while also negotiating your school’s threshold for comfort and support.

2. Empower students to help choose group meeting times, locations, and agendas.

3. Schedule occasional check-ins that bring together various stakeholders for dialogue (moderators, administration, task force, ally group, etc.).
    a. Continue to discern the threshold for LGBTQ+ support as an integrated ministry in the school community.
    b. Reaffirm the commitment of school leadership to buffer the group from outside questions and controversies.

4. Be welcoming to LGBTQ+ faculty and staff, whose unique gifts can be a blessing for others in the community.
    a. Discuss adding employment and retention protections to the faculty contract and handbook for employment.

A WELCOMING APPROACH TO GENDER NONCONFORMING STUDENTS IN CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

Go forth without fear, for he who created you has made you holy, has always protected you, and loves you as a mother. Blessed be you, my God, for having created me (St. Clare of Assisi).

The Congregation for Catholic Education has declared, "The educating community is responsible for ensuring respect for the life, dignity, and freedom of pupils and other members of the school, putting in place all necessary procedures to promote and protect minors" (Identity of the Catholic School, 40). Gender nonconforming students should be held to the same standards of admission and retention as other students; however, these cases are unique and must be evaluated according to the needs of the student and the ability of the school to offer a resolution. If someone who identifies as gender nonconforming is supported by parents and counseling professionals, then admission or retention must be taken seriously. All children and their families should be welcomed at Catholic schools without prejudice, and be admitted to the rights, privileges, programs, and activities offered to all community members.

It is important to understand that a gender nonconforming student is not an *ideology*—the student is a human person. Catholic doctrine is clear that a human person is irreducibly complex in body, mind, and soul; a person is more than just a sexual or gender identity. Nonetheless, Pope Francis has said, "Realities are greater than ideas" and in every case we must "welcome it, accompany it, look into it . . . . This is what Jesus would do today." The Catholic school does not sacrifice any of its identity to employ the methodology of Jesus Christ to *encounter* and *accompany* persons seeking community in Catholic education.

Given the uniquely personal and private circumstances of gender nonconforming students, **it is best for schools not to have rigid policies**. Instead, schools need to be proactive by developing a strategic plan for student accompaniment. This is a responsibility that cannot be ignored. Without a plan in place, an unjust hardship is placed on "first families" to educate and support the communities they want to join. Additionally, schools need to be direct about what they are willing and able to do as partners in this state of journeying. These are our children, and how we treat them with honesty and compassion reflects what we mean by *unconditional love* and the *consistent ethic of life*.

Most gender nonconforming students and their families do not arrive at Catholic schools with a list of demands. Instead, they simply seek to participate in a community that offers them respect, opportunity, and peace—the three constitutive elements of the common good. Schools sometimes fear that bad actors will abuse special policies for improper purposes, yet that fear is hardly a reality. A gender nonconforming student is very different from a student who would devise such a scheme, and deception can be identified easily through a well-planned screening process that includes trusted professionals.

STRATEGIC PLAN TO WELCOME GENDER NONCONFORMING STUDENTS

OBJECTIVE 1: Form a Care Team

The purpose of a care team is threefold: (1) to listen to the student, (2) to support the needs of the student, and (3) to buffer the student as much as possible from internal and external risks (for example, prejudice, bullying, anxiety, and depression).

Principle: "Human society can be neither well-ordered nor prosperous unless it has some people invested with legitimate authority to preserve its institutions and to devote themselves as far as is necessary to work and care for the good of all" (CCC 1897).

Actions:

1. A care team must be prepared in advance to accompany gender nonconforming students. The team should represent important areas of school life (for example, administration, counseling, campus ministry).
    a. *Not every adult is a good ally*. An ideal member of the task force is well-regarded in the community; connected to the students, faculty, and staff; intellectually and emotionally mature; tactful in difficult conversations; hospitable, faithful, patient, and kind.

2. The care team should be prepared to include the family, another school representative of the student's choice, and the student's personal/family counselor. Working as a team is in the best interest of the student, assuring that the student is supported in school and at home. There must also be a plan for regular communication.

3. The care team must be prepared to engage the student and family in conversations about what resolutions are reasonable and possible. These circumstances require case-by-case consideration.

4. If a group does not already exist, the care team should work to establish an LGBTQ+ support group for students in the school. This group is important for the development of positive, affirming, and healthy relationships among peers.

OBJECTIVE 2: Establish a Communication Plan

Effective leadership requires a clear and consistent communication plan as a necessary ingredient for success. Schools that commit to accompanying a gender nonconforming student will need to consider the many facets of respect and restraint required for the good of the student and the community.

Principle: “Everyone should observe an appropriate reserve concerning persons' private lives. Those in charge of communications should maintain a fair balance between the requirements of the common good and respect for individual rights” (CCC 2492).

Actions:

1. Schools must prepare communication plans to protect the privacy of persons and the confidentiality of information. Care must be taken to prevent the inadvertent outing of a student.

2. A communication plan must consider what information is allowed to be shared, with whom, and how to address questions from those outside the school. Beyond applicable laws, a standard of reasonableness should govern these decisions. “No one is bound to reveal the truth to someone who does not have the right to know it” (CCC 2489).

OBJECTIVE 3: Build Protections

A Catholic school “is a school for all” (Identity of a Catholic Schools, 22). Safeguards must be in place to protect all students from physical and emotional harm. While adolescents are still works-in-progress, those who act in bad faith must be held accountable with suitable corrective or punitive sanctions.

Principle: "It is necessary that all members of society meet the demands of justice and charity" (CCC 2495).

Actions:

1. Schools should have in place handbook policies on discrimination, harassment, bullying, and hate speech. These policies should include specific statements that homophobia, transphobia, sexism, racism, and other forms of violence are unacceptable and inconsistent with Catholic values.

2. Any violations of school policies that protect students must be taken seriously and investigated thoroughly.
    a. Mercy and justice are important virtues in a Catholic school. While correction and reconciliation are noble goals (mercy), wilful acts of malice should trigger grave consequences (justice).

OBJECTIVE 4: Design Professional Development

Catholic schools are designed to inspire lives of learning, faith, and service. The ongoing development of knowledge and skills is essential for faculty and staff, especially in the areas of diversity. Rather than seeking secular programs to increase awareness and competencies, schools should seek to create experiences that engage more deeply the prominent themes of Catholic social teaching: dignity, stewardship, solidarity, option for the poor, participation, subsidiarity, common good. When grounded in Catholic faith, these themes provide a theological and pastoral justification for creating communities of inclusion.

Principle: "Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults" (CCC 1784).

Actions:

1. Professional development should be designed to introduce faculty and staff to the language and principles of Catholic social teaching and LGBTQ+ accompaniment.

2. Faculty and staff must be trained in the school communication plan, so that they understand privacy, confidentiality, and how to handle various circumstances—including when to defer matters to the administration.

OBJECTIVE 5: Prepare for Challenges from the Community

Almsgiving, works of mercy, and acts of charity are mandates of the gospel, but serving the LGBTQ+ community brings greater scrutiny. Questions and grievances are to be expected (from internal and external constituents), so the posture of school leaders should seek first to listen and then discern ways to transcend the conflict.

Principle: "Conversion is accomplished in daily life by gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right, by the admission of faults to one's brethren, fraternal correction, revision of life, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness" (CCC 1435).

Actions:

1. Navigating community challenges begins with a clear articulation of mission and identity. All concerns should be heard with openness and humility, and all responses should begin by establishing common ground.
    a. The point of entry is agreement upon the mission statement of the school, the charism of the community, and the ministry of Jesus Christ.
    b. It is also important to express that a plan to accompany gender nonconforming students does not imply acceptance of positions that are inconsistent with Catholic faith.
    c. The goal of accompaniment is to support individual students in the least disruptive way possible.

2. Administrators, the care team, and others involved in accompanying gender nonconforming students should be familiar with scriptural foundations for inclusive ministry. Stories of transformative encounters with Christ include:
    a. James and John (Matthew 20:20-28)
    b. Peter (Luke 5:1-11)
    c. Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37)
    d. Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42)
    e. Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)
    f. Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael (John 1:35-51)
    g. Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10)
    h. Samaritan Woman (John 4:4-42)
    i. Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18)
    j. Thomas (John 20:24-29)

3. For the most strident parents who might seek to interfere with school prerogatives, discuss adding a Parent Code of Conduct to the family/student handbook.

GUIDANCE ON SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The list below is alphabetical and highlights a series of contentious sexuality and gender identity issues that require great attention and sensitivity. “In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity…[the governing body should not] substitute itself for the initiative and responsibility of individuals and intermediary bodies” (CCC 1894). Individual schools will need to consider present thresholds to determine the road ahead. A willingness to engage in proactive measures and strategic planning will ultimately mitigate spontaneous reactions, which often lead to divided communities.

There is an important difference between accompanying an adolescent through various stages of discernment and disclosure, and implementing institutional accommodations intended to support a student’s school experience. Accommodations will require consultation between school and home.

Athletics
Providing opportunities for students to participate in sports and other activities is an integral part of adolescent development and formation; however, sports participation for gender nonconforming students is highly contested. Catholic schools must continue to build relationships with balanced partners who are willing to engage in quiet, rational dialogue and think creatively about solutions that are right and just. Safety and fairness are paramount but must also be balanced with humility and compassion, and the initial presumption should be one that maximizes access, flexibility, and privacy. For example, consideration should be given to the physical demands of some sports in contrast to the strategic demands of others (music, theater, speech, and esports, for example). To avoid targeted exclusion, schools should be proactive. If a student’s participation in a sport will be rejected, then alternative sports/activities should be presented in which a student **can** participate. This issue extends beyond Catholic schools and will necessarily include state athletic associations and legal considerations. Two secular organizations offering possible insight are GLSEN and the LGBT Sports Foundation.

Bathrooms and Locker Rooms
Any person should have the right to a single occupancy space if needed.

Chastity
All students are called to chastity, which is a moral virtue inviting all the faithful to self-mastery in forming healthy friendships and properly integrating human sexuality. “The deliberate use of the sexual faculty, for whatever reason, outside of marriage is essentially contrary to its purpose” (CCC 2337-2359).

Dances
It is the responsibility of every Catholic school to educate its students on the authentic message of the gospel, including the call that all students are to live chastely “in friendship with one’s neighbor” (CCC 2347). While some schools worry that permitting same-sex guests at a school

dance will cause an occasion of sin or scandal, those schools also risk scandal by misrepresenting the love of Christ if certain people are unwelcome in the Kingdom of God. Pastoral applications should be the result of open dialogue; for example, tickets to all dances can be sold individually without regard for singles or couples.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The original purpose of Catholic education was to serve poor immigrant families who were not accepted by mainstream culture. Catholic schools have a moral mandate to welcome and care for "today's immigrants," especially those who are marginalized by intersecting factors of race, ethnicity, class, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender, physical appearance, and/or disability. "It is evident that [justice] stands foremost among all the moral virtues" (St. Thomas Aquinas). Catholic schools can transcend DEI conflicts by talking instead about the principles of Catholic social teaching.

Dress Code

Dress codes in Catholic schools typically reinforce principles of professionalism and modesty (CCC 2522). Gender-neutral options should be available for both boys and girls. Additionally, schools should evaluate their policies to identify and reconsider places where gender and cultural stereotypes are reinforced (for example: hair length, hair style, nail polish, makeup, earrings, piercings, clothing colors, fabric patterns, tattoos, pants/skirts, shoes). Fashion is subjective, and schools must reflect on enforcement practices to eliminate cultural biases.

Faith Formation

Although not specific to LGBTQ+ youth, formation in a life of Catholic prayer is an important strategy for building communities of belonging. Opportunities for welcoming LGBTQ+ persons include Mass; scripture studies; retreats; service projects; prayer experiences like the Liturgy of the Hours, the Rosary, and Adoration; and experiences with the sacraments.

Flags and Symbols

While it is helpful to display an affirming symbol for LGBTQ+ inclusion, the use of pride flags needs to be decided based on a threshold assessment at the school. Displaying flags does not necessarily mean tacit endorsement of anti-Catholic values (*fallacy of composition*); however, which symbols are used should be the result of open dialogue.

Group Work

If concerned about controversies over groupings like boys and girls, then groups can be arranged by alternative categories like birth month or alphabetically by first or last initial.

Laws

Schools should seek legal counsel on matters pertaining to state and federal laws, including Titles VII and IX, FERPA, and discrimination laws.

Medicine
The Catholic Church has clear doctrines on therapeutic and nontherapeutic medical treatments and procedures, including amputations, mutilations, and sterilizations (CCC 2291-2292). While schools can determine what they will or will not agree to as a matter of religious freedom, schools should also refrain from entangling in matters of private family medicine.

Names and Pronouns
Discerning the proper way to accompany students requires time and careful discernment, not rash judgments that cause unjust injury (CCC 2477). Decisions about names are part of an ongoing journey to build and support relationships, so pastoral applications should be the result of open dialogue with parents and mental health professionals. A leading principle should always be that a person has the right to be known by the name they choose (CCC 203). A possible compromise is to avoid the use of pronouns by consistent use of a student's name, nickname, or initials.

Nondiscrimination Policy
Schools should publish a nondiscrimination policy in their handbooks and on their website. Current and prospective employees, students, and families will appreciate this public disclosure of assurance that they will not be rejected because of their identity.

Official School Records
Concerning official school documents, there are a number of considerations at hand for gender nonconforming students. If official documents require legal names, one possibility is to distinguish between the use of names on internal and external documents. Schools should be prepared with strategies to address name concerns that include:

- Alternate names or nicknames
- Technology accounts
- Course registration
- Extracurricular registration
- Alumni notes
- Enrollment paperwork
- Learning management systems
- Teacher grade books
- Rosters
- Standardized tests
- School photos
- School identification cards
- Yearbook
- Graduation Diploma/Program
- Counseling/Guidance documents
- Official student files
- School communications
- Intercom announcements
- Summons slips
- Alumni records/announcements

Parental Notification
Catholic schools are partners in the education and formation of students, but "parents are the principal and first educators of their children" (CCC 1653). It is a grave matter to discuss a student's sexual orientation or gender identity without permission, so schools must discern a proper balance between honesty and discretion in these matters (CCC 2469). Schools should not implement significant changes without parental involvement. However, schools should not discuss a student's LGBTQ+ identity without first assessing that student's perceived risk for

rejection or maltreatment. The school should work with the student to develop disclosure skills and plan steps that strengthen the parent-child relationship, so that the student is empowered in the conversation. In no case should a school withhold concerns about a student's life, health, or safety—but these concerns can be shared without disclosing a student's sexuality or gender identity.

Retreats and Overnight Trips

Any student should have the option for a single occupancy space if needed. This accommodation is often limited, so single bedrooms and other private spaces can be made available by lottery—with the intention always to meet the needs of a student who needs this space. If single spaces are not available, then decisions should maximize safety and privacy for all persons involved. Some considerations include having no fewer than 3 students in a room, allowing students to choose their roommates, sleeping in a common area, or staying with a family member in a room or nearby location.

Same-Sex Parents

All children and their families should be welcomed at Catholic schools without prejudice, and be admitted to the rights, privileges, programs, and activities offered to all families at the school. "The Church does not refuse the Sacrament of Baptism to these children," so neither should Catholic schools refuse admission or retention for these families (Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination).