



Live Life to the Full 1 |

# EREA Safe & Inclusive Learning Communities Statement

This position paper presents Edmund Rice Education Australia's response to providing safe and inclusive learning environments for all students, in particular for same-sex attracted and gender diverse young people.

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## Our Context

Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA), as a part of the Catholic Church, supports EREA schools to be authentic Catholic schools in the Edmund Rice tradition. As Catholic schools inspired by the life of Edmund Rice and the Christian Brothers, the Inclusive Community touchstone (EREA Charter 2017) figures prominently in this identity.

Our sacred scripture reminds us (Genesis 1) that each and every person is made in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, each person has their own inherent dignity and is intended by God to grow to fullness. For EREA, this means supporting each young person to achieve growth and liberation through pastoral as well as academic and co-curricular support.

Jesus, the great includer, challenges us with a radical vision of love and inclusion. Pope Francis takes up this challenge: *"We would like before all else to reaffirm that every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while 'every sign of unjust discrimination' is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression and violence."* Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia: The Joy of Love*, 19 March 2016.

Our schools have a moral and legal responsibility to ensure that each student receives an education free from discrimination and bullying irrespective of their sexual orientation and gender. More importantly, Edmund Rice inspires us to give particular care to young people who might otherwise be excluded and rejected.

Catholic schools in the Edmund Rice tradition recognise that to be inclusive communities, students, parents, care-givers and other family members, as well as staff must be valued in all their diversity.

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## Our Imperative

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of and therefore, experience in caring for, same-sex attracted and gender questioning students in all schools in Australia. There has also been an increased awareness of children who are members of same-sex couple families.

- > In 2013 16.8% of secondary school students reported to be same-sex attracted or attracted to people of both sexes<sup>i</sup>
- > 1.7% of children born in Australia are estimated to be intersex.<sup>ii</sup>
- > In 2011 there were 6,300 children living in same-sex couple families in Australia, up from 3,400 in 2001.<sup>iii</sup>

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**Our community is accepting and welcoming, fostering right relationships & committed to the common good.**

Inclusive Community – Charter for Catholic Schools in the Edmund Rice Tradition

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EDMUND RICE EDUCATION  
AUSTRALIA

Research carried out over the last twenty years has highlighted the strong correlation between homophobic and transphobic abuse and the impact on the mental health and wellbeing of victims. This research has demonstrated that schools are the predominant location for this abuse, both verbal and physical.

- > In 2010 61% of young people who are same-sex attracted or gender questioning reported verbal abuse because of homophobia (18% physical abuse and 26% 'other' forms of homophobia). Young men and gender questioning young people reported more abuse than young women.<sup>v</sup>
- > Schools were identified as the major site in which homophobia and transphobia prevailed.<sup>v</sup>
- > Almost double the number of young people who had been verbally abused (40%), in comparison with those who had experienced no abuse, had thought of self harm (22%) - and three times those who had been physically abused (62%).
- > Twice the number of young people who suffered verbal abuse, in comparison to those who had experienced no abuse, had attempted suicide, and four and a half times the number of young people who had been physically assaulted had attempted suicide.<sup>vi</sup>

Given this current context, the purpose of this document is to ensure that in living out the Inclusive Community Touchstone, the wellbeing and educational needs of young people who are same-sex attracted or gender questioning are being addressed in EREA schools.

## Terminology

**"Same-sex attracted"** is used throughout this document as an inclusive term in regards to sexual orientation when used in relation to adolescents. Some students will consistently identify as other than heterosexual while the experience of same-sex attraction for other students at that stage of development does not necessarily indicate a fixed or lasting homosexual or bisexual orientation. "Same-sex attracted" is therefore inclusive of all relevant young people as it also includes those young people who do identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

**"Transgender"** relates to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex. A person who is transgender may or not decide to "transition", which requires medical and psychological support.

**"Gender questioning"** relates to people who may be questioning the validity of their biological sex.

**"Intersex"** relates to a person who is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male.

## Positional Statements

1. Every human person – child, young person and adult – is made in the image and likeness of God. (Gen 1:26-27) "It is fundamental for our human development that our dignity, freedom and autonomy be acknowledged and respected."<sup>vii</sup>
2. Jesus of Nazareth demonstrated through his words and actions a radical vision of inclusiveness.
3. Edmund Rice's inclusivity was evident in his deliberate actions to ensure that each individual felt valued, respected, and accepted irrespective of their circumstances.
4. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a reminder that no child should experience discrimination based on the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.<sup>viii</sup>
5. EREA values the diversity of our school communities, and embraces all students, staff, and family members irrespective of their sexual orientation.
6. Research clearly indicates that students achieve their potential in safe and supportive learning environments. A sense of belonging and connectedness are paramount to the development of positive student wellbeing and self-esteem.
7. Students who are same sex attracted, transgender, intersex, or questioning their sexuality are more likely than other students to be marginalised in society which can affect their physical and psychological health.
8. Homophobia diminishes the dignity of all. The existence and acceptance of homophobic attitudes in a school can perpetuate narrow gender stereotypes.
9. Transgender identification is complex. Appropriate support requires collaboration of the young person, their parents and caregivers, appropriate professionals, as well as key school and EREA staff.

## Guidelines

In 2007 Fr Peter Norden SJ undertook a national study examining how Catholic schools can respond to same-sex attracted students. In 2017 EREA republished this report with some updates undertaken by Norden. In a recent article, he recommends that:

"In order to further enhance the development of an inclusive

A person once asked me, in a provocative manner, if I approved of homosexuality. I replied with another question: 'Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?' We must always consider the person. Here we enter into the mystery of the human being.

Pope Francis, America Magazine, 2013

school approach within Catholic secondary education, it was seen as important to emphasise three components of effective school administration:

- > A clear articulation of values,
- > The development of a policy emanating from those values,
- > The implementation of policy in a way that can be clearly seen as giving expression to those values<sup>ix</sup>

The outcomes of Norden's original report highlight the need to consider an integrated approach to the following four areas as a possible intervention plan to ensure a school community is safe and inclusive for all:

- > Pastoral Care & welfare and counselling services
- > Staff development and training
- > School curriculum and the availability of information and resources
- > The fostering and sustaining of an inclusive school culture.

In total, the study makes 21 worthwhile recommendations that need to be considered within the context of each individual school. Amongst the first tasks that ought to be considered are the following:

- 6.2 "It is recommended that a 'whole school approach' be adopted by each Catholic secondary school that clearly reflects an awareness of the presence of same sex attracted individuals in its student community.
- 6.4 It is recommended that each Catholic secondary school includes in its discrimination and harassment policies, guidelines and procedures that address homophobia, along with sexism, racism and other forms of violence.
- 6.5 It is recommended that Catholic secondary schools review their existing policies, procedures, guidelines, programs and practices to ensure that they are inclusive of the needs of same sex attracted students.
- 6.8 It is recommended that each Catholic secondary school should seek to create an inclusive and supportive environment in which staff and students feel confident to explore issues of identity, difference and similarity."<sup>x</sup>

While Norden's report did not consider young people who are transgender, many of his recommendations should also be used to ensure the wellbeing of these students through explicit references and acknowledgment. Specific recommendations include:

1. It is recommended that policies, guidelines and procedures regarding discrimination and harassment should be updated to ensure that transphobia is addressed explicitly.
2. It is recommended that the approach taken if a student discloses a wish to transition should be developed under the advice of and in collaboration with the young person, their parents and caregivers, appropriate professionals, as well as key school and EREA staff. The approach taken may differ from one student to the next, however, it should always reflect the schools' care for the particular young person and their family as valued members of the school community.

Schools, depending on their individual circumstances, ought to consider implementing appropriate recommendations over an extended period, based upon the integrated approach as outlined by Norden in '*Safe and Inclusive Learning Communities*' (2017).

Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us.

Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, (2015)



The human person, made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reductionist reference to his or her sexual orientation. Everyone living on the face of the earth has personal problems and difficulties, but challenges to growth, strength, talents and gifts as well. Today, the church provides a badly needed context for the care of the human person when she refuses to consider the person as a “heterosexual” or a “homosexual” and insists that every person has a fundamental identity: a creature of God, and by grace, His child and heir to eternal life.

CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH,  
LETTER TO THE BISHOPS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON THE PASTORAL CARE  
OF HOMOSEXUAL PERSONS, 1986

- i Mitchell A, Patrick K, Heywood W, Blackman P, Pitts M. (2014). *National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2013*, (ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 97), Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.
- ii *Face the Facts: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people 2014*, Australian Human Rights Commission, [www.humanrights.gov.au/publications](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications) (accessed 20/1/17).
- iii *Face the Facts 2014* (accessed 20/1/17).
- iv Hillier, L., Demsey D., Harrison, L., Beale, L., Matthews, L., & Rosenthal, D. (2010). *Writing Themselves In 3: The Third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people*. National Centre in HIV Social Research, LaTrobe University, Melbourne.
- v Robinson, KH, Bansel, P, Denson, N, Ovenden, G & Davies, C. (2013). *Growing Up Queer: Issues Facing Young Australia Who Are Gender Variant and Sexuality Diverse*, Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne.
- vi Hillier, L., Demsey D., Harrison, L., Beale, L., Matthews, L., & Rosenthal, D. (2010). *Writing Themselves In 3: The Third national study on the sexual health and wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people*. National Centre in HIV Social Research, LaTrobe University, Melbourne.
- vii Pope Francis. (2015). *No Longer Slaves but Brothers and Sisters*, World Day of Peace Message, 1 January 2015.
- viii UNICEF, *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 2.1, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>, accessed 9th Nov 2016.
- ix Norden, Peter, (2015). *Not so straight: engaging same-sex attracted students in Catholic secondary schools – an Australian study*, *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, 22, 1, 179-201.
- x Norden, Peter, *Safe and Inclusive Learning Communities*, Edmund Rice Education Australia, Richmond Vic, 2017, pp 57.

