



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

Statement regarding Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions

The Guidelines for Best Practices document issued by the Minister of Education on January 13, 2016, contain many constructive, thoughtful and reasonable suggestions for Best Practices. Many of these are already being followed or could easily be adopted by Catholic schools without concern for adversely affecting the Catholicity of the schools.

For example, the Guidelines state that “Requests for supports are addressed on a case-by-case basis and solutions are evidence-informed and individualized to best meet the needs of the student making the request.” This underlines the principle of subsidiarity, the importance of allowing the educators who work directly with the students to determine individual needs and accommodations.

However, the Guidelines contain many other suggestions based on an underlying principle that is simply not congruent with Catholic teaching; that is, that “self-identification is the sole measure of an individual’s sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.” From this principle stems a number of suggestions for creating an artificial gender-neutral atmosphere in schools, often without proper regard to the rights and protections previously upheld for boys and girls and their mothers and fathers.

The Catholic belief is that the human person is created “body and soul” together (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 362f.), that God created human beings male and female (Mark 10:6), and that we are all called to care for and respect our bodies as they are created.

Pope Francis put it very well in his recent encyclical *Laudato Si*:

“The acceptance of our bodies as God’s gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human

ecology. Also, valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. (155)"

Of course, we know that some young people struggle with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, and that educators are called to respond with sensitivity, respect, mercy, and compassion. Catholic educators are already doing this, and we are confident that this sensitivity will be reflected in any policies brought forward by our districts.

However, a Catholic school cannot reasonably be expected to deny its faith base in its day-to-day operations and activities. In a Catholic school, all curricular and extra-curricular activity is to be rooted in and consistent with the principles of Catholic doctrine. A Catholic school is a unique and distinctive faith community of learning that not only pursues academic excellence but also nurtures the entire person. Our school boards will no doubt keep this in mind as they formulate policy.

It is important to note that the Minister has stated an appreciation of Catholic education and has demonstrated an openness to diverse circumstances by presenting the Guidelines for Best Practices only as recommendations.

We are proud of the tradition of Catholic education – Catholic schools were the very first in the province, and they enjoy a great deal of support today. Across the Archdiocese of Edmonton, the parents of some 85,000 children have chosen to send their kids to Catholic Schools, with the full understanding that Catholic faith and morals will be part of their comprehensive education.

Our culture and our society are enriched by a variety of faiths, beliefs and cultures. If we value this diversity, we must also value and defend the role of Catholic schools.

Finally, I must address the role of Catholic school trustees in the current discourse.

In Alberta, Catholic school trustees have two classes of rights, duties and responsibilities. There are those conferred by civil legislation (the provincial School Act) and shared with all other schools, and those conferred by Canon Law (the universal law of the Church) upon the Catholic school. These two lines of accountability require of trustees that they be not only stewards with exceptional governance skills but also people of faith and commitment to the Church and her mission.

In their pastoral letter [Reflecting on the Ministry of Catholic School Trustee](#), (September 28, 2013), the Catholic Bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories wrote:

“Fidelity to the Church, its teaching and its leaders enables the board of trustees and the local Church to think with one mind and work together in ministry to our students. The willingness and ability to share the faith with administration, teachers, students and the community is an essential feature of a Catholic school trustee. It requires the forging of trusting relationships with and among fellow trustees, staff, students, parents, clergy, and parishioners.”

The majority of trustees in the ten school districts that operate Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Edmonton appreciate the sacred and serious nature of their vocation, and serve faithfully, ethically and responsibly. It saddens me to say that this is not the case with some trustees in the Edmonton Catholic School District. There, for too long now, we have witnessed the inability of trustees to function in a cohesive way or speak with a unified voice. The words and actions of some trustees, rather than defending and upholding all that is good in Catholic education, have caused harm and hostility. In so doing, they have betrayed the trust placed in them by Catholic electors.

I urge these trustees to review the Trustees’ Code of Conduct to which they agreed, and reflect seriously on their commitment to the vocation of Catholic school trustee.

Most Rev. Richard W. Smith
Archbishop of Edmonton
21 January 2016