



Iontaobhas Scoileanna Éamainn Rís  
Edmund Rice Schools Trust

# Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in an Edmund Rice School

## *A safe and inclusive place for all*

This position paper is the Edmund Rice Schools Trust's response to providing a safe and inclusive learning environment for all members of the school community, in particular for same-sex attracted and gender diverse people.

### Introduction

The Edmund Rice Schools Trust supports its schools in line with the tenets of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust Charter. Our main object is to ensure and foster the advancement of education and to further the aims and purposes of Catholic education in the Edmund Rice tradition. We are part of a worldwide network, Edmund Rice Education Beyond Borders (EREBS).

Our schools promote equality of access and participation. We recognise the uniqueness of each individual in caring communities where holistic development is nurtured. In the spirit of Edmund Rice, we cherish and welcome children of all faiths and beliefs, at every level of ability, of any nationality or ethnic grouping and of any sexual orientation or gender identity.

Our schools uphold an ethos of social justice. Inspired by the five key elements of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust Charter our schools are responding to a changing world and supporting the leaders of the future to work in partnership, care for the environment, look after themselves and others equally and be inspirational citizens.

The five key elements of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust Charter are

- ✓ Nurturing faith, Christian spirituality and Gospel-based values;
- ✓ Promoting partnership;
- ✓ Excelling in teaching and learning;
- ✓ Creating a caring school community;
- ✓ Inspiring transformational leadership.

Creating a caring school community features prominently in our identity and in everything we do.

In the Bible, we are reminded that each and every person is made in the image and likeness of God. 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,..."*

**Pope Francis, Amoris Laetitia: The Joy of Love (Par 250), 19 March 2016.**

Edmund Rice schools are centres of love and inclusion where every person is cherished and supported. We will provide support for LGBTI and gender-diverse students in the formation of their identities. Furthermore, 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 identity. More importantly, Edmund Rice inspires us to give particular care to young people who might otherwise be excluded and rejected.

### Social Change

In recent years, Ireland has become a more open and inclusive place and our understanding and appreciation of diversity has been challenged by developments in society. Young people are coming out/transitioning at a younger age and are being supported by their families, schools and social networks.



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However, there are still unacceptable incidences of intolerance and exclusion which may result in some young people who may wish to come out/transition being reluctant to do so.

- ◆ 70% had seriously contemplated suicide
- ◆ 32% had attempted suicide.

**For many LGBT young people homophobic and transphobic bullying are serious issues that not only limit and prevent the formation of a positive identity but hinder them from feeling safe, supported and affirmed for who they are in school. (Being LGBT In School)**

- ✓ In 2010 just under a quarter of young people aged between 10-17 years reported that they were bullied at school at least once in the previous couple of months (Kelly et al, 2012).
- ✓ A 2016 study funded by the National Office for Suicide Prevention found that 50% of the lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT+) people who participated had been bullied as a consequence of their LGBT identity, or their perceived LGBT+ identity, while at school (LGBT Ireland Report, Higgins et al, 2016).
- ✓ This same report (Higgins et al., 2016) found that LGBT+ young people in the study:
  - ◆ Had twice the level of self-harm
  - ◆ Had three times the level of attempted suicide and
  - ◆ Had four times the level of severe stress, anxiety and depression levels
- ✓ Other statistics from the study included the following:
  - ◆ Only 20% of LGBT+ students felt that they completely belong in their schools
  - ◆ 25% of LGBT+ students skipped school or classes to avoid negative treatment
  - ◆ 25% considered leaving school
  - ◆ 56% of 14 -18 year-olds had self-harmed. Most said the self-harm was related to their LGBT+ identity

In a survey (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2013) of 8000 students, 8% identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual and a further 3% were unsure. The study above (Higgins et al, 2016) found that more and more young people were coming out in second-level school.

Most of the young people surveyed for these studies are in our schools. The mental health problems being experienced by these young people are not all necessarily due to identifying as LGBT+ but also due to the experiences of being bullied, rejected or harassed. This points to the importance of the school's role in developing and maintaining a caring, safe and inclusive environment where everyone feels welcome and experiences a sense of belonging.

In September 2013, the Department of Education & Skills published *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* with specific references to identity-based bullying. In 2016, BeLonG To, supported by the HSE and Healthy Ireland, published a 'LGBT Safe & Supportive Schools Toolkit'. This position paper uses many of the ideas and strategies in these publications.

## Terminology

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation are **not** the same.

Sexual orientation ranges along a continuum from exclusive sexual attraction to the opposite sex through to exclusive attraction to the same sex. People can identify their sexual orientation as heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Gender identity is the person's feeling of being male, female, both, a mixture or neither, which is shown to other people through gender expression – clothes, hairstyles, mannerisms etc.

A glossary of other terms is contained in the table below.

TERM	EXPLANATION
Bisexual	Romantically/sexually/emotionally attracted to people of either sex.
Gay	A man who is physically and emotionally attracted to someone of the same sex.
Lesbian	A woman who is physically and emotionally attracted to someone of the same sex.
Gender fluid	Gender identity that varies over time
Intersex	Sexual anatomy that does not fit the usual definitions of male or female.
Transgender (Trans)	Trans is an umbrella term used to describe people with a gender identity and /or gender expression different to their sex assigned at birth.
Coming Out	Coming out is the process through which an LGBT+ person accepts their sexual orientation or gender identity as part of their overall identity. It not only refers to the process of self -acceptance, but also to the act of sharing this identity with others.
Homophobic bullying	Bullying based on actual or perceived sexual orientation.
Transphobic bullying	Bullying directed at a person perceived to be trans.



Same-sex attraction for some young people may not necessarily mean they are gay or lesbian while for others this may be the case. In this paper, we will use the term 'same-sex attracted' to include both groups.

## Rationale for a Response from ERST

1. Our Edmund Rice schools offer a Catholic education in the Edmund Rice tradition. Jesus demonstrated inclusivity through his words and actions as did Blessed Edmund in his work with young people.
2. Schools play an important role in building positive self-esteem and positive self-identity in young people and developing a school community that includes and accepts students for who they are. As schools in the Edmund Rice tradition, it is essential that we are at the forefront of promoting this inclusivity.
3. The first key element of our charter is '*Nurturing faith, Christian spirituality and Gospel-based values*'. According to the Bible, every human person is made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27) and it is fundamental to human development that the dignity, freedom and autonomy of every person is acknowledged and respected.
4. The Edmund Rice school values the diversity of its school community and embraces all its members. The fourth element of our Charter is 'creating a caring school community'. We support and value LGBT+ students who are discovering their sexual orientation or gender identity.
5. Positive student wellbeing results from the caring and supportive learning environments that characterise Edmund Rice schools.
6. Students and staff who are same-sex attracted, transgender, intersex or questioning their sexuality are more likely to be marginalised in society which can affect their physical and psychological health. Our schools must address this through the education they offer and the care they provide.
7. Homophobia diminishes the dignity of everyone. The school communities of Edmund Rice schools are careful to implement policies that are in line with gospel-based values. The care provided for students in Edmund Rice schools seeks to eliminate narrow gender stereotyping.
8. Our Charter calls us to offer a positive response to members of our school communities who may feel excluded by the policies and systems that determine the way our schools operate.
9. Schools are legally obliged to deal with homophobic and transphobic bullying under the Education (Welfare) Act (2000) and the Equal Status Act (2000 to 2008).

## Guidelines for Our Schools

These guidelines were formulated by a Steering Committee of volunteers from our schools working with staff from the ERST office. We were guided by the following documents:

1. Catholic Schools in the Republic of Ireland – A Position Paper. Catholic Schools Partnership (2011)
2. Edmund Rice Schools Trust Charter (ERST, 2008)
3. Safe & Supportive Schools Toolkit (2016). BeLongTo, supported by HSE and Healthy Ireland
4. Growing Up LGBT: A Resource for RSE and SPHE produced by DES
5. DES Action Plan on Bullying and Mandatory Reporting Procedures (2013)
6. NAPD Advice Sheet on reviewing policies through the LGBT+ lens
7. Online supports available at [www.belongto.org](http://www.belongto.org), [www.teni.ie](http://www.teni.ie) and [www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie)

In general:

1. Acceptance and understanding will be promoted through a whole school approach in line with our ethos.
2. When students come out the school's response will be caring, holistic and inclusive, with the students and their families at the centre of its response.
3. The gender identity of students will be treated with respect, dignity and fairness.
4. Edmund Rice schools will support transgender students and their families and will facilitate them to access whatever supports are available.

The more specific guidelines below are not meant to be prescriptive but will hopefully help schools to develop and review their own policies and procedures.

## Policy & Planning

It is important that sexual orientation and gender diversity are addressed on a whole-school basis, involving students, staff, parents and Board of Management. It should be on the agenda of the Student and Parent Councils, Staff Meetings and BOMs.

Teachers will require information and training to ensure adequate and confident responses by school personnel. ERST will support the provision of training for staff within each school.

The annual Open Night and other general meetings of parents and students provide a great opportunity for our schools to express unambiguous support and inclusive policies that include all students, including LGBT+ students. This should be clear from presentations made to parents and



students. It needs to be included in the school prospectus and other information on the school, in hard copy or online. It also needs to be addressed in the school's programme for the induction of students who are new to the school. This will hopefully build broad parental and student support for inclusion of and respect for all students.

While many school policies will refer to inclusion and caring, it is important that our schools make specific references to sexual orientation and gender diversity in order to send out a clear message to everyone, including LGBT+ young people and their families, that they are valued and equal members of the school community. The strategies and options available to young people for whom this is not their experiences should be clearly laid out and available to them. It is open to schools to incorporate these key messages in a range of relevant policies and to formulate a new and separate policy on issues relating to 'same-sex attracted and gender diverse young people'.

The school's response to students who come out or wish to transition should be explicit in the relevant policy or policies.

It is essential that schools pay particular attention to the following policies and review them, using inputs from students, teachers and parents, in the context of this position paper:

1. Admissions Policy – especially the section on Characteristic Spirit.
2. Code of Behaviour – explicit references to sexual orientation and gender diversity
3. Anti-Bullying – should explicitly state that homophobic and transphobic bullying are wrong and provide a step-by-step approach that the school will take to deal with transgressions
4. Dignity in the Workplace
5. Critical Incident
6. Health and Safety
7. SPHE & RSE
8. Extra-curricular
9. Transition Year
10. Tours or other outings – domestic or foreign
11. Special Educational Needs, particularly around differentiation

ERST recommends that all its schools should participate positively in activities that promote inclusion of LGBT+ students, raise awareness of the issues and educate people on appropriately managing their responses. In particular, engagement with 'Stand Up' week is a clear signal to the school community of the inclusive nature of the Edmund Rice school.

## Curriculum

The curriculum should include opportunities to discuss LGBT+ issues in a respectful way that provides students and teachers with knowledge and skills and challenges beliefs that may result from stereotyping or ignorance. In this way, the curriculum promotes respect and dignity for all.

Every Edmund Rice school should incorporate explicit references to sexual orientation and gender diversity, appropriate to the age group in question in the SPHE and RSE curriculum.

The classes at primary level will follow the DES-prescribed courses.

The classes at second - level will follow prescribed material and provide opportunities for learning about the school's policies and procedures that relate to:

- ✓ Understanding sexual orientation
- ✓ Dealing with homophobic and transphobic bullying
- ✓ Supporting students in coming out to self and/or others
- ✓ Responding to students who wish to/or are transitioning
- ✓ Identifying supports available to young people, in school and from external agencies

The school should also explore how LGBT+ content can be embedded in other areas of the curriculum, apart from SPHE and RSE. A simple example might be to ask teachers to use language in the classroom or give examples of problems in their subjects that include same-sex couples or are gender neutral.

## School Infrastructure

A safe and supportive environment is available in our schools evident in the attitudes, policies, procedures and infrastructure, combined with sensitive and appropriate leadership. The infrastructure includes information displays, written documents, the school's online presence and facilities such as toilets and changing rooms.

It is recommended that a full audit of the school's facilities through an LGBT+ lens should be undertaken, with inputs from students, staff (teachers, SNAs, caretakers, secretaries and any other ancillary staff) and parents.

The Board of Management should be involved in all aspects of reviewing the school environment, from policies to infrastructure.

## External Supports

Our schools should bring to the attention of its students and families the wide range of supports that are available from external agencies. A full list of the supports available in the school's local community should be compiled and made available to the school community.

