



# Affinity Groups

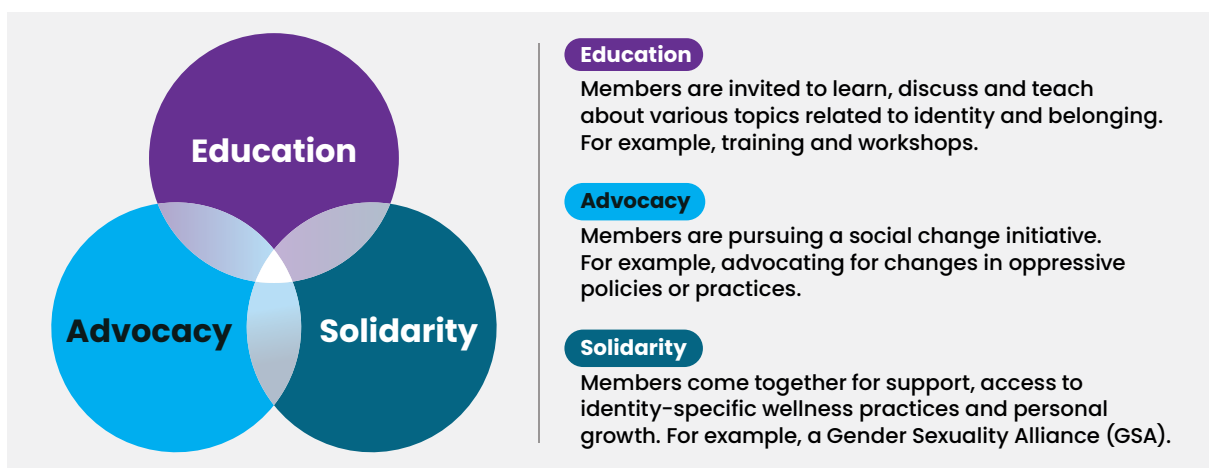
## Creating and sustaining student affinity groups

Affinity groups aim to bring people with shared identities together to explore education, advocacy and solidarity. They can help create communities where individuals feel affirmed, connected, supported and comfortable showing up in their most authentic way.

Affinity groups are specifically created to support identities that have been impacted by systemic racism, oppression, bias and discrimination. These groups can combat the impact of oppression by fostering students' sense of connectedness and creating affirming environments that support mental health and wellness. Clubs, teams and extracurricular activities, including affinity groups, help to foster engagement and support student well-being and mental health in schools.

## Types of affinity groups

Miller et al. (2023) define three types of affinity groups categorized by the purpose they serve:





## Affinity group membership models

Affinity group membership can take two distinct approaches or a blended model.

### Open membership model

A space open for individuals who share a similar identity as well as allies who do not share that identity.

### Closed membership model

A space reserved for individuals who share a specific identity.

**The types of groups and membership are generalizations and can be fluid.** Decisions regarding membership and purpose should be made in consultation with the members whose identity the group is focused on supporting. The focus of the group and the membership may change and evolve based on the needs and goals of the students involved. It is important to work alongside students, starting from the group's inception or initial meetings and throughout the year to determine which objectives (education, advocacy or solidarity) and which type of membership should be prioritized and when.

## Creating the conditions

The following are considerations for creating and meaningfully sustaining affinity groups. They are intended to be suggestive rather than prescriptive guidelines. Your experiences, alongside those of staff, students, parents/caregivers and community members, provide valuable insight into your school community. These insights will help you identify the most appropriate and relevant steps to move forward.

Before creating an affinity group, consider how it aligns with your board or school's mental health strategy and action plan. When creating affinity spaces, be aware of the school and board protocols related to extra-curricular opportunities.

It is helpful to build a broad understanding with students, the community and staff regarding the affinity space. Doing so can build the support needed to sustain this work in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

## Collective and individual reflection

Schools that strive to be identity-affirming and are dedicated to addressing the ongoing impacts of oppression, such as racism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination are better prepared to support affinity groups.

Before establishing affinity groups at your school, consider how reconciliation, equity and identity affirmation can serve as guiding principles for your entire school community. These guiding principles help to ensure that student perspectives and lived experiences are centred and amplified in affinity groups and valued throughout the school community.

For caring adults to develop meaningful relationships with students, self-reflection is fundamental. This is especially true when facilitating affinity groups. Engaging in critical reflection helps to uplift student experiences and perspectives and avoid unintentional harm that may result from our action or inaction. Understanding our own positionality is foundational to meaningfully supporting students in affinity groups, particularly for staff who do not share the same identity as the group they are supporting.





An **'ally'** is someone named or identified by students as such. Not all caring adults will be identified as allies. The practice of being a caring adult and ally involves recognizing that you will never fully understand the lived experience of someone else's identity, but that you will do your best to conceptualize, empathize and advocate in solidarity. Allyship is about listening to and amplifying the perspectives and lived experiences of the communities we serve.

For staff that share the affinity space identity, this is heart work and it can feel deeply personal. The discussions may impact you on many levels. It's important to be aware of this and use tools and strategies to take care of yourself. This may mean co-facilitating with a colleague or community member to help ensure that the space is supportive for you as well.

To help support your reflection, check out:

- [Identity-Affirming School Mental Health Frame](#)
- [Cultural Humility Self-Reflection Tool for School Staff](#)
- [Cultural Humility Self-Reflection Tool for School Mental Health Professionals](#)
- [Student Engagement Toolkit: Actions of a Caring Adult in Student Engagement Initiatives Related to Mental Health](#)

## Foundations for effective and sustainable affinity groups

Creating and sustaining affinity groups requires a thoughtful, comprehensive approach grounded in student-centred practices and effective implementation. Just as successful school mental health initiatives rely on strong infrastructure and implementation strategies, affinity groups thrive when schools provide dedicated support, clear frameworks and are committed to sustainability. Consider the following actions to plan for success:

### Needs assessment

Work as a community (e.g., with students, parents/caregivers, community members, administrators and school staff) to gather and analyze relevant information to better understand the needs related to reconciliation, equity and mental health in your school that might be supported through an affinity group. This process should intentionally assess whether there is student interest in, and a need for, a specific group, with students playing a central role in expressing what supports feel meaningful and appropriate to them. Use various sources, such as school climate surveys, student census data, student input and your observations. Engaging directly with students and reviewing existing data can provide valuable insights to inform your approach and ensure that the group is responsive and grounded in perspectives the group is intending to serve.

### Leadership commitment

Support from school and system leadership is helpful to ensure this group is sustainable and impactful. To help garner support, consider engaging administrators early, drawing connections between the group's goals and school priorities and demonstrating the value of the group within the school community. Work with administrators to consider how this group maps onto the board mental health strategy and/or school action plan.





### **Building capacity**

Lack of support for affinity spaces is often the result of misunderstanding related to the purpose and intent of the group. For some, it may contradict what they understand 'inclusivity' to look like. Providing information and capacity building with staff, students and the parent/caregiver community can help address biases and dispel myths associated with affinity spaces.

### **Alignment**

Affinity groups can help support a variety of school and system goals. Collaboration with other committees and groups can support not only the affinity group, but also the students and staff in attendance. Consider working with your school or board mental health leadership teams, school councils and student councils to garner support.

### **Engagement and collaboration**

Bring together a group of students and staff to lead the initiative, centring the voices, leadership and lived experiences of those who share the identity of the affinity group. This may also include engaging parents/caregivers and partners outside of the school community (e.g., other schools and community organizations) to provide additional support, resources and perspectives, ensuring that leadership and direction remain grounded in the experiences of the identity of the affinity group.

### **Communication**

Create open and ongoing communication with staff and the broader community (e.g., parents/caregivers, community partners), when appropriate, to convey the purpose and benefits of the affinity group. Keeping everyone informed can help to build understanding and generate support.

### **System policies**

As with all board-supported opportunities, it is important to be aware of and follow board policies and protocols, while also considering the impact on students affected by oppression and discrimination. Familiarise yourself with your school board's policies and protocols on discrimination and harassment and be prepared to actively support students. Schools and boards should ensure that students are aware of the pathways to report incidents of discrimination and that a clear, confidential process for doing so is well communicated.

### **Circle of support**

As a caring adult in any student space, you play a critical role in noticing and responding to emerging student mental health concerns. Having caring adults in students' lives is a protective factor that supports their mental health and overall well-being. It is important to be equipped with the knowledge to identify when a student may be experiencing a mental health problem and respond with care. Be familiar with the mental health resources, personnel and pathways available in your school and community to support. For more information, refer to the [ONE-CALL Desk Reference](#) and [Circle of Support and System Pathways](#).

## **Strategies for sustaining affinity groups**

### **1. Ensure student voice and perspectives are at the centre.**

This space is for students to develop and adapt to meet their needs. This means that at times, caring adults may need to reflect on their role in supporting students and intentionally create space or step aside for students to actualize their autonomy. This may involve pausing an activity as students delve into an in-depth discussion, allowing them to explore ideas or giving them space to make decisions about how they engage.





## 2. Codevelop group agreements.

Students and caring adults can work together to create shared agreements that establish expectations and safety within the group, helping to foster supportive, inclusive and affirming environments. These agreements should be revisited and refined over time to align with the group's evolving needs and processes. Consider how situations where agreements are not upheld will be addressed and worked through collaboratively, with a focus on learning, accountability and repair. Group agreements can also be displayed in a visible place or shared online so that all students can easily reference them.

When developing group agreements, consider how personal sharing will be approached. Include expectations around confidentiality, respect, care and allowing space for all voices. Encourage group members to be mindful of others' experiences when sharing stories or examples, recognizing that their words may bring up difficult emotions or have unintended impacts.

As a regular practice, it is important to remind the group that when sharing experiences, they share from their own perspectives. When we share the identifiable information about others (members and non-members) without their permission, it compromises the confidentiality of the space. Regularly remind students to discern how and where they share their stories and the supports that are available to them (including school/board reporting protocols).

If a triggering, vulnerable or distressing situation is shared, ensure that there is a plan to debrief and support students. It may also be important to 'take the temperature' of the group and allow space for individual follow-up/check-ins. As a caring adult, familiarize yourself with the supports in your school and local community, as well as the process to connect students to mental health supports, if needed.

For more on group agreements, visit [Fostering Supportive and Responsive Spaces for Student Engagement and Leadership – Building mentally healthy spaces through co-created agreements.](#)

## 3. Foster action-oriented spaces.

Help students channel their insights and passion into meaningful action. Invite them to decide how they would like to use the space to create positive change in their school community (e.g., an affinity group focused on education, advocacy or solidarity). Encourage students to focus on one or two feasible goals, fostering a sense of empowerment and showing that small, intentional actions can create meaningful impact.

Affinity groups can be deeply personal for student participants, so it's important to be intentional about how students enter and leave the space. Ending meetings with a moment of grounding, a hopeful reflection or a transition activity can help create a sense of closure and care.

## 5. Secure resources.

Ensure the group is adequately resourced so that it can continue as a sustained, long-term initiative rather than a short-term project (e.g., budget, meeting space, staff support).





## Frequently asked questions

Across discussions with school boards throughout the province, these were commonly asked questions about affinity groups.

### How can I ensure support from leadership (e.g., school administrators)?

School and system leaders are there to support the needs of the school community. Through data, board policies and protocols and collective voice, you can amplify the perspectives of students, parents and caregivers to demonstrate the value the affinity group would bring to the school community.

Connecting with staff in other schools to provide additional information regarding successful practices may be beneficial.

### Should the facilitator share the same identity of the affinity group?

When a facilitator shares the same identity of an affinity group, they have the potential to cultivate a protective space by using insights from their lived and shared experiences. Using their lens of identity, facilitators may also have a different understanding of school climate and culture and have the skills to recognize and navigate nuances related to logistical considerations, potential pushback, group dynamics, etc.

**Facilitators should pause and reflect:** How might your identity, power and privilege shape the space? How can you ensure that the focus remains on the students' voices rather than your own perspectives?

The practice of being a caring adult and ally involves recognizing that you will never fully understand the lived experience of someone else's identity, but that you are going to do your best to conceptualize, empathize and advocate in solidarity.

### What if we do not have staff that share the identity of the affinity group?

If no staff members share the identity of the affinity group, students should be consulted about how they would like the space to be supported. In these cases, consider inviting a trusted member of the school community (e.g., a cultural liaison, Knowledge Keeper, faith leader or representative from a community organization) to co-lead or hold the space for students.

It is also important for school staff to recognize their positionality when supporting affinity spaces. A school staff member without that shared identity may still take on a co-facilitator or supportive role. This could include managing logistics (like booking rooms or providing materials), helping students create group agreements and supporting emotional safety without necessarily participating in the group's conversations. In this way, staff model meaningful allyship by following the lead of the students and community member and ensuring the space remains well-supported and aligned with school policies.





## How do I respond to comments that state “these types of groups promote segregation and are exclusive?”

Affinity groups can strengthen the school community as they reinforce a sense of connectedness for students who have been discriminated against.

Consider sharing the goals of the group. Once people recognize that safety and belonging are not guaranteed and must be intentionally created, they may better appreciate the role affinity groups have in creating a sense of belonging and community at school for students who have traditionally been excluded.

It can also be helpful to connect with school leadership to ensure consistent and proactive communication. A shared understanding across the school community can support thoughtful responses and reinforce the group’s purpose.

## What if we have students who do not share the identity of the membership group who want to join?

Many students are interested in joining clubs that promote advocacy, change and social justice. They may be interested in affinity spaces for this reason. It is helpful to revisit the purpose and membership model of the group, as affinity groups can serve different functions (education, advocacy or solidarity) and may be structured as open or closed spaces.

If the group has decided that the affinity space is a closed, identity-specific space for students who share the identity, it is important to have open, honest and capacity-building conversations with students who are interested but do not share the identities. Consider the following:

- Explain what an affinity space is and that it is meant to provide a space for students to share and build community with peers who have the same lived experiences. It is important that this is a space where students can speak freely about shared experiences and feel fully understood without the need to explain or educate.
- Emphasize that this kind of space supports well-being, belonging and honest conversation and that the students have decided that at this time, they would prefer that it is for members who share the same identity.
- Let students know that the identity-specific (closed) membership model is not intended to exclude others, but rather to ensure the students have access to a space specifically designed to support their well-being and sense of belonging.
- Encourage them to support in other ways (invitations to open opportunities, participation in school-wide events, etc.).

[How Do We Talk About It? A Guide For Having Difficult Conversations](#) (Egale) shares practical tips to have respectful, informed conversations and counter harmful rhetoric. This may be a helpful resource as you navigate these conversations.

**This document reflects current research on affinity groups. As the literature evolves, this document will be updated.**

This resource is part of our [Student Engagement Toolkit](#).

