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Affinity Groups

POCIS Position on Affinity Groups:

POCIS advocates and actively supports the development of affinity groups and affinity spaces in Bay Area independent schools at the K-12 level. Recognizing the need for both students and adults of color and white allies to have safe spaces to further their identity development, POCIS believes that affinity groups are a vital part of supporting and empowering People of Color (PoCs) in our school communities.

FAQs:

Q. What are affinity groups and affinity spaces?

Affinity groups and affinity spaces are “safe spaces” that are exclusive to the people of a particular identity. They have a clear goal in mind and are meant to be working spaces where people also make personal connections that support their emotional well being.

Q. Aren't affinity groups and affinity spaces in schools just another type of exclusivism masquerading as “progressive education?” Isn't this divisive when we should all be working together?

Affinity groups and spaces are created to meet the needs of people of color and their allies in our schools. This is a place where both People of Color and their White Allies can develop a better understanding of how their racial identity shapes the experiences of POCs in their schools. The intent is to create spaces where students and adults can be frank and honest without feeling inhibited by the presence of people who do not share the same identity and experiences.

Q. What exactly happens in affinity groups or affinity spaces?

Students and adults in school affinity *groups* use the time and space to share personal successes, reflect on their own racial identity development and support each other in addressing issues that come up for members of their self-identified community in their schools. A moderator/ facilitator sets ground rules, creates an agenda, supports active involvement of all participants in the group and poses questions to members of the group for discussion.

Affinity *spaces* are designed to connect people of the same identity for professional purposes as well as personal support. POCIS affinity events such as our annual reception for educators of color (*F.U.B.U*) are designed to help adults of color develop professional connections that better help them navigate the often challenging experience of being in independent schools. This includes connecting with mentors of color and learning about leadership opportunities available in our schools. Events such as school sponsored picnics for prospective Families of Color, receptions for prospective teaching Candidates of Color, are designed to allow these families and individuals to ask the tough questions that they need to in order to know that the school community that they are considering is safe, supporting and empowering for their students and for themselves.

Q. How will white allies learn about the experiences of people of color if affinity spaces are meant to be exclusive?

POCIS believes that it is not the job of people of color to be the sole source of education about issues of equity and justice for White Allies or institutions. While people of color can certainly forward this work in sharing their experiences and directing individuals and institutions to resources, POCIS believes that it is necessary for individuals and institutions to do their own work around issues of true inclusion and equity. In addition to supporting affinity groups and spaces, schools should certainly strive to create opportunities where People of Color and their Allies can have frank, open conversations together.

Q. I can understand how affinity groups at the adult level or even the high school student level make sense, but aren't the primary grades/middle school years too early a time to start this work? Children are "blank slate" after all. Doesn't this teach them that people are different and isn't that a form of racism?

Research has shown that children, by the age of three, are actively involved in sorting their world. At this early development stage, they are aware of difference as they engage in sorting blocks, animals, colors, people etc. Supporting children in their awareness of each other's difference and connecting positively to their own racial identity is not the same as promoting racism. POCIS believes that children are strengthened to face and fight racism and ignorance by the tools and experiences we give them, not by our denial of the need for this developmental appropriate discussion. If we as educators and adults do not help young children develop healthy cultural and racial identities, then our larger culture and their peers are ready to do it for us. It takes more than respectful "tolerance" of differences and acknowledgement of cultural holidays to achieve this. No amount of text based/project based curriculum can replace the personal exploration and resulting confidence that students develop in affinity groups and POCIS believes this is essential in supporting the development of healthy, happy, grounded young children.

Lower schools and middle schools such as Shady Hill School in Massachusetts and The Bank Street School for Children in New York City have already started doing this work and are happy to share their progress with schools that are interested in developing affinity groups for K-8 students.

Q. I am interested in having my school develop and support affinity groups, but I don't know where to get started. Where can I find resources to help?

POCIS is committed to helping member schools find the resources they need to develop and support affinity groups and spaces in their school communities. Please email us POCIS at nina.wang@ba-pocis.org to request contact information for Bay Area independent schools that already have affinity groups for students and adults and for articles that will further this work. POCIS can also direct you to schools and

resources outside of the Bay Area that can further support your efforts.

About **Contact**

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