

## **The Role of Affinity Groups in an Inclusive Community**

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The existence of affinity groups at an independent school that champions the progressive values of diversity and inclusivity can sometimes be puzzling to members of the school community. At CDS, as at many independent schools, the parent response to the idea of affinity groups has ranged widely from enthusiastic support to skepticism and even alarmed opposition. Many parents are unfamiliar with the ideas and concepts behind the creation of these groups and some parents will initially regard affinity groups as divisive and antithetical to the values of inclusivity and community. In fact, well-facilitated affinity groups strengthen the community by providing support, connection, and affirmation to students whose identities, whether racial, ethnic or otherwise, may differ from the majority population and culture at the school.

An affinity group provides a “safe space” in which its members can explore issues of shared identity and experience and affirm their emotional and intellectual responses to being part of a distinct sub-set of the community. These groups can be an important tool for reducing the sense of isolation, discomfort, and even marginalization many children can feel even in the most progressive school communities.

Affinity groups encourage children to embrace the different parts of their identity and to feel confident and proud about themselves rather than to silently suppress aspects of that identity because it is different from the majority culture. These group meetings can help students to feel more visible and more included in our community and in doing so they enhance our commitment to inclusiveness.

### *Why lower school affinity groups?*

Much of the available research on the cognitive development of children shows that children begin to develop a sense of their identity as individuals and as members of groups from the earliest ages. Children as young as three years old notice physical differences such as skin color, hair texture, and the shape of facial features. Young children also develop strong in-group preferences. In the school setting these early experiences in exploring self-identity and group identity can be isolating and distressing for those children who feel that they are different from most of their peers. Often, this situation will lead students of color to feel an affinity with each other and a group sense of marginalization within the wider community. Well-facilitated affinity groups create a positive and constructive context for students to explore and affirm their identities and experiences with the full support of the school leadership and faculty. This approach helps to strengthen our community and to cultivate students confident enough in themselves and their place in that community that they can grow into young leaders. As our school has clearly articulated in its mission statement, CDS wants to provide an environment “where children of all backgrounds feel safe to be themselves, become avid learners, and strive to make a difference in the lives of others.”