News



St. Anne's Catholic School Principal Amy Lofaso, left, and Essex Member of Provincial Parliament Taras Natyshak look at the pieces of a gay-straight alliance mural. (Dana Wachter)



by Dana Wachter

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London, Ontario — August 14, 2017

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Whether named Gay-Straight Alliance, Inclusivity Club, or something else, Catholic schools in Ontario now allow lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) acceptance student groups because they have to, but many districts are proactively supporting gay-straight alliances, and many students find their school to be a much more empathetic place.

"A lot of people do get the impression of oh, gay club, and they're like, oh I can't go because I'm not gay. And it's like, well, no, that's the reason it's 'gay-straight alliance,' " said Katie Butler, a 12th grade student at St. Anne's Catholic School in the Windsor-Essex district. "It's a safe space where you can go and talk about things. Where you know you're going to be accepted in that area. It's very educational, I'd say."

It's been five years since the province of Ontario implemented the Accepting Schools Act, or Bill 13, which requires all public schools, secular or Catholic, to allow students to name their clubs "gay-straight alliance."

Butler said her high school launched its gay-straight alliance soon after the bill was implemented in 2012. Identifying as an ally, she considers herself a heterosexual female who supports the LGBT community. Butler tried out the club in grade 10, encouraged by a friend who identifies as LGBT. At her first meeting, Butler learned terminology like gender expression, gender identity and sexuality, and she discussed their varying spectrums with other students there. She felt included and welcome.

Now headed to the University of Western Ontario, Butler has seen major steps taken by her Catholic high school and others nearby. The gay-straight alliance itself has grown, but also the knowledge of what it is and what it means. At first, she said two student leaders hosted presentations at the gay-straight alliance's biweekly meetings, but now many students are involved in organizing meeting themes: whether learning history of the LGBT movement or discussing the LGBT climate in different communities in Europe, North America and the developing world.

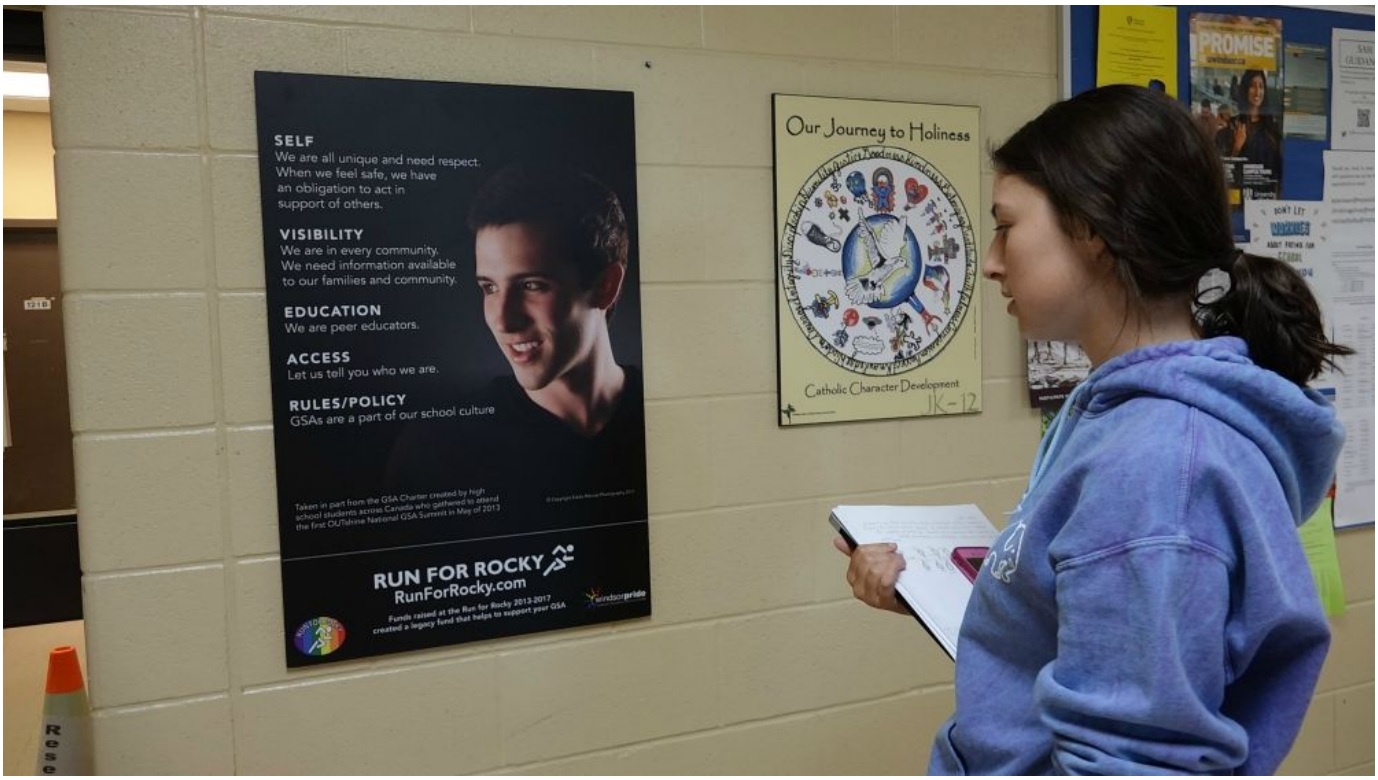
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"You can forget sometimes how much improvement you've made when you look at your state and you just focus on the negative, like oh, we're not there yet. You can forget how much you've improved compared to other places in the world. We're so lucky," said Butler.

Teaching and learning from each other is a priority that is not lost on the St. Anne's gay-straight alliance's lead teacher, Vice Principal Arlene Davis — or on the Windsor-Essex Catholic school board administrators. Having worked in the Catholic school system for 26 years, Davis admits to her own learning curve, figuring out LGBT terminology to fully support involved students. She gives major credit to the district's principal of Safe Schools, Equity and Inclusion, Danielle Desjardins-Koloff, who has been instrumental in forging Windsor-Essex Catholic's path.

"In a Catholic system, it's not the same," Desjardins-Koloff said. "... It was delicate because we had a community that had a lot of questions, right?"

Desjardins-Koloff knew her board needed a careful approach to the transition and that cultivating a supportive atmosphere may take more time and education for the Catholic community compared to a secular public school system.



Tyler White, senior at at De La Salle North Catholic High School, delivers a speech at the march in Portland on March 24; White starts speaking at the 28:20 mark.

What's in a name?

Patrick Daly, president of Ontario Catholic School Trustee's Association, said Catholic boards across Ontario have "always had an absolute commitment to vulnerable student populations," but he acknowledges heated discussion surrounding Bill 13 back in 2011 and 2012. About five months before the provincial order passed, the association responded with a resource document of its own, called "Respecting Difference." Daly calls it a "holistic approach" and said it serves as a resource against bullying for all Ontario Catholic boards. It discusses bullying in regard to gender identity and sexual orientation, but never uses the words, "gay" or "straight."

Also chair of the Hamilton District Catholic school board, Daly said that terminology is up to individual schools. Some high schools in his district have used "gay-straight alliance," but others choose not to — one used their school mascot, a cardinal, in the title of their anti-bullying club. He's only heard positive responses about the efforts of staff and students creating and participating in the clubs.

"Clearly the Catholic boards have complied with the law, and things are going well," Daly said.

Of the 32 high schools in the Toronto Catholic School District, some may have gay-straight alliances, but others call them "inclusivity clubs" or may have other names, according to Nick D'Avella, superintendent of student success. Like in Hamilton, Toronto Catholic schools say students "have the right to call them whatever they choose."

The Sudbury Catholic District school board strives for an inclusive learning environment, too. Communications officer Carlee Vendramin told NCR via email that each of their four secondary schools have gay-straight alliances and diversity groups, supporting "a variety of students."



Teachers and administrators at St. Anne's Catholic High School display safe space stickers on their doors to welcome all students. (Dana Wachter)

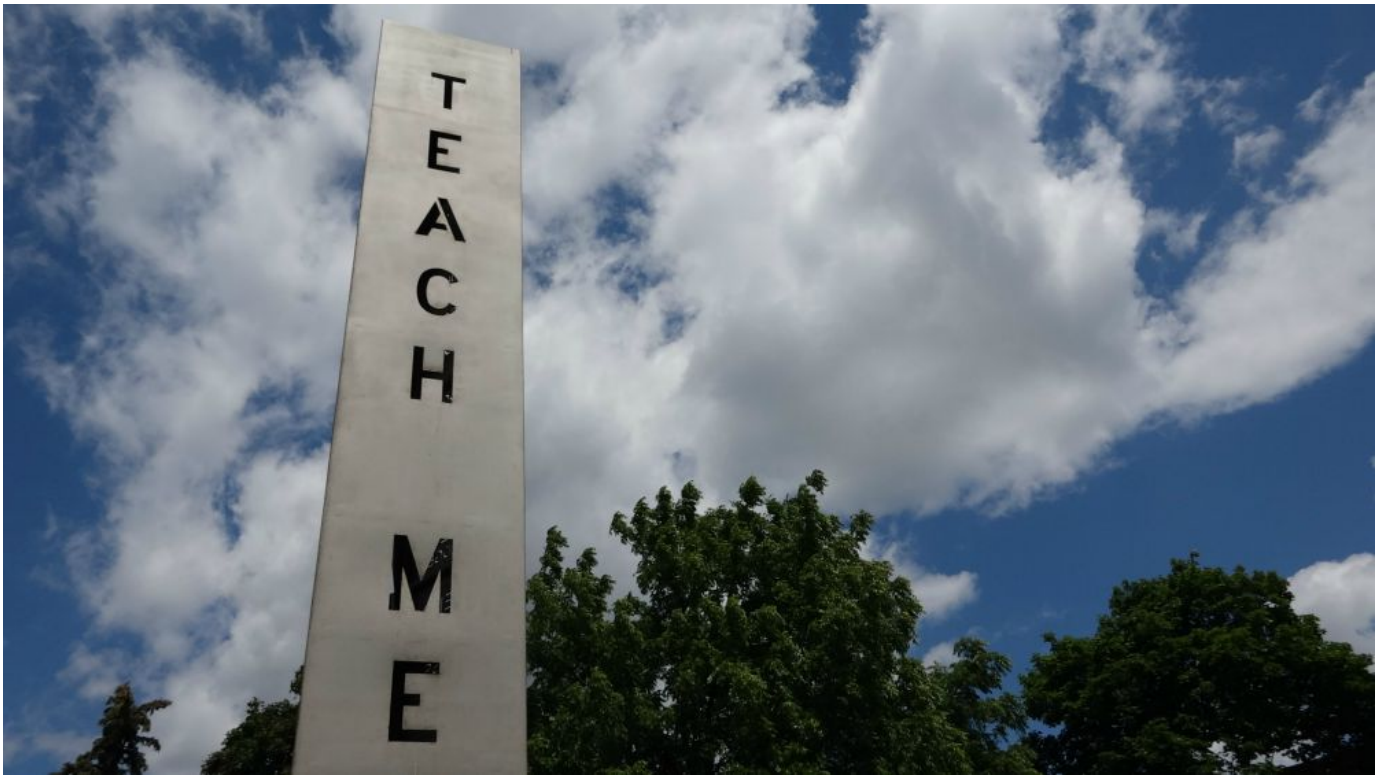
Educating themselves and the community

Before Bill 13, Desjardins-Koloff said schools in the Windsor-Essex Catholic District may have had social justice clubs, or took notice of at-risk LGBT students, but immediately after the bill passed, she received a letter from a student formally requesting a gay-straight alliance.

"To be honest, I was very excited, because I do believe that [the alliances] celebrate our human dignity and they recognize that these students have a unique place," said Desjardins-Koloff, who at the time was vice principal at St. Thomas of Villanova Catholic High School.

Desjardins-Koloff set a goal to train every school in her district how to support the LGBT student population within four or five years, and she's reached that. With its final school creating a gay-straight alliance this past school year, all eight secondary schools in the district now have them. Desjardins-Koloff has found her community to be more supportive than not.

"We had allies where we didn't know allies existed, where we hadn't yet defined 'ally,' " added Desjardins-Koloff.



Winsor-Essex Catholic District School Board has been proactive in supporting students involved in gay-straight alliance groups. (Dana Wachter)

Calling the transition to gay-straight alliance-labeled clubs "un-navigated territory," Desjardins-Koloff said aside from a teacher's college course, many heterosexual Catholics see this as "a long journey, a huge shift of perspective because we're all challenged by getting past our own unconscious biases."

As a heterosexual female, Desjardins-Koloff has relied on colleagues and the community to help her support students, and now she offers insights from people she's met who identify in the LGBT community or connect as allies. She created partnerships with Windsor Pride and also The Campana Family, which sponsors Run For Rocky in honor of their LGBT son, Rocky, who committed suicide. She thinks the challenges they have faced and overcome can inspire students who may be struggling to find their place, and she uses their help to support other Catholic teachers drawn to be mentors and disciples for vulnerable students.

The wider Windsor pride community introduced Desjardins-Koloff to opportunities to support students, including trips and scholarships to OUTShine, a national student gay-straight alliance summit. This year, Windsor-Essex Catholic District hosted WEShine for the first time, a summit specifically for local Catholic students. The Campana Family now sponsors Catholic students to attend conferences and even honored Butler and another Catholic school graduate with a university scholarship.

Davis remembers her students' smiles and confidence-building during OUTShine, which Windsor hosted in April.

"As a parent first, to see kids that just feel so free and so able to just express themselves and enjoy. And not be judged ... like, this is who I am, and I'm cool with it," explained Davis. "I think there still is that extra thing, when you're on a team. It makes you feel a little bit more special, a little bit more heard, a little bit more accepted, and you know, I think we try, but I still think there's some kinds of obstacles."

Blending gay-straight alliance with Catholic ethos

Desjardins-Koloff understands that some members of the community may fear that a gay-straight alliance would "devalue the traditional sense of a family," but she is quick to point to the convergence of a gay-straight alliance and Catholic ethos. She said she worked to "convince the community that these clubs weren't about sex or sexuality. It was about sexual identity and orientation; it's about identity and celebrating individuals' authentic versions of themselves."

Seeing Catholic social justice teaching providing "beautiful support," Desjardins-Koloff helps students design gay-straight alliance meetings that are "centered on Christ-like actions and discipleship." She thinks gay-straight alliances are helping to bring students back to a church where they felt they hadn't belonged before.

"The first few times these kids don't see themselves as part of the Catholic community at all, and they kinda laugh, and they don't want to join hands and they don't want to join in, and it's by choice," said Desjardins-Koloff. "But by the end of the semester or even some by a month, we are praying together. Our hands are held and we're in a circle and they feel that energy. They feel every bit a part of that community."



St. Anne's Catholic High School received a grant to provide a library of books discussing an array of identity-focused challenges. (Dana Wachter)

Gay-straight alliances in Windsor-Essex are now linked with a type of council, where members from each Catholic high school meet together and are able to come up with common solutions to issues they may face.

Toronto students support the "annual inclusivity conference," which is run by the Catholic Student Leadership Team, according to D'Avella. He has attended the yearly conference that places inclusivity as a focal point, now featuring needs of the LGBT community.

There is more to be done

D'Avella himself hasn't heard any complaints from Toronto Catholic parents or resistance to the gay-straight alliance groups. He does acknowledge that comments may go directly to the schools and principals and not to his level on the school board.

"Almost everybody I know is doing their best to care for those students," said D'Avella, noting that "there are always those who abide by what they think is right."

D'Avella adds, "nobody has reached perfection" in finding the right balance between the more "secular" aspects of the Accepting Schools Act and their Catholic beliefs.

As a vice principal at St. Anne's, Davis said she has taken phone calls from concerned parents who want to know what the gay-straight alliance is about.

"Our religious background is something that we respect, but at the same time, it is conservative, and we want to respect that and we want to help these kids along so that they can definitely go along and feel like they're accomplishing things," said Davis.

Having set up a booth for the gay-straight alliance group at St. Anne's parent-teacher interview nights, Butler noticed that some parents seemed pleased to see it, but others she watched direct their children to avoid the club.

She may hear talk from classmates that their parents are not accepting of gay-straight alliance, but Butler thinks they don't voice disapproval publicly because, "that's not the popular opinion, that it's not the PC thing to say."

Butler recalls an incident from a couple years ago, when students spray-painted the school's parking lot with obscenities about a transgender student after the gay-straight alliance promoted a transgender-focused event. She and her friends were scared but found confidence when school administrators and the school board backed them up. They brought an art therapist to the gay-straight alliance, and Butler and others began work on a mural which will soon hang in the school building. She found the incident gave way to a new conversation, awakening students to realize hate did exist in their community and it's not something to ignore.



Vice Principal Arlene Davis is the lead teacher for St. Anne's gay-straight alliance. (Dana Wachter)

"It's just important that we have our gay-straight alliance so that they can have someone to confide in," Butler said. "They can have somewhere to go for advice if they know it's not going to be safe for them to go home and get it."

She does think the more classmates interact with the gay-straight alliance, the more aware and respectful they have and will become.

Butler appreciates her school's progress, but was disappointed with the school board's response to her request to raise a rainbow pride flag outside as other secular schools and local businesses do.

"When they don't see the immediate need to change protocol for something like this, if everyone else is doing it, it's a big statement," she said. "It's a statement to make [by] not doing, I think."

Considering that the pride flag hangs inside the school, a new set of identity-focused books is available to the school community, and partnerships stand with Windsor Pride and others, Davis reminds students to be patient.

"We always try to say, let's go back in history and look at different things that have happened in the world, and it doesn't happen overnight," Davis said. "We're definitely making big steps, and we have to be patient, and we just have to continue to support one another and to be advocates for yourselves. I think [the students] do that."

[Dana Wachter is a freelance journalist and digital storyteller based in London, Ontario.]

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A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 25-Sept 7, 2017** print issue under the headline: Gay-straight alliances spring up in Ontario.