

Sequoia Union High School District Affinity Groups

In 2021, at the recommendation of the Equity Diversity Council (EDC), SUHSD contracted with Teaching Well to train SUHSD employees on how to facilitate and conduct Affinity Groups. As cohorts of employees have been trained and Affinity Groups were formed, social dynamics related to race, gender, sexual orientation, inclusion and exclusion of who could attend Affinity Groups or not, fostered concern for the legal implications to which SUHSD could be held liable.

In response to employees' urge to foster safe space through the use of Affinity Groups, SUHSD sought legal counsel in an effort to create a balance between ensuring legal obligations and the request to train facilitators and host safe spaces for Affinity Groups. Responding to the EDC's request to hire a director-level equity practitioner, SUHSD leadership created and advocated for an executive director position and upon hiring Dr. O'KenZoe, tasked him with helping SUHSD navigate this matter. Through a bi-focal lens of equity and legality, Dr. O'KenZoe summarized legal recommendations made to SUHSD leadership and recommended that, to ensure the viability of Affinity Groups, guidelines be created to make clear the expectations of legal compliance SUHSD maintains while permitting Affinity Groups to operate.

The SUHSD Affinity Group Guidelines apply to all employees who participate in or facilitate these voluntary (noncompensatory) groups. Affinity Groups are formed around shared identities or interests and are open to all employees, regardless of their background. These guidelines emphasize the importance of creating an inclusive and respectful environment for all participants while adhering to legal and district policies. They clarify that Affinity Groups are not intended for formal grievances or discriminatory behavior and should not create a hostile work environment for any employee.

We understand that these guidelines, while designed to foster a healthy and positive work environment at SUHSD, may bring about a range of reactions. We sincerely hope they reflect our leadership's commitment to creating the best possible workplace for everyone. However, we also recognize that change can sometimes be challenging, and some of you may feel disappointed or concerned. As each of your well-being is important to us, we want to support you through this transition. To ensure your voices are heard, [Dr. O'KenZoe](#) will schedule time to listen to those seeking to be heard and conversation with those who desire collegial conversation and dialogue.

SUHSD Affinity Group Guidelines FAQs

What is the purpose of having Affinity Groups?

- Affinity Groups provide a valuable space for **employees to connect with colleagues who share similar backgrounds or experiences.**
- Foster a sense of **belonging and support**, allowing individuals to productively discuss common challenges and celebrate shared and/or support-affiliated identities.
- They are **inclusive and supportive spaces** (sometimes referred to as “safe” spaces) within the workplace that can enhance employee morale, improve communication, and foster a stronger sense of community within an organization.

Who are SUHSD Affinity Group guidelines for?

- Any SUHSD employee engaging as **facilitator or participant.**

What does the use of the word “voluntary” mean in reference to facilitator and participants' involvement with Affinity Groups?

- Volunteer means **there is no compensation** for Affinity Group facilitators and participants. More specifically, Affinity Groups will not meet during contract hours, rather meetings are encouraged to occur during duty-free lunch or non-contract hours. ****Please note that the Affinity Group facilitators training taking place in Spring 2025, conducted by Teaching Well, will continue in the same manner it has. There are no changes to its operation as part of professional development.**

What are SUHSD Affinity Groups and what are they for?

- SUHSD Affinity Groups **are voluntary (noncompensatory) employee groups** created based on specific shared identities (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity) or other elements of same-ness (e.g., left-handedness, special interests).
- These **groups must be open to all employees**, regardless of their background, and must not discriminate against any individual to ensure **adherence to legal and district policies.**
- The guidelines emphasize the importance of non-discrimination, **respectful professional communication, and avoiding the creation of a hostile work environment** for any employee.

What SUHSD Affinity Groups should avoid:

- **Affinity Groups are not intended for formal grievance procedures.** Employee grievances should be addressed through the process described in the applicable collective bargaining agreements.
- **These groups should not be used as platforms for discriminatory remarks or behaviors.** All employees, regardless of their background, must feel safe and respected within the group.
- **Affinity Groups are not a venue for engaging in activities that could create a hostile work environment for any employee.** This includes any form of harassment, discrimination, or exclusion.
- **These groups should not be used to undermine or contradict established district policies or procedures.** All activities within the group must align with the district's board policies related to employee code of conduct.

What are the parameters of the Affinity Group guidelines?

- The Affinity Group guidelines apply exclusively to meetings of SUHSD employees **conducted on SUHSD property or during compensated time.**

SUHSD Affinity Group Guidelines

1. Is it legal for SUHSD to have employee Affinity Groups? Yes.

Affinity Groups and culture/identity-oriented celebrations can focus on specific identity groups, but **MUST** be accessible to, AND welcome, everyone. SUHSD [prohibits discrimination](#) of any kind. Such occurrences or concerns of discrimination should be reported using this link to [Human Resource](#)

2. Are SUHSD Affinity Groups and BIPOC receptions (such as graduation celebrations) legal? Yes, but only when they are accessible on a voluntary basis to employees of all backgrounds and when they do not violate the rights of employees who choose not to participate. [Proposition 209](#) permits these activities as a measure for advancing diversity in the workplace.

3. What is SUHSD responsibility related to how Affinity Groups' members/participants are invited into identity-specific spaces? Employers, such as SUHSD, may not discriminate or grant preferences based on race or other shared identity, but may still make efforts to develop and retain a diverse workforce. Employers can and should continue to make efforts to provide a positive environment for all employees, so that its diverse team works together effectively, and so that talent is retained. Groups and activities that are formed around the goal of sharing common interests and experiences, including those that have a race-related theme, and which are open to all students regardless of identity such as race, will generally not raise concerns under [Non-Discrimination & Title IX](#). Because participation in an affinity group is not limited to members of certain identity groups such as races or ethnicities, these groups would pass that basic hurdle on legality. However, because affinity groups may officially be open to anyone, but in practice be restricted to members of a particular group, it would be important for all information and literature about affinity groups to make clear that membership and participation is open to anyone interested. By this same standard, exclusion from a single reception may not be enough by itself to support a discrimination claim.

4. Can Affinity Groups exclude non-alike people with interests? Affinity Groups and other race-based or shared interest events must not disparage or create a hostile work environment for those employees who do not belong or participate. With race-based or shared interest activities and events, it is important to take steps to ensure that the facilitator and/or participants' conduct does not create a hostile work environment for others or otherwise violate District policy. Affinity group facilitators and participants should be aware that they are subject to the [District's non-discrimination policy](#), so that the discussion within those groups remains focused on promoting a positive and equitable work environment for everyone and does not become a forum for attacking people of other cultural/identity backgrounds. --- It is recommended that any materials that affinity group facilitators or participants wish to broadcast to the general employee population, or to the community at large, be reviewed by the principal first.