

Affinity group spaces shift, prompts discussion on **impact**, next steps

Changes to affinity group spaces in the High School have led leaders and members of former affinity spaces to re-evaluate how they may continue to make an impact on student life, as the groups shift from closed doors to inclusive spaces.

Rudi Chamria /
Lead Features Editor

For the last three years, Eleanor Ilyas ('24) has observed affinity groups as a positive addition to student life, since entering the High School in 2020. However, in an assembly Sept. 2, Head of School Coreen Hester announced identity based groups must allow students of all identities to join. Thus, affinity groups – groups only open to specific identities – have subsequently been discontinued. Hester said this was one of several changes implemented to meet standards outlined by the Office for Standards in Education. The Ofsted report specifically names identity-based groups, stating they “provide opportunities to discuss world issues.” However, according to the report, affinity spaces that are restricted to

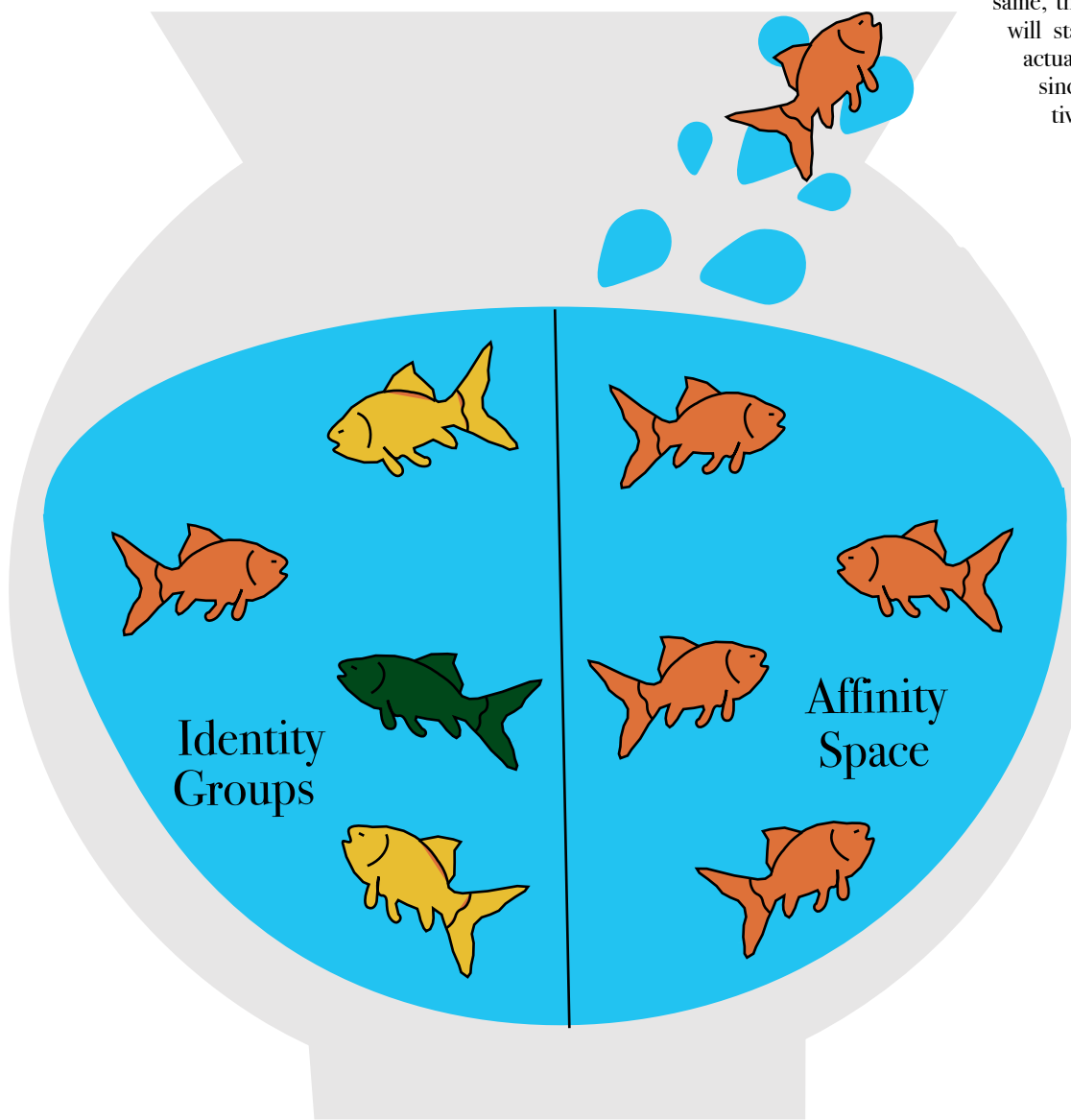
specific identity groups were not well regarded, as Ofsted stated “some parents and pupils feel that this approach is divisive.” Director of Institutional and Community Equity Mirangela Buggs said opening affinity group spaces to all is a necessity to comply with U.K. guidelines in order to preserve “protected characteristics,” a list of identities which must be acknowledged and sheltered by schools. Buggs said coming from her background directing equity and inclusion in independent schools in the U.S., affinity spaces were commonplace and widely accepted. However, she said she recognized the importance of “adjusting to the U.K. sensibility and the law.” World Languages and Culture Teacher Udai AbuLteaf, who was the faculty sponsor of the Arab Affinity Group, said cultural and affinity groups have always played a vital role in student life and found their beginnings due to student demand.

“The important thing about affinity groups was that they were student-initiated,” AbuLteaf said. “Students felt a need for the space and reached out to teachers to help them make those spaces.” Matthew Sherman ('23), the president of the Students of Color Society – formerly known as the Students of Color affinity group – said the group has now allowed people of all races and cultures to join the conversation. Regardless, he said the conversations and objectives of the club have not changed. “The activities that we do have all stayed the same, the way the students treat the group will stay the same,” Sherman said. “It’s actually expanded in numbers of people since last year. There’s really no negatives.”

Moreover, Lucas Marty ('26) said the closure of affinity groups is a positive change because it is more productive to have people with different experiences in discussion. “If you want to talk about issues that a certain group of people has, you are not going to get anywhere by just having those people talk about it,” Marty said. Math Teacher David Hill, who is also the faculty sponsor of the Students of Color society, said although the space is open to all, the dialogue will continue to be centered around students of color’s experience, and their meetings would “not be an intellectual conversation, but an experiential conversation.” Similarly, Sophic Singer ('25), a Grade 10 representative of the Mitzvah Club, replacing the former Jewish Affinity Group, said the club has focused on opening discussions to the wider community. “This year we were really speaking about expanding it out to, like, anybody,” Singer said. “Yes, it’s, like, predominantly made up of the Jewish students in school and we want it to be a place where Jewish students can come and feel connected. But, we also want it to be open to anybody, who either wants to come support or wants to learn more about the culture.”

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-Lucas Marty ('26)

Social Studies Teacher Christin Putnam, who is a faculty sponsor of the Mitzvah Club said in an email on behalf of the group that it aims to be inclusive of all and spread discussion of Jewish heritage. “We are all part of the same family so that even if someone is not Jewish, the Mitzvah Club is a place to learn about Jewish culture and be part of our family,” Putnam said. Marty said now that affinity groups have shifted to be all-inclusive, it will be beneficial for both newcomers and original members of the spaces. “Having multiple viewpoints is definitely going to be useful for all parties involved,” Marty said. “It allows for more discourse between people.” Further, Principal Devan Ganeshanathan said although students will need to adjust affinity groups to be inclusive of all, students may now be able to further build understanding in the community. “Ideally, the impact will be, now that they are open, there is space for more allies,” Ganeshanathan said. AbuLteaf said though there may be contrasting opinions on this change, he believes the community will come to terms with it and also make identity clubs “more grounding and more rewarding” for students.



According to Director of Institutional and Community Equity Mirangela Buggs, the U.K. Department for Education has posed guidance for school leaders and staff, pertaining to national anti-discrimination laws – specifically the Equality Act 2010.

What does the Equality Act 2010 protect in schools?

- Equality in the admissions and hiring process
- Identity-based equality discrimination with pupils
- Reasonable adjustments which accommodate all identities

What does the Equality Act 2010 state in regard to closed affinity space?

Schools must encourage pupils of all characteristics to engage in all school activities. The Department for Education said, for example, “encouraging both boys and girls, and pupils from different ethnic backgrounds, to be involved in the full range of school societies.”

Source: Department for Education

“As a community we are creative and we are now at a transition point,” AbuLteaf said. “Any transition requires growth to progress.” Iman Eldukair ('24) said although there are positive impacts of opening affinity groups, students said they benefitted from closed groups as well. Eldukair enjoyed participating in the Arab Affinity Group last year due to the “safe environment” it created. Eldukair said while the opening of affinity groups will not automatically create an insecure environment, the conversations may be less authentic. “I don’t think that it will no longer be safe,” Eldukair said. “I just think that people wouldn’t be as open with things or they wouldn’t feel comfortable enough to say certain things, which takes away their voice.” Hill said backlash regarding the exclusivity of affinity groups was often “misguided or misinformed,” and that affinity spaces were really meant to combat the issues they have been accused of perpetuating.

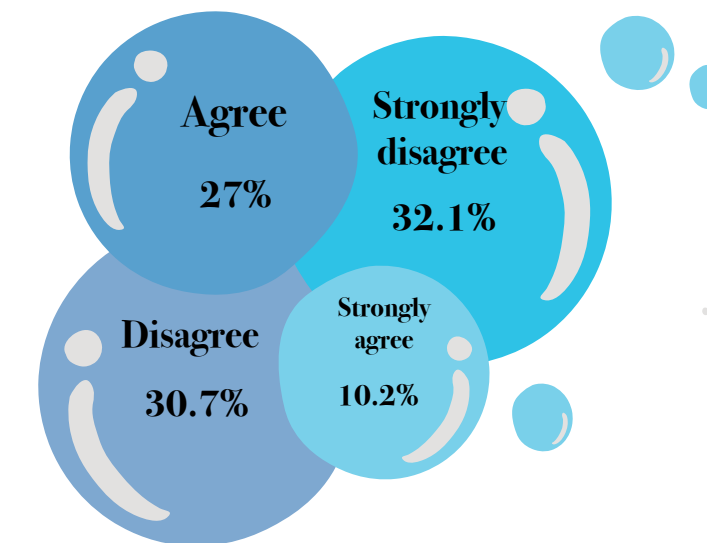
Hill said although opening up affinity groups may be difficult for current members, it is a good reminder of how safe spaces for minority groups have historically been shut down, and the closure may be a pivotal educational moment. Singer said she personally did not feel an impact after affinity spaces were opened due to the fact that she has a strong Jewish community around her, and she did not require additional support at school. Singer said if she was less connected with her Jewish heritage, she would feel the impact of this change more. “I do see if someone were to tell me that affinity groups was something they really wanted, I think I’d be able to see where they’re coming from,” Singer said. Ilyas said former affinity groups may still be effective after changes as long as the community respects the newfound space. “If people aren’t joking about it, and it’s happening exactly as it did last year, it just happens to be named something different, than I think the integrity still holds,” Ilyas said. Ganeshanathan said he believed High School students will be considerate and acknowledge the importance of the space, and he said those who didn’t respect the space, he “would imagine to be subject to social correction.”

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-Iman Eldukair ('24)

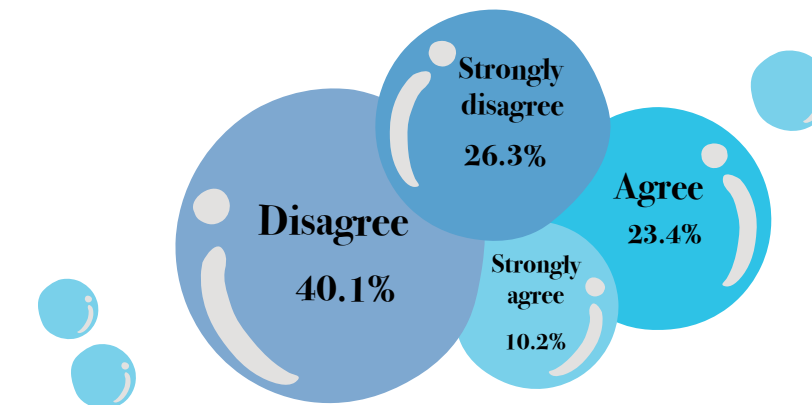
Ultimately, Buggs said although there may be conflicting ideology between American educational doctrine and Ofsted’s requirements, shifts can be made to honor British principles and retain the integrity of the school’s mission. “We can still be ourselves as a school in terms of pedagogy and values,” Buggs said. “There’s certain pieces of our school that have to be squarely about being in the U.K., and it feels like that’s what happened with the decision to shift the affinity group dynamic.”

Blu Belinky contributed to reporting.

Closed affinity spaces are exclusionary.



The closure of affinity groups has had a positive impact on the High School community.



Graphics by Rudi Chamria