

Fact vs. Fiction

Setting the Record Straight on the BSA Membership Standards Policy

Overview:

Several organizations outside of Scouting have commented recently on the BSA's new membership standards policy and the effect it might have on the organization. Much of this commentary has inaccurately stated that the BSA has made a fundamental shift in values and, in some cases, has attempted to cause division within Scouting in order to generate publicity or support for alternative Scouting organizations. The following is meant to clearly explain the effect the new policy could have on local units and members and to answer frequently asked questions.

The membership standards policy and chartered organizations:

The new membership standard states that "No youth may be denied membership in the Boy Scouts of America on the basis of sexual orientation or preference alone." Accordingly, simply stating he or she is attracted to the same sex, but not engaging in sexual activity, does not make a youth ineligible for membership.

Further, the new BSA policy states that any sexual conduct, whether homosexual or heterosexual, by youth of Scouting age is contrary to the virtues of Scouting. Members must demonstrate behavior that exemplifies the highest level of good conduct and respect for others and is consistent at all times with the values expressed in the Scout Oath and Scout Law. Last, as always, BSA policy states that members cannot use Scouting as a vehicle for promoting a particular social or political agenda.

The *Boy Scout Handbook* continues to define "morally straight" as "Your relationships with others should be honest and open. Respect and defend the rights of all people. Be clean in your speech and actions and faithful in your religious beliefs. Values you practice as a Scout will help you shape a life of virtue and self-reliance."

Leaders have the responsibility and authority to set boundaries and address them with youth members. The *Boy Scout Handbook* tells boys that "Your religious leaders can give you guidance for making ethical choices. Your parents, guardian, or a sex-education teacher can provide the basic facts about sex."

To be clear, the only change to the BSA membership standards policy is that simply stating a same-sex attraction is no longer grounds for a youth member's removal from the traditional Scouting program. However, if the behavior of any youth member becomes a distraction to the program or the performance of the unit, such as by discussing sexual activity or advocating conduct inconsistent with the mission and beliefs of the Boy Scouts of America, unit leaders may remove him or her from the troop or crew.

Under the new policy, Scouting's chartered organizations continue to have the right to establish and discuss behavioral expectations regarding all forms of sexual abstinence as a condition of membership within the units they sponsor. Moreover, a Scout may be removed from a local unit due to behavior inconsistent with those rules.

The BSA is not endorsing homosexual conduct nor is it forcing religious chartered organizations to do so. Rather, the new policy rightly recognizes there is a difference between youth and adults while remaining true to the long-standing virtues of Scouting. The BSA policy follows the same approach most congregations use with their youth group members, allowing them to continue to use the Scouting program while remaining true to their beliefs, and in no way requires a unit chartered by a religious organization to affirm the moral acceptability of same-sex attraction or premarital sex of any kind.

Frequently asked questions:

1. Is the BSA endorsing homosexual conduct and forcing its chartered organizations to do the same?

No. The BSA is reinforcing that Scouting is a youth program, and any sexual conduct, whether heterosexual or homosexual, by youth of Scouting age is contrary to the virtues of Scouting. Scouting is not the place to resolve divergent viewpoints in society, and no member may use Scouting to promote or advance any social or political agenda. This policy rightly recognizes there is a difference between youth and adults while remaining true to the long-standing virtues of Scouting.

2. Is this merely the first step in a process that will fundamentally change the BSA?

No. This policy change was the result of an internal Scouting discussion, not because of pressure from external groups. The adult membership standard remains unchanged, and within the framework of this policy, chartered organizations continue to have the right and responsibility to choose their own unit leaders according to their own values and Scouting values. The Boy Scouts of America fully supports its chartered organizations. As the BSA just completed a lengthy review process, there are no plans for further review on this matter. The youth membership standard was not intended to be, or to be seen as, a "first step."

3. What types of sexual behavior are unacceptable or distracting?

This will be determined on a case-by-case basis. However, any form of sexual behavior is simply not acceptable in Scouting. Discussions of sexual preference have no place in Scouting. Nor is the promotion, overtly or otherwise, of sexual politics or preferences allowed in the program. Simply put, while a youth member may acknowledge his or her sexual preference, that acknowledgment may not reach the level of distraction, which may include advocacy, promotion, or the distribution of information of a sexual nature. This same standard applies to all youth members of the BSA, regardless of age or sexual preference.

4. Will the new policy result in greater risk of liability for chartered organizations?

BSA members are not required to be members of a chartered organization, and the chartered organization cannot deny BSA membership solely on the basis of sexual preference.

As a result, the BSA has and will continue to be the responsible organization for establishing and defending its membership standards. The BSA has and will continue to assert its constitutional right as a private organization to define the moral standards embraced by its members. Duty to God, duty to Country, duty to others, and duty to self, as expressed in the Scout Oath, and the Scout Law are the fundamental tenets of Scouting and always have been. The BSA respects the rights of other organizations to disagree or to have their own moral standards, which may be different from the BSA's. However, the BSA has and will continue to oppose any action that threatens the BSA's right to define its own moral standards for membership.

In addition to taking the lead in opposing any effort to force the BSA to surrender its core values, the BSA remains committed to defending its chartered organizations threatened by litigation solely because of their support of the Scouting program. Membership standards are determined by the National Council of the Boy Scouts of America. The BSA will continue, as it has in the past, to bear the cost of the defense of BSA membership standards, even if the claims are asserted against chartered organizations.

5. Can a youth member of the BSA participate in a social or political cause that calls attention to his or her sexual orientation or preference?

Under the BSA's rules and regulations, a youth member may appear in uniform at a nonpartisan and nonpolitical gathering in a way that gives him or her the opportunity to render service in harmony with his or her training in the Scouting program. However, the BSA is required to avoid involving the Scouting movement in any activity of a political character, and Scouts and their leaders may not participate in single-issue or social advocacy events or activities outside of the Scouting program in a way that suggests the BSA endorses that activity or event. Each youth member is free as an individual to express his or her thoughts or take action on political or social issues but must not use Scouting's official uniforms and insignia when doing so.

Conclusion:

We understand the new membership standards policy has raised questions with many of Scouting's supporters, and has been used by others as an opportunity to create confusion or division. However, when reviewing statements meant to misrepresent Scouting's position, it is important to keep them in context and to examine the issues, without conjecture or speculation. Please feel free to share this document, and thank you for your help in making sure this discussion remains focused on an examination of the facts. America's youth need Scouting, and by focusing on the goals that unite us, we can continue to accomplish incredible things for young people and the youth we serve.