

11 WAYS SCHOOLS CAN HELP STUDENTS FEEL SAFE IN CHALLENGING TIMES

Following the 2016 Presidential election, we have seen alarming images and biased language in schools and universities: name-calling, hate-filled taunts, vandalism, racial slurs and epithets, offensive graffiti on desks and bathroom walls. In addition, many young people—especially those whose identities were targeted during the campaign—are fearful about their futures. Teachers have had to work overtime to console those students and provide resources to get help. Schools must be places where students feel safe, supported and respected, especially in these challenging times. Below are prevention, intervention and education strategies in order to promote inclusive school environments where young people can learn, thrive and become their best selves.

1. ESTABLISH CLEAR SCHOOL POLICIES AND REINFORCE GOALS

Make sure your school's anti-bullying, harassment and non-discrimination policies are current, reflect district and [state guidelines](#) and include clear definitions and consequences. Establish technology use guidelines and have students/families sign acceptable use agreements. Publicize policies and guidelines in multiple ways. Develop and/or reinforce your school community's goals around respect, civility, regard and care for others, equity and inclusion. If and when incidences of bias occur, make sure you acknowledge publicly that this is unacceptable, taking care not to “out” people engaged in it.

2. ASSESS YOUR SCHOOL, CLASSROOM AND SELF

This might be a good time to [assess yourself and your school](#) by reflecting on the current and historical influences that shape your school's culture. Consider the following: school mission and policies, how students interact with one another, the racial and gender dynamics among students, the extent to which parents and families are involved and engaged, how celebrations are approached, the curriculum and instruction materials, etc. From there, develop meaningful action plans that maximize existing strengths, address areas of improvement and develop goals to create positive change by applying

principles of anti-bias education. Further, encourage individual staff to do their own self-assessments of their anti-bias approach and principles.

3. BE PUBLIC AND PURPOSEFUL ABOUT BEING INCLUSIVE

Find ways to let everyone in the school community know that school is a safe place, all are welcome and that biased words and actions are unacceptable. Being intentional, public and loud about it sends a strong message that this is a priority for your community. Some examples include: a clear sign/statement at the entrance to the building, a public letter to the school community, a wall mural featuring the diversity of your student body and/or language about being inclusive, an updated mission statement, social media posts, announcements on the public address system, and school-wide events celebrating diversity. Involve the school community in coming up with these ideas and think about ways to do different activities throughout the year.

4. ENCOURAGE REPORTING

Many bias and bullying incidents go unreported. In fact, as children get older, they are less likely to report to adults in their lives—parents, teachers, family and friends. Establish safe and confidential reporting mechanisms for bullying incidents and clear procedures for investigation and response. Make sure students are aware of these procedures and encourage them to tell a trusted adult about threatening or harassing behavior that they experience or observe. Find ways for adults to be more approachable (see #5).

5. BE MORE APPROACHABLE

Students often suffer in silence and don't tell anyone about the bias, harassment or bullying they experience. They often believe it won't help and may even make things worse. One way to increase their openness to talking with adults is to [be more approachable](#) by taking the issue seriously, investing the time and space to listen before moving into problem-solving mode, not harping on the past, and being a role model by not engaging in stereotyping, name-calling and bullying.

6. TEACH ABOUT BIAS

What happens in the classroom is valued and important. At the onset, teachers should engage students in a process to [create an anti-bias learning environment](#). Take the time to [teach about bias](#), either by doing direct instruction or by integrating anti-bias education into the curriculum. Use current events, literature, social studies and other subjects to address bias, diversity, bullying and social justice. You may

also want to talk about the [presidential election](#), the bias and bigotry that characterized the campaign, and what students can do about it. Also, address the critical issue of identity-based bullying so that students are not targeted based on core aspects of their identity.

7. INVOLVE PARENTS, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Parents and family members are vital members of the school community. If everyone conveys the same message about bias, hate and discrimination, young people will get that message. Work with the school's PA/PTA to host a parent education workshop. Get everyone on the same page about school policies, goals, language and how to be an ally. In addition, partner with local youth organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs to organize events that promote respect for differences.

8. PROVIDE SUPPORT TO TARGETS

Ensure that the crisis intervention team, school counselors and social workers have the skills and knowledge to support students who have been targeted. Assist the target and the target's family in coping with the impact of the bullying and building skills for dealing with such problems in the future. Make sure not to inadvertently make the target feel responsible for the bullying in any way, or to unintentionally punish the target by limiting access to activities or technology. In addition, make sure counselors understand the fears that many children have as a result of the election, particularly children whose identities were targeted during the campaign, and provide comfort and resources they may need.

9. TEACH CIVICS

Now more than ever, teaching young people what it means to be a citizen is critical. Helping students understand the [First Amendment](#), their rights and freedoms, government, how legislation works and their role in it, the rule of law, current events, advocacy and activism are all components of being engaged citizens. While civics education has generally become less of a priority in schools, it needs to be brought to the forefront as much as possible.

10. INSPIRE ALLY BEHAVIOR

One of the most effective tools we can give young people is [how to be an ally](#) when faced with bias and bullying. It can be as simple as encouraging them to reach out to someone targeted by sending them a supportive text message or saying hello to them. They can also learn how to safely stand up and tell aggressors to stop; for example challenging bigoted and offensive words. In addition, reporting the

behavior to an adult and actively not participating are good ways to be an ally. Being an ally helps the target and also helps the person engaging in allyship feel more powerful by doing something to make a difference.

11. ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO BE ACTIVE

Activism is another way that young people can do something about the bias, discrimination and hate they see in their schools, online community, neighborhood and world—and pro-actively make it a better place. [Activism](#) can take many forms: teaching others, advocating for school or legislative policies, demonstrating, creating an online public awareness campaign, writing letters, volunteering, raising money, organizing or signing a petition, etc. Activism is a powerful antidote to feelings of powerlessness and an important part of citizenship.

ADDITIONAL ADL RESOURCES:

Curriculum Resources:

Assessing Yourself and Your School Checklist, www.adl.org/assets/pdf/education-outreach/Assessing-Yourself-Your-School-Checklist.pdf

Creating an Anti-Bias Learning Environment, www.adl.org/education-outreach/curriculum-resources/c/creating-an-anti-bias-learning-environment.html

Election 2016 Teaching Resources, www.adl.org/education-outreach/curriculum-resources/c/election-2016-teaching.html

First Amendment and Our Freedoms, www.adl.org/education-outreach/lesson-plans/c/first-amendment-and-our-freedoms.html

Let's Talk about the Presidential Election, www.adl.org/education-outreach/lesson-plans/c/lets-talk-about-the-presidential-election.html

Talking with Young People after the Election, www.adl.org/education-outreach/anti-bias-education/c/talking-with-young-people-after-the-election.html

Trainings, Tips and Strategies:

10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism, www.adl.org/education-outreach/curriculum-resources/c/10-ways-youth-can-engage-in.html

Anti-Bias Workshops and Programs, www.adl.org/education-outreach/anti-bias-education/c/a-classroom-of-difference.html

Be an Ally: Six Simple Ways, www.adl.org/education-outreach/bullying-cyberbullying/c/be-an-ally.html

State Bullying Prevention Statutes, www.adl.org/assets/pdf/education-outreach/adl-bullying-prevention-statutes.pdf

Ten Things Students Wish Teachers Knew, www.adl.org/education-outreach/bullying-cyberbullying/c/ten-things-students-wish.html

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